

Art Daybook: A 'Watershed' moment

Liz Ward takes viewers on an epic float down the Mississippi River

Molly Glentzer , *Houston Chronicle*, March 20, 2017



A detail of Liz Ward's watercolor/collage "The Falls of Peckagama."

The piece: *"The Falls of Peckagama"*

The artist: Liz Ward

Where: In the solo exhibition "Watershed" at Moody Gallery, through April 1

Why: Because it's the first day of spring, and as much as we'd like to slow down the pace of this year, Old Man River just keeps on rollin'.

Liz Ward's show "Watershed" features 14 intriguing mixed-media paintings that evoke mysterious, mythical aspects of the Mississippi River as it might have been seen in the early 19th century, or way before that.

I know the river's southern end. But with watercolor, gouache, graphite, pastel and collage elements, Ward's map-like pieces suggest the northern end, depicting places so unfamiliar I wondered whether they were real. A quick Google search for "Falls of Peckagama" yielded only the archived narrative of an explorer who discovered the source of the Mississippi in 1832.

Bingo. That would have been Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. Other paintings from this group explore the less successful efforts of others on the same quest. The falls of Peckagama don't sound terribly impressive, dropping maybe 20 feet. But I love the elysian sensibility of their name. For the geographically curious, the Mississippi begins at the north end of Lake Itasca in Minnesota, where it was slightly dammed decades ago so tourists can wade in shallow water or cross over it on a log bridge.

"Our present moment in time is certainly a watershed in the affairs of the nation, but my use of the term is also a reflection on the many such 'watershed' moments that one encounters in any investigation of the natural and human history of North America," Ward writes

Each painting is infused with gorgeously detailed, transparent layers that also give them the sensibility of Japanese screens. The show includes a series she calls "Ghosts of the Old Mississippi," based on geological maps of the ancient courses of the Lower Mississippi. It came as some consolation to realize that I am not quite old enough to find those familiar, either.