

PERSPECTIVES ON SALINITY: RIVER FROM WITHIN  
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EXHIBITION BROCHURE, KATONAH MUSEUM OF ART, 2009

The Hudson River and its environs comprise an iconic American landscape. Much has been written about the Hudson and its influential hold on artists, both past and present. The river inspired numerous painters in the nineteenth century, giving rise to what is arguable the nation's first "school" of painting. Today the Hudson continues to draw artists to its pristine vistas and industrialized shores.

Nancy Cohen's "Perspectives on Salinity: River from Within" considers the river's unique tidal currents and shifting salt composition. The dramatic scale of the installation captures the power of moving water, while its construction from paper simultaneously suggests the river's fragile ecosystem. Cohen's own relationship with the Hudson has been shaped over eighteen years of working in a Jersey City studio overlooking the historic river.

With hundreds of pieces of handmade paper, Cohen transforms the Museum's project gallery into a metaphorical waterway. "Perspectives on Salinity" articulates the confluence where fresh water from the Adirondacks meets salt water from the Atlantic. The lower Hudson is an estuary; its tidal influences can be measured as far north as the Federal Dam at Troy. (The Mohican Indian name for the river, Muh-he-kun-ne-tuk, means "the river that flows both ways.") For much of its 315 miles, the Hudson's waters ebb and flow with varying degrees of salinity.

At the Katonah Museum, Cohen's billowing sheets of pigmented paper swirl around the gallery's perimeter. She fabricated the paper from abaca, a species of banana plant native to the Philippines. Cohen selected abaca for its strength and durability, as well as its smooth, silky surface. Each sheet is formed from two pieces of paper, slightly varied in tone, with wire sandwiched between. Some of the embedded wires create textures and patterns that mimic ripples on the river's surface, others coil into bubbles or leave ghostly watermarks.

Careful consideration is given to the paper and its placement. Cohen installed the larger, darker-hued pieces on the floor and wall to the left of the gallery entrance. These sheets are deep blue, many bearing the crystallized patterns of dried salt on their surfaces. Their size and color convey a sense of heaviness, suggesting the rush of sea water from the vast Atlantic churning up the river bed as it enters the Hudson. Clear fresh water, flowing down from the mountains, is represented by the smaller sheets of green/blue paper suspended from the ceiling and along the right-hand wall. Here the paper is spaced further apart to reflect the openness of the river's northern landscape. Like paint on an artist's palette, the colors collide and combine on the gallery's back wall. Cohen's color choices are based on detailed notations she made during a boat trip on the Hudson last fall.

Similar to the river itself, "Perspectives on Salinity" never appears static. Cohen's large "salt molecules" tumble amid the waves of paper on the "sea" side. These white cubic crystals are fabricated in wire and covered with cotton paper pulp and a thick crust of dried salt. Chains of smaller sodium chloride molecules flow through the work, some escaping "north" into the freshwater areas.

Cohen's dramatic installation surrounds viewers with waves of shifting color and subtle movement. The subtitle, "River from Within," summarizes its effect: the viewer is literally standing in - and under- the swirling water. This is an artwork intended to be entered and experienced, one that cannot be viewed in its entirety from a single vantage point. It is Cohen's third large-scale paper installation inspired by water (previous works were based on the Mullica River in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey). "Perspectives on Salinity" was designed specifically for the Katonah Museum.

Viewers may respond in awe to the scale and scope of Cohen's installation. Yet the work demands closer inspection. Meticulous handcrafted details, like the delicate "crocheted" filament that supports the freshwater paper, can be found throughout. The river's ever-changing ratio of fresh to salt water presents an interesting visual comparison, but this natural phenomenon is not the artist's sole intent. In "Perspectives on Salinity: River from Within," Cohen successfully creates the experience of being swept away by the beauty and enormity of the Hudson River, while simultaneously fostering intimate encounters with both nature and art.