



Behind the Scenes: Mary Coble @ Conner Contemporary Art

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Photos by *Kimberly Cadena*

Performance art can be hard – hard on the viewer, hard on the artist and difficult to capture, either in images or words. At the same time, this art form can be one of the most successful in sending a message. Seeing a fellow human being perform even the simplest act can leave a much deeper, lasting impression on a viewer than than briefly admiring a painting or letting the eye linger over a photograph for a few seconds.

This Saturday, Conner Contemporary Art will feature performance artist Mary Coble's new water-focused work *Source*, BYT's Year in Art Spotlight for May. Although previewing a performance is a tricky task, Coble, an artist-in-residence at DC's Red Dirt Studios, was kind enough to let BYT stop in for a sneak peek at the medium: water and Coble herself.

It initially came as a surprise that Coble would require studio space at all. Coble's body of work is literally that: **the artist's favorite medium is her own skin**. She is best known for her performances that confront injustice, particularly against LGBT people. Past works of hers have involved her binding her breasts, receiving electro-shock therapy and inscribing the names of LGBT hate-crime murder victims across every inch of the back of her body with an empty tattoo gun.

Source marks a slight departure from those past performances. Slight because, when it comes down to it, Coble's work resonates with messages about dignity and social justice. Water, she says, is a fundamental human right.

"We should all have access to clean water and free water. It disturbs me that socioeconomic issues play into whether you can afford to buy bottled water," Coble says. "In the U.S. we're lucky because we have free

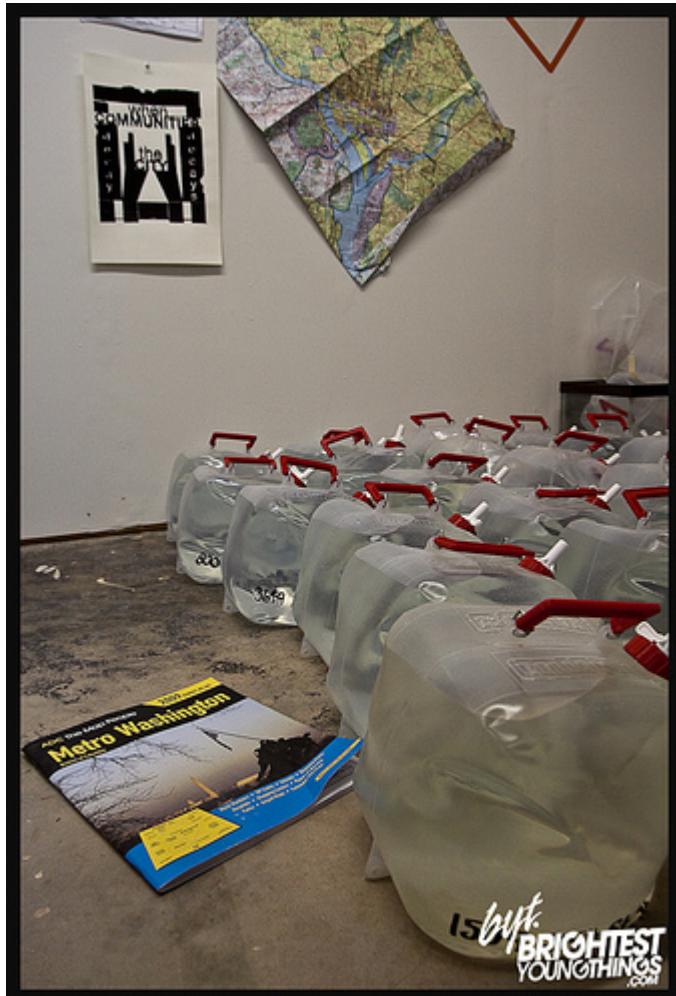
water. In other countries, women walk miles for water from a dirty river. People get tokens for water and their houses may be burning but they can't afford to spend their token to put the fire out because it's such a precious thing. And we often take it for granted."

An hour with Coble in her studio quickly proves that she takes little for granted and displays the meticulous collection, of stories, of samples, that goes into her work. In a small open room that sits facing the Red Dirt Studio's loading dock, dozens of clear plastic containers sit neatly in rows. Addresses are neatly marked with black sharpie along the sides of each and the color of the contents varies from crystal clear to a soft muddy brown.

If you were to remove the clutter of pots and sculptures and clear the area of hard metal tools and fine, white dust, the space would resemble the staging area for a disaster relief effort. It's fitting since, as Coble puts it, the world is facing a water crisis. DC, the town that flows people in and out every few years in waves, was the perfect lens through which to view this growing calamity.

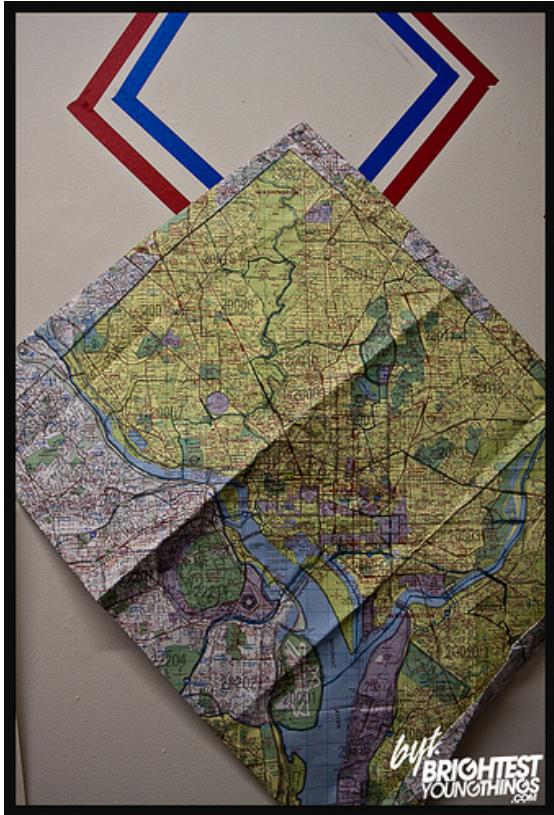
"I've wanted to make work about DC for a long time," said Coble. "But there are also much more global issues. And this is something that allows me to talk about both."

In preparation for the performance, Coble has spent weeks traveling around the District collecting water samples from purified sources: taps and water fountains. A map on the wall is covered with routes, both planned and actualized. After superimposing a rough map of the DC wards over the streets, Coble dropped a grid of pink dots over the entire District to mark points she hoped to sample. She then went out and had to find the best area to collect water close to the dots. This often meant improvisation.



"I couldn't get on the airforce base. And the Arboretum for example – there were water fountains and hoses in certain places but I had to be flexible."

She showed us the roots of the performance: a stack of notebooks filled with the addresses of the gathering points, along with the stories she had heard and the conversations shared. Coble was invited into homes and kitchens to try the tap water. Sometimes people refused. Sometimes people were suspicious.



"Part of this was to have the dialogue. So if I saw someone in an area working in the garden, I might roll up and explain briefly what I was doing. They'd say yes or no to the water – I just wanted it from taps, DC taps – and then I would have a conversation with them about their thoughts on DC water."

Most people don't drink DC water straight. They buy bottled water or have filters. This led to greater conversations about the smell of the water, the taste, how it looks, the way family norms impacted how they drank it. Some people knew they wouldn't drink the water, and some asked Coble for the answer as to why. But she couldn't provide one, she could only pose the question.





"I'm not testing it. I'm not trying to show that DC water is good, bad, whatever. I just want to bring up the topic of the global water crisis. Imagine how we feel, or how some people feel, and then think about it globally," said Coble.

To do this, Coble has the ammunition of **500 gallons of DC water**. At Conner Contemporary, Coble will present an endurance performance that will run from 2pm til 8 or 8:30pm during the opening. She suggests catching the performance at a few different points in the show (with a beer break on H Street in between) because, as they say, you cannot step twice in the same stream.



Other than a peek at the water jugs and a promise that there would be drawings and a screening of three videos filmed at a lake in Skowhegan, Maine (where Coble spent nine weeks at a residency this summer), Coble left the rest of the details up to our imaginations.

"If they hear what's going to happen, they'll think, we know already and won't come. But the thing about performance is you've got to be there. You've got to see it, experience it with a group of people. You've got to smell, you've got to hear."

And, hopefully, it will get you talking and thinking about an element that is so present in our city and our world, but so often taken for granted.



To see more of Mary Coble's work, visit: <http://www.marycoble.com/index.php>

Check Out her performance THIS SATURDAY @ 6PM AT CONNER CONTEMPORARY

To learn more about Red Dirt Studios, visit: <http://www.margaretboozier.com/reddirt1.html>