



Very Serious Play

A Conversation with

Jess Benjamin



BY KIM CARPENTER

Nebraska-born sculptor Jess Benjamin creates work with an austere sensibility and eloquent narrative that is inextricably tied to the land—more specifically to the water—of her home state. The daughter of a rancher, she earned her BFA in ceramics from Hastings College before working as a studio assistant for Jun Kaneko and then earning an MFA under John Balistreri and Joseph Pintz at Bowling Green State University.

Though many artists tackle the issue of climate change, Benjamin does so with a quiet authority devoid of stridency and sentimentality. Her intensely personal sculptures depict the accelerating depletion of water in a way that relies on scientific documentation as well as poetic interpretation. Her subjects often center around things that people either do not or should not see: invisible water molecules combine to form a depleted aquifer, and eroded jackstone-faced earthen dams that should remain underwater are exposed in drought conditions. The objects we do see and know well—water faucets, pumps, and buckets—take on ominously exaggerated sizes to remind us of how much water is consumed on a daily basis.

Benjamin's most recent work—renderings of the Hoover Dam's inlet towers on view at the Joslyn Art Museum last fall—demonstrates her desire to broaden the scope of her investigations. As drought becomes a climatic threat on a global scale, her looming towers add a new, nuanced layer to the conversation.

Opposite: *Hoover Dam Inlet Towers*, 2015. Stoneware, 81 x 18 x 18 in.

This page: *A Crowning Achievement: Hoover*, 2016. Stoneware, 27 x 8 x 8 in.



Kim Carpenter: *You grew up on a ranch in western Nebraska. How did that inform your work?*

Jess Benjamin: My work focuses on water usage in the Great Plains area, a regional concern that's related to the phenomenon of global drought. On the ranch, I saw first-hand the battle between man and nature. When I moved to Omaha, I started to reflect on that constant battle. I realized that the urban population, compared to the rural population, has a major disconnect of information.

KC: *When you say "disconnect," what do you mean?*

JB: In 2002, Lake McConaughy—Nebraska's largest water reserve for irrigation—was well below half-capacity, so the news started coming out. Around that same time, a wider conversation was starting about water. Now, the conversation is escalating because people are tuning into news from California. People are beginning to realize that what we did in the 1930s to store water for our future and to bring flowers to the desert doesn't always work when it doesn't snow and it doesn't rain. We've made massive changes, building up places like Lake Mead and Hoover Dam. It isn't working anymore, which means we need to start looking at the real problem of water consumption.

KC: *How did you start to visually conceptualize this huge subject?*

JB: I started with the jackstone, which is a six-pointed tetrahedron, a type of pyramid. Jackstones are most often used on the face of waterways—for instance, along the complicated water systems in Holland. They



Above and detail: *DAM Nebraska*, 2008. Salt-fired stoneware, 3 x 9 x 4 ft.

lock together like jacks. One object becomes two, then three, four—and they work together as one. They help prevent erosion and protect earthen dams. What I've found interesting about jackstones is how they show the passage of time and the battle along the face of the dam. They're around 80 years old now, and the rebar is exposed. Parts of their legs and appendages are missing. It's a real war. Understanding depends on how old a person is. If they're kids, they look at the jackstone and think "ball and jack," a game. A 40- or 50-year-old might know them from waterways, but anyone 70 or older recognizes them from the landing at Omaha Beach. The Germans used steel jackstones, which they called "ship stoppers," because if you ran into them, you couldn't budge them. They just dug into the sand. They're very iconic objects that basically tell the whole story of water. It's a game, but it's a dangerous game. It's an ongoing battle, one that we normally don't see because when it snows and rains all these jackstones are underwater. In 2002, drought exposed jackstones that no one had seen since they were put on the face of the dam back in the 1930s.

KC: *Could you talk a little bit about your process for creating them?*

JB: I've made them as a dam and as individual pieces. I start out with hand-pounded slabs and make each leg. Each one has five parts (or sides) and a top. From there, I put them together, tip it, and put the last leg on. That's when I take a knife and start breaking them down, destroying them, adding more clay to fill in what I've destroyed. Then I hand-make the clay rebar that goes into them. I use my knife and aggressively work the sur-



Installation view with (left rear) *Kingsley Strength*, 2008, stoneware, 51 x 51 x 51 in.; (center rear) *DAM Nebraska*, 2008, salt-fired stoneware, 3 x 9 x 4 ft.; and (foreground) *65 Feet Below Capacity*, 2008, stoneware, 4 x 4 x 65 ft.

faces over so they're extremely expressive while mimicking what's really happening.

KC: *It seems like you stick to a monochrome palette.*

JB: Real jackstones are the color of concrete, and it's always hard to determine if I want to add color. The biggest lesson that I've learned is the less color, the better; the pieces are more emotional. Black and white tells the story best and gives me the most detail and intensity. They stand on their own. I would say that every ceramic artist loves their work when it's in wet clay form. It's so beautiful—it's all one, all uniform. Your job from there is to not mess up what's good. Color covers things up. I'm keeping it as simple as possible. The jackstones wouldn't be very powerful if they were bright yellow.

KC: *What about scale? Some go up to four feet.*

JB: Scale is always a question. I continue to move that scale around according to my interests. Kilns are an issue, but I sometimes do a pegging system so the pieces come apart every 24 inches. I drill holes at the top and bottom and then put a piece of rebar on the inside so that they peg together. If people try to push them over, they can't.

KC: *When you're working with a subject like drought and thinking about elements like soil, is clay a natural medium?*

JB: It's always been a natural medium for me. When I was four years old, I played in irrigation ditches. When the topsoil eroded, it exposed the clay. I would take that clay and build dams. I would

Wild Pack of Ethanol Molecules, 2011. Stoneware, 20 x 12 x 2 ft.



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST / BOTTOM: DANA DAMEWOOD



Above: *U.S. Drought Monitor: May 2014*, 2014. Stoneware, plywood, and paint, 6 x 8 x 1 ft. Below: *Dried Up on the Ogallala Aquifer 6*, 2016. Stoneware, 27 x 20 x 2.75 in.



divert water, and I would play “lake.” Clay is the material that I’ve used for my whole life to explore my imagination. I’m doing the same thing now that I was doing when I was five, just a little bit differently.

KC: *You’re still playing?*

JB: I’m still playing, but it’s very serious play now. There’s a big commitment. This isn’t just an afternoon outside. This is years and years of intense thought and reflection and refining my skills as a sculptor—being able to build an object and building a monumental one.

KC: *You started with the jackstones, and where did you go from there? Did you go to the drought maps?*

JB: For my MFA thesis, I was specifically looking at Lake McConaughy, a major icon of Nebraska water. When Dad starts talking about how they’re shutting water off early for farmers and crops are burning up in August, it gets your attention. After that, I thought I needed to broaden my horizon and not just landlock myself to Nebraska, which led me to the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest underwater aquifer in the world. It just so happens that Nebraska has the major portion of it and has the most water. Scientists are predicting Texas to dry up by 2022, so I thought it was another important kind of water-related story that needed to be told, because you have both groundwater and surface water. They’re two entirely different things, but they’re directly related to one another.

KC: *How do you express what’s happening to the aquifer?*

JB: I looked at scientific maps and made my own Ogallala Aquifer by creating water molecules. I then put them together to document what scientists are telling us is happening to the aquifer.

KC: *Do you try to make your work have a specific narrative? Is that why you use the water molecule as the basic shape, as a way to convey the story?*

JB: I think that if you give too much to the viewer, you make it too complicated, and I don’t want to be too narrative. If I can use my imagination to look at these problems, maybe other people should, too. Maybe we won’t make the same mistakes that we did historically if we just think a little bit differently. I look at the water molecule, because it’s a fascinating object. We all know what a water molecule is—well, hopefully all of us do—but then you flip it upside down and it’s Mickey Mouse. I think it’s funny that something so serious can be taken lightheartedly.

KC: *When did you start using them?*

JB: I started making water molecules in 2010 and 2011, and I made them pretty much every day, all winter long—just making water molecules until I could figure out what I wanted to do. Originally, I had the idea of submerging them below ground like the old James Bond movie in which the villain has a glass floor and you can walk over it. Conceptually it would be the nail on the



Above: *Dry Times*, 2014. Stoneware, 10.5 x 72 x 17 in. Right: *Water Pump and Bucket*, 2014. Stoneware and hemp rope, 66 x 18 x 18 in.

head for the piece if you could walk on the aquifer—walk all over the aquifer, which is exactly what we’re doing, metaphorically and literally.

KC: *How do you choose the colors that you use on your drought maps? You have blue, yellow, green, and red.*

JB: Those are the colors that scientists use. Blue means lots of water, green quite a bit; yellow, peach, orange, red, and maroon are how cartographers document drought. The darker the color, the more broken down these water molecules. The surfaces tell you if they’re full of water or if they’re breaking down. If you can imagine eight states on a map, the blue and green molecules are Nebraska. The maroon ones are Texas, and they’re mostly rebar.

KC: *You did two pieces representing the time elapse of drought in the country: U.S. Drought Monitor 2002 vs. 2012 and the reverse in U.S. Drought Monitor 2012 vs. 2002. Were you surprised at the progression in just a decade?*

JB: The National Drought Mitigation Center has put out a drought map every three days since around 1999. When I started looking at it, the severity of what things were in 2002, when Lake McConaughy was low compared to what we had in 2012, was mind blowing. Nebraska was 88 percent in extreme drought. We were far worse than California. We almost caught on fire; the whole state was so dry.

In 2012, it did not rain in western Nebraska. It was brutal out there. My dad took cattle out early; the grasshoppers came. It wasn’t the massive drought of the ‘30s, but that’s because we have better land management, and guys got their cattle out of the hills early. It didn’t get the same attention as California or Texas, which



DIANA DAMEWOOD

TOP: DIANA DAMEWOOD / BOTTOM: COLIN CONNORS



A Crowning Achievement: Kingsley, 2016. Stoneware, 11 x 10 x 10 in.

is part of the reason I made the work. Somebody needs to notice what's happening in the middle of the country. We're growing so much, and there's a pretty major economy in charge of a lot of land. Water is probably going to become the most valuable resource under any of this land, and we need to start talking about it before people say, "Oh, let's just start piping," which T. Boone Pickens thought of five years ago. He bought land in Oklahoma so he could pipe water to Dallas. In California, they're all saying, "Let's just pipe water from Seattle." No! No! No! We need to cut back on consumption. I hope to balance out what's happening in the thought process.

KC: *Your faucets, water buckets, and water pumps seem like a complete departure from the jackstones and water molecules.*

JB: The faucets are a struggle for me. I still don't know if I like them. I started working on them about two years ago. They're other objects that talk about water, and I think it's a more urban connection. More people know exactly what they are, and they add another layer to both the conversation and my work, but I don't know how I feel about them. They're different for me, and I need to think about them.

KC: *And the buckets and pumps?*

JB: I'm always looking for ways that objects connect. All of these objects are interesting—the faucet, the bucket, and the pump. People can immediately relate to them, but they don't tell you the same thing that the pile of jackstones tells you. They don't show the battle or the sense of time in the same

way, which is why I'm still awkward about using them. The bucket is fascinating to me, but I think it would be a lot more fascinating if I broke it down instead of mimicking a real working water bucket.

KC: *Why did you opt to make the buckets larger than life?*

JB: They look real, but they're monumental so they can speak to habits of consumption. The faucets are oversized, too. It's different when you bump up the scale. It always makes something just a little bit more important.

KC: *When did you start your inlet towers?*

JB: About a year ago. I was frustrated with my work. I made some water buckets and water barrels—huge life-size water barrels—and they were just too real. They were too literal, too narrative, so I went back through my research and started looking at images. I thought that I should revisit inlet towers. I made one in grad school as part of another piece and thought, "Well, it's just a cylinder; it could be boring," but then I found on-line blueprints of real ones and thought, "This has gotten really complicated. I'm excited about this."

KC: *They're based on dams, right?*

JB: The Hoover Dam inlet towers. There are four: two are Nevada's and two are from Arizona. The purpose of an inlet tower is to let water in, so it goes to the hydropower plant that then produces the electricity before it shoots it out the bottom part of the dam.

KC: *Why did you decide to make towers versus the surface of the dam?*

JB: One, I've made the jackstones, which are earthen dams. Two, I've thought about making my own dam; but if you're going to do something like that, it would have to be as large as the jackstones. I still need to think more about how I could potentially do that.

KC: *What is the particular challenge with these?*

JB: Everything—mixing all the clay they take, which has to be prepped in advance before I even start on the pieces. They're over 800 pounds. I can't mix clay and fabricate on the same day. They can take me at least six hours every single day to keep going.

KC: *How long does the construction take from start to end?*

JB: They take over 30 days. I'm doing four of them—two, four, six, eight feet in height—because there are four at Hoover Dam. When Lake Mead is full, you only see the top of the tower. The next piece is halfway, when there's less water. You see four different stages, and the largest piece is the one that's the most broken down, because that means there's no water. You'll go from perfection with water to a tower that is totally exposed—an environmental disaster.

KC: *Are you finding that conceptually your challenge is to become more monumental as you go forward?*

JB: These pieces are the hardest technically. When I fab-



Jackstone Armature, 2012. Ceramic stoneware, 14 x 14 x 14 in.

ricated a *dango* for Jun, it was a tall form, but hollow. When I saw John Balistreri build, the form had an interior structure that you could break down. When you start building up and breaking down, you really have to know what you're doing. Timing is crucial. If something dries out, you're screwed. You need to know your moisture and control it. If a piece is too wet on the bottom, it will start to slump and won't support the weight on the top. Everything is shrinking differently, and if you're adding wet clay to it, you're never going to be on, and I don't accept imperfections. Everything is as slow as you can go when building up. You also need to be able to step back for a moment, see them, and keep them centered.

People don't realize how much clay moves. Just in two weeks, the pieces bend toward the light, so I have to flip them. Every few days, you have to rotate pieces. When you're rotating something that weighs 500 pounds, and it's on a center point, and you pick

it up and move it, you've got to be dead on when you put it back down again, otherwise everything else is off. If you're off three-quarters of an inch at the top, that means you might be off five inches on the bottom. It's a massive amount of weight. The architecture is also constantly moving.

KC: *What's next? How will you continue addressing drought?*

JB: I'm going back to the jackstone pile next. I'm going to make more, and I'm interested in going backwards with them, so that the work goes back to the face of the dam. Those accompanied by four towers will be very striking. But my work isn't just about drought. It's really about water usage. If I'm only looking at drought, then I'm only ever looking at a negative. Just to keep your sanity, you have to keep positive. It's water usage. It's consumption.

Kim Carpenter is a writer based in Omaha.