



Painter John Pugh expected his mural, "Drain," to "open dialogue," but he never thought the politics of the Owens Valley would get so involved. Photo by Mike Gervais

# Beyond the Owens Valley

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LADWP gives back donation to Mural Society amidst national coverage of local controversy

By Mike Gervais  
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Even with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power attempting to stamp out some of the bad press it's received since it last spoke about a mural painted in

Bishop, residents, visitors and even the national media don't appear to be making that easy.

The mural, titled "Drain," depicts a Sierra vista with snow-capped peaks, lush green foliage and a mountain lake. The subject of controversy in the mural, however, is an obtrusive, rusted drain pipe stamped with the letters "LADWP" (Los Angeles Department of Water and Power) draining the color from the picturesque scene.

When the painting was unveiled officials from LADWP publically cried out about the subject matter, and argued that it was inappropriate — even historically inaccurate. The util-

ity revoked a \$500 donation to the Bishop Mural Society, an act for which LADWP took widespread flack (including in a pointed *Sacramento Bee* editorial). In a letter sent to the Bishop Mural Society, LADWP also promised to take a closer look at the donations it makes to other entities in the Eastern Sierra.

However, LADWP reissued the check to the Mural Society this week. LADWP Aqueduct Business Manager Gene Coufal declined to say whether the decision to give the money back was made in Inyo County or Southern California.

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# ATTENTION

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City officials in Los Angeles have been clear that the actions of LADWP officials in the Owens Valley were not condoned by those in charge in the Southland.

A spokesman for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa told the *New York Times* that the mayor feels "Mr. Coufal's letter should not have been sent" and Mayor Villaraigosa "welcomes projects like this."

Furthermore, the *Times* reported that Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley said "the mayor expressed his dismay to managers at the water department."

Coufal did make it clear the return of the donation was not a sign of a change-of-heart regarding LADWP's feelings about the mural.

"Despite what happened, we felt we had a commitment" to the Mural Society "that we wanted to fulfill," Coufal said this week.

The Bishop Mural Society wasn't the only entity to draw the ire of LADWP in the mural's wake. World-renowned muralist John Pugh, who designed the concept for the painting and put in the hours to paint it, was sent a letter by LADWP Watershed Resource Manager Brian Tillemans, in which Tillemans denies the historical accuracy of the mural's message and asserts the mural will perpetuate ill feelings towards LADWP.

As for Pugh, who stands by the history portrayed in the mural, he said he has mixed feelings about

the results.

"It's healthy and important to open dialogue" about the water issues in the Owens Valley "rather than keep it quiet," he said. "But this painting isn't meant to stir up current issues, otherwise, it wouldn't be a rusty pipe."

Rusted or not, however, the pipe has sparked debate all throughout the valley. "I knew (the mural) was going to be edgy, but I didn't think it was going to get political." Pugh also said that he feels the mural "is going to get a lot more media attention" before the issue simmers down.

That "media attention" has so far stretched from Sacramento to New York.

It seems that nearly everyone has an opinion on the matter except the Bishop Mural Society, which is responsible for maintenance and upkeep of the mural now that it's finished.

When asked for the group's stance on the mural, Bishop Mural Society President Barbel Ackermann-Williams would say only that, "We approved the mural. We got a black and white concept sketch and we approved it."

The Mural Society later issued a press release noting: "We take a neutral position regarding controversial or political issues."

It was the seeming political content of the mural that had some residents upset, as they believe that sort of subject matter doesn't belong in public art. "...We were very disappointed with the mural

recently completed on the Core building at the corner of West Line and Fowler Street. Though Mr. Core denies that the mural makes a political statement, in our opinion it does just exactly that," Bishop residents Carl and Virginia Gorham wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Inyo Register* ("Politics have no place in murals meant to beautify City of Bishop," Oct. 13, 2005).

However, there has also been a public support regarding the mural as a true depiction of LADWP's relationship with the Owens Valley, both historically and otherwise.

"Isn't it sad that LADWP is 'deeply offended' by the John Pugh mural on the east wall of the Window Fair building? Now the people of the Owens Valley are *again* being threatened by LADWP," wrote Don C. Dillinger of Bishop in a letter to the editor ("Core Mural Rightly Tapped LADWP's Guilty Conscience," Oct. 13, 2005.)

The "threat" Dillinger referred to was Coufal's comment in his letter to the Mural Society that other LADWP donations would be more closely examined from now on. "Unfortunately, now we're going to have to look a little closer at the people and groups we donate to," Coufal wrote, after mentioning that the \$500 donation to the Mural Society was revoked.

What organizations LADWP contributes to "has to be their decision," Bishop Mayor Kathy Henderson said, adding that "that

money they donated to the Mural Society, then took back (then returned again), not a penny of that went to the mural they're upset about." Henderson denied to comment further on the matter, saying, "I don't want to be put in a position where I take sides; we have to work closely with DWP" and other members of the community.

After LADWP reclaimed its \$500 donation, the owner of the building the mural was painted on, Jerry Core, replaced the lost \$500 donation. Core also covered most of Pugh's \$30,000 fee for painting the mural.

Coufal also noted this week, after the check was returned to the Mural Society, that all requests for financial support from LADWP will be handled as they always have been. "Just like any other request for support that comes in, we'll evaluate it and make a decision," Coufal said.

Regardless of whether the mural is historically, politically or currently accurate, public sentiment proves that there are still ill feelings in the Owens Valley about LADWP and the water wars. "There are still embers there that are undoused," Pugh said, standing in front of his mural as a motorist passed by and yelled, "Hey, I like it," and gave him a thumbs up.

The mural is under contract by Core, the Mural Society and Pugh and cannot be taken down or changed without consent by all parties involved.