



# LAY OF THE LAND

*Reports from near and far*

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## Cure for Pain

JANINE DEBAISE

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I SIT CROSS-LEGGED among the weeds and rubble of an abandoned industrial site, my raincoat bunched up to protect my bare legs from bits of jagged metal. A light rain falls on the polluted Flint River, which runs past concrete barriers sprayed with graffiti, as I watch an artist with a shovel poke at a hill of debris.

I've come to Flint, Michigan, to figure out how art can help save a damaged planet.

The Crying Post Project is a global art installation intended as a "memorial to the earth's pain." Dennis Summers, a soft-spoken Buddhist artist who grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, travels the world to visit sites of environmental disasters and install what he calls Crying Posts: tall wooden markers that emit an electronic wailing noise, sometimes pulsating frantically like an alarm.

Summers has put up posts at contaminated nuclear sites and plutonium processing plants. He traveled to Bhopal, India, where a chemical gas spill killed thousands of people, and to Bligh Island in Alaska, the site of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. To mark the hole in the ozone layer,

he journeyed to Ushuaia, on the island of Tierra del Fuego in Argentina, commonly referred to as the southernmost city in the world. And now he has returned home to Michigan to install a Crying Post to mark the Flint water crisis.

"But why?" I ask Summers, as he digs. "What does art like this accomplish?" It is probably a rude question. "How does this help solve the environmental crisis?"

Summers laughs. Wearing glasses and a collared shirt, his black hair streaked with gray, he looks more college professor than international artist. He is a calm, centered person. The word "chill" comes to mind.

"I'm not trying to solve the environmental crisis," he says.

I stare at him.

"That's the thing you have to understand," he says patiently. "Not only am I not looking to solve the environmental crisis, but because I'm a Buddhist, I don't even believe that I *could* solve it."

In every place Summers has installed a post, he's met victims and survivors, who are usually surprised to see him. "They ask, 'What are you doing here? Why do you even care?'" he says. An environmental catastrophe will make a big splashy headline for a couple of weeks but then the world moves on to the next problem, and the local people know they are forgotten, even though the problem still exists.

"I can't change what happened or

solve an environmental tragedy," Summers says, "but I can acknowledge the pain. I can bear witness to the suffering."

On the ground behind him lies the Crying Post, twelve feet long and beautifully painted. The top third is sky blue, with raffia hanging down like hair; the middle is chalky bone white, wrapped in copper wiring; and the bottom is brown and textured, like tree bark. "This is art, not political protest," says Summers. "Art has layers of meaning to it."

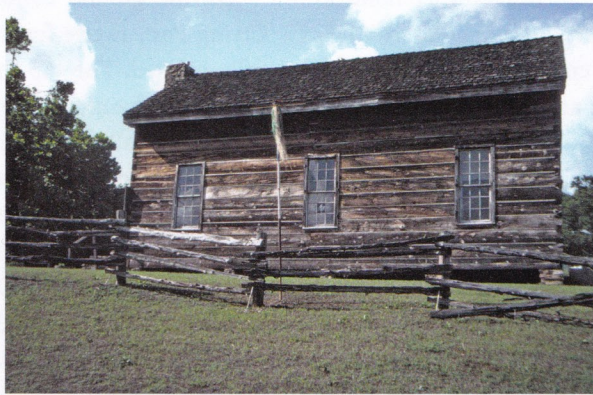
The wooden post will eventually rot, if it isn't vandalized first. But Summers embraces the temporary nature of his art.

"The other posts you've installed—do you know if they're still there?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I doubt that they are."

I can't help but think of Buddhist monks from Tibet, who create beautiful mandalas from sand and then sweep them away.

As he shovels, Summers takes a few minutes to recap the Flint water crisis. In 2014, under the leadership of an emergency manager—an outsider brought in to balance the budget—the city switched its water supply from Lake Huron to the polluted Flint River, a cost-saving measure. Soon after, residents began complaining about the water quality, and by August city officials had issued boil-water advisories. That October, a General Motors plant in Flint stopped using the water, saying that it was too corrosive for



Dennis Summers's Crying Posts bear witness to disasters around the globe. Top left: Flint, Michigan, where over 100,000 residents were exposed to lead in their drinking water. Top right: Bhopal, India, where over 500,000 people were exposed to highly toxic methyl isocyanate gas from a leak at a pesticide plant. Bottom left: Reconstruction of a Cherokee courthouse from the 1829 capital of Tahlonteeskee, near Gore, Oklahoma. In 1839, the forced removal of eastern Cherokee on the Trail of Tears killed 4,000 people. Bottom right: Sellafield, England, site of the Windscale fire, the worst nuclear accident in Great Britain's history.

car parts. Because the city neglected to use an anticorrosive additive, residents in older homes were exposed to high levels of lead in their drinking water. This caused serious health problems, especially for children.

"It's the same old story," Summers says. "A government that doesn't care and will cover up when things go wrong. And the poor people, the disenfranchised: they suffer the most."

His shovel clinks. He holds up a piece of metal that looks like a big flat coin and tosses it to me.

"It would have cost something like one hundred dollars per day for the anticorrosive additive to prevent the lead poisoning," he says.

Perhaps because he's a visual artist, Summers looks at the big picture, at the patterns that keep repeating no matter where they happen on the globe. "I see commonalities amongst all these environmental disasters," he says. "We tend to think of them as unique experiences, especially when they're happening; but really, it's the same story over and over again. Environmental degradation causes

human suffering, and suffering is the same regardless of place."

It's not an easy dig, but finally, Summers breaks through the layers of rubble and hits actual dirt. Before we lift the post into the hole, he attaches a small solar panel, which will power the piezo buzzer.

Summers intends the Crying Posts not as individual memorials but as part of a global network that connects the suffering of humans impacted by environmental disasters all over the world. "A network of pain," Summers says, "but also, potentially, a network of catharsis and change."



*Left: Bligh Island, Alaska, where just off the coast the Exxon Valdez struck the Bligh Reef and spilled 10.8 million gallons of crude oil. Top right: Dennis Summers stands above the Flint River. Bottom right: North of the border town Mildura, New South Wales, Australia, where the irrigation practices of people of European descent have led to the salinization of the land, making it inhospitable to life.*

The clouds shift, and the sun shines down on the concrete and weeds. A single great blue heron flies above the polluted Flint River. The Crying Post rises from the rubble, the raffia waving in the breeze. The piezo buzzer responds to the sun. The post begins crying.

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## Trailblazers

SARAH GIRAGOSIAN

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**WE STARTED** playing *Oregon Trail* in earnest after the 2016 elections. Something about the dysentery, the cannibal-inducing privation, and the more than two thousand miles of travel across treacherous rivers and mountain chains appealed to us in those early weeks. We

play *Oregon Trail* on Friday—“Villain Friday,” my wife calls it, the one day of the week we take a break from lesson prepping, teaching, reading, and writing to rest. Songbirds migrating across the ocean have been spotted taking refuge on cargo ships and tankers when they need to refresh before the next stage of their journey. Friday is our floating barge.

If you’re American and you came of age in the nineties, as I did, you probably know *Oregon Trail*, the computer game that purported to teach schoolchildren about the perils of early nineteenth-