



The Sordoni Art Gallery wishes to thank John Bromberg and Charlie Morrow for bringing their talents and visions to Wilkes University. Additional thanks to Bernie McGurl, Director, Lackawanna River Corridor Association; F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.; Annette Schultz, Project Manager, Pennsylvania Environmental Council; and the Mulberry Poets.

Judith O'Toole, currently the Director of the Westmoreland Museum of Art, originated this exhibition during her tenure as Director of the Sordoni Art Gallery. Nancy Krueger, the Sordoni Art Gallery Co-ordinator, has managed all the complex details associated with this installation.

The Metro Agency designed the layout of the exhibition brochure, which was printed by Design Systems.

This exhibition is sponsored in part with funds from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the F. Lammot Belin Foundation and the New Forms Regional Grant Program. The New Forms Regional Grant Program is administered by the Painted Bride and funded by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts/Interdisciplinary Arts Program, the National Endowment for the Arts/Inter Arts Program, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

Mr. Morrow's soundscape has been funded in part by the Meet The Composer Fund. Meet the Composer funding is provided with support from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Xerox Foundation, the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation and the Dayton Hudson Foundation.

Wilkes University and the Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery have provided additional support.



Sordoni Art Gallery

Wilkes University
150 South River Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
717-831-4325
Gallery Hours: Daily 12-5, Thursdays until 9

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john bromberg

From the Alignment Series

W A T E R

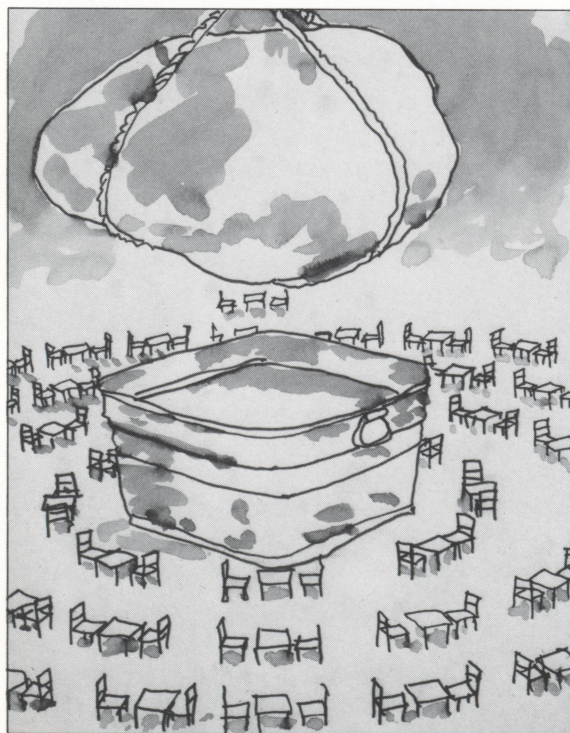
An Installation
A Performance
A Ceremony

May 1 - June 5, 1994

"Water," the third installation in John Bromberg's "Alignment Series," draws its subject from the catastrophic flood that inundated Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, on June 23, 1972. Like the installation "Fire," which commemorated the 1971 inferno that consumed the Marywood Motherhouse in Scranton, Pennsylvania, "Water" focuses on the theme of community renewal in the aftermath of a calamity.

For his "Water" installation, Bromberg has divided the Sordoni Art Gallery into three discrete areas. The tripartite formal arrangement mirrors the work's underlying exploration of the interrelationship between creation, deluge and renewal by means of installation, performance and ceremony.

As in a High Renaissance painting, a pyramid dominates the central axis. Constructed of eight iron bars—four form the base and the remainder slope upward to the peak—the pyramid has a linear, dematerialized quality. In this pyramid, space has replaced mass. Pieces of broken glass completely cover the area enclosed by the perimeter of the base. On the glass shards, directly beneath the apex of the pyramid, Bromberg has placed a galvanized steel tub filled with water. Green ants form a circle on the surface of the water. Tiny chairs and tables, some painted in primary colors, circle the tub in neat, orderly rows.



Drawing: John Bromberg

A primitive, wooden scale composed of boulders suspended by ropes from an irregular, wooden beam rests in precarious equilibrium atop the pyramid. The central boulder, which hangs from the fulcrum, hovers directly above the water-filled tub. A circle composed of small, stream-rounded stones, painted lapis blue, surrounds the pyramid-cum-scale. A few mud covered chairs and tables have been scattered in the narrow space separating the pyramid from the circle of stones.

On either side of the central pyramid, separated by

aisles, eight four-foot-square panels have been suspended horizontally from the ceiling on monofilament lines. They appear to float above the floor. The painted panels together create a single picture: a diptych whose halves have been pushed apart by a wedge.

A four by eight foot relief sculpture is mounted on the side walls of the Gallery. Directly behind the central pyramid along the back wall is a couch. A huge monolith completely occupies the couch. Additional boulders are scattered throughout the installation site.

Bromberg employs a rich, allegorical and Biblical vocabulary to intensify the visual experience. By concentrating on the symbolic associations of each element in the composition, the viewer can probe the mystery of the creation-destruction-renewal cycle which, of course, parallels the Old Testament story of Noah (*Genesis* 7, 8:1-19).

The installation should be read concentrically, like ripples radiating from the point where a stone enters a quiet pool. The central symbol in Bromberg's installation, the sea of tranquility, is an assemblage of shards, chairs, a pyramid, and balance scales. At the heart of the composition, the tub of water and the green ants, which refer to an aboriginal creation myth, signify creation. The stillness and limpidity of the water evoke the purity of original creation. Divine presence is suggested by the triangular sides of the pyramid.

The ring of chairs and tables is a complex symbol of civilization. Like the Edenic apple, chairs represent knowledge and its consequences. Not only are chairs—with their arms, legs, backs, and seats—emblematic of ourselves, but they underscore a changed relationship between man and nature: when humans ceased squatting on the ground and began using chairs, a certain close contact with the earth was lost. Bromberg reinforces this concept by setting the chairs, but not the tub, on large pieces of shattered glass. This placement suggests that civilization both mimics and fractures the primordial stillness of creation. Like a mirror, civilization simultaneously reflects and distorts nature. Equally significant, the chairs symbolize a changed relationship between individuals; from ancient Egypt to the present, the chair or throne remains a symbol of sovereign power.

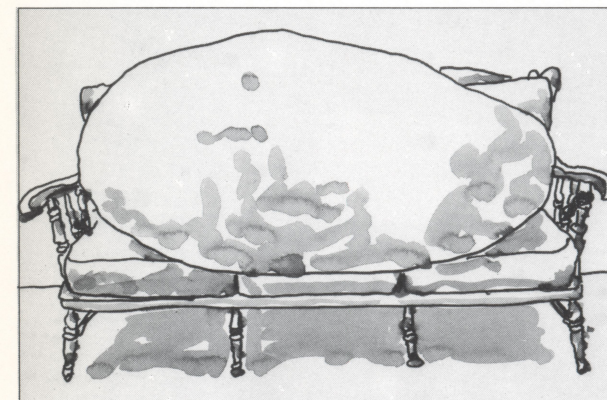
Creation and civilization exist in a state of equilibrium within the sheltered space of the pyramid. The pyramid, which has been synonymous with stability, permanence and death since the time of the Old Kingdom Pharaohs, reinforces this sense of repose or balance. The equilibrium, however, is precarious and depends upon Justice and Faith. Here Bromberg employs the heraldic device, the scales, that always appears in allegorical representations of Justice. Not only are scales attributes of Justice, but they also signify Philosophy, Music, Statecraft, and Logic (rope is another attribute of Logic), all of which seek equipoise among contrasting elements. The boulders represent the solidity of faith by recalling Christ's pronouncement that Peter was the Rock on which His Church would be built (*Matthew* 16:18-19).

The balance reflects Bromberg's equivocal feelings toward civilization and its dislocations. He recognizes

the fragility of the natural world and the threats posed by technology, while simultaneously accepting the benefits of civilization. This tension is expressed in formal terms by juxtaposing organic forms, the boulders for example, with the installation's rigorous geometric pattern.

Outside the sea of tranquility, in a ring of Chaos, scattered monuments of civilization lie upended and covered with mud. These discarded chairs and tables eloquently remind us of the consequences of tilting the balance too far in either direction. Against Chaos, Bromberg offers a prayer in the form of a restraining band of blue stones.

Beyond the ring of stones swirls the deluge. The floating panels, which define the surface of the flood waters and mimic its movement, flow around the calm. The couch and its boulder represent the ideal of domestic tranquility disturbed by cataclysmic events. The reliefs with their rock-like forms suggest dikes erected along the river banks. These control barriers, however, provide only the illusion of security, like a house built on sand.



Drawing: John Bromberg

The installation will open with a performance piece and close with a water ballet ceremony to be performed in a local park. Both the performance and the ceremony infuse the entire work with the promise of the covenant and of redemption.

The performance will begin with a "soundscape" created and performed by New York composer Charlie Morrow. Morrow's soundscape may be compared to a painting with sounds, instead of colors, creating the images. Horns, whistles, and other ancient instruments form the soundscape by layering improvisational responses to the installation over a prerecorded studio composition. Like a landscape where the potential for movement is an essential component of the viewer's experience, the soundscape has a strong kinetic element. The soundscape will activate the floating panels, on which giant boulders rest, causing them to sway as if responding to the ebb and flow of the waters.

While the soundscape fills the Gallery, interacting with the forms and audience, several figures, looking like ambulatory Easter Island statues enter. These are the Mud People, who have figured in many of Bromberg's works. The autochthonic Mud People are a composite of various creation myths whether Judeo-Christian, wherein God created man from the "dust of the

ground" (*Genesis* 2:7), or Hellenic, as Prometheus' man fashioned from clay (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1:76-88). The Mud People raise the boulders from the floating panels, an action that recalls the removal of the rock from the Sepulchre (*Matthew* 28:2-3, *Mark* 6:3-5, *Luke* 24:2-4, *John* 20:1-2). The boulders, which will remain suspended for the remainder of the installation, are transformed from matter into spirit by means of ritual and community.

While the Mud People struggle through their ordeal, bubble machines, hidden beneath some of the panels, fill the Gallery with ascending, ephemeral spheres. These *vanitas* symbols, once commonly found in allegorical paintings, remind us of the brevity of life or, as Varro

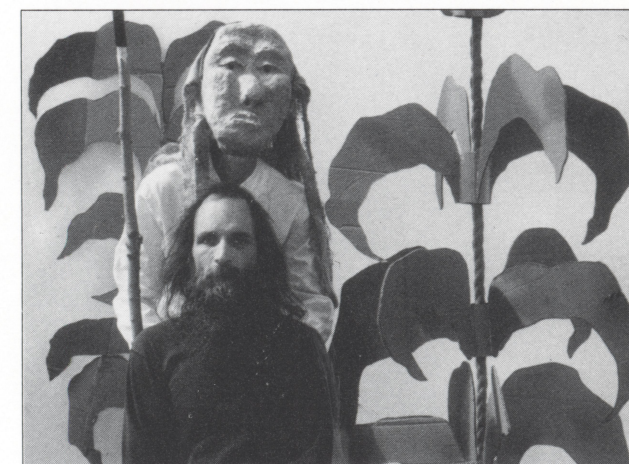


Photo: Trudy Gerlach

observed, *Homo bulla est* (Man is a bubble). The performance ends with an apotheosis symbolized by the ascension of white, helium-filled balloons from a black box set in front of the central pyramid. Like Noah's dove, the balloons symbolize the end of the deluge and point to the covenant of redemption. The final act of the Mud People, therefore, is to distribute these symbols of spirit and innocence to the children.

In his "Alignment Series" installations, Bromberg has sought to focus, to bring into line, the essential significance of a community's response to cataclysm. During a disaster, people concentrate on essentials: food, water, shelter, communication, health services. The community becomes a tribe where everyone's survival is interdependent. Yet this clarity of common purpose and vision fades with the passage of time and the passing of the participants. As an artist, Bromberg stages events and creates rituals that recall the once-shared purpose, keep alive the memory and, most especially, the truth that we are a community, we suffer as a community, and we thrive as a community. By transforming a specific catastrophe into myth, Bromberg seeks to universalize the particular. Linking similar, elemental catastrophe myths into a series, he underscores the common, shared nature of the human experience. A common line links the fire people to the flood people to the wind people to the earth people. We are our brothers' keeper.

Stanley I Grand
Director