

Hafren/Severn

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This work consists of seven samples taken at sites along the river Severn over the past month in order to attempt to produce a kind of portrait of the river. I am interested in the idea of seeing things at several different angles/locations at once, examining the ideas of a river as a unitary entity. Is a river one whole or simply a succession of myriad spaces? It is fascinating as it is in a sense a place and yet is moving. I became interested in rivers that cross borders: if water flows from Wales into England, it almost leads to questions of where the river is. Is it in Wales, England, both or neither? Is it an entity in itself extraneous of nationality or is it fundamentally tied up with the very sense of nationhood, a defining characteristic, as at Chepstow where it delineates a border? By taking water and soil from seven locations on the river, three in Wales, four in England, I am asking where and what these samples are. Though the Welsh samples are now resting in England, they were sealed in Wales. Does that somehow make them a small part of Wales in England? An island – the bottled essence of nationality. What if I was to break the glass and pour them onto the ground, does that essence dissipate? Do they become England. What makes a piece of land a nation? There is something in the kind of ‘blood and soil’ nationalism that would almost ascribe a sacred essence to the country’s land. By bottling it like this can one capture an almost holy relic of this essence? Is this part of the nation, like an embassy in a foreign land or is its glass shell simply an illusionary barrier to its essential unity? Is a bottle of Evian part of France? It seems farcical and yet it contains the distilled essence of French soil and land. The human body supposedly replaces every single cell completely every five years. If I remain in country five years do I become part of it? A citizen or part of the land itself? Perhaps it is language that defines a nation? So what if the labelled locations along the river from both sides of the border are in shown in both languages? Does one language define a place for its people, another for outsiders? What of older names subsumed by new ones. Yr Trallwng becoming Welshpool, Caer Wrangon becoming Worcester. Language becomes a symptom of politics, and as politics defines nationality most succinctly, language can signify a space; a weapon of domination or resistance. How does it make an inhabitant of a place feel to see their city called by an alien name? Should the labelled sample state Caer Wrangon or Worcester? Plynlimon or Pumlumon? It works both ways. As a river that flows through two countries should we call it the Severn or Hafren? It comes from Wales, carrying Welsh water and Welsh stones with it, so as it flows through Worcester is it entirely part of England? As it is never still can it ever even be in a place, can something that never stops and rests in a country really be part of it or is it somehow outside of it? A river, a migrating salmon or swallow, an international artist, an immigrant.

All of these are questions that fascinate me and as an artist who has spent extensive amounts of time living and working in both Wales and England it mirrors some of the complexities of my own sense of identity and nationhood. I was born and raised in England but after living in Wales it is the Welsh flag and Anthem that stir the hairs on the back of my neck. Such are the complexities and unresolved tensions that exist within concepts of nationality and borders, can I be like a river that is simultaneously of both nationalities and neither, that is essentially part of the land and yet at the same time just passing through.