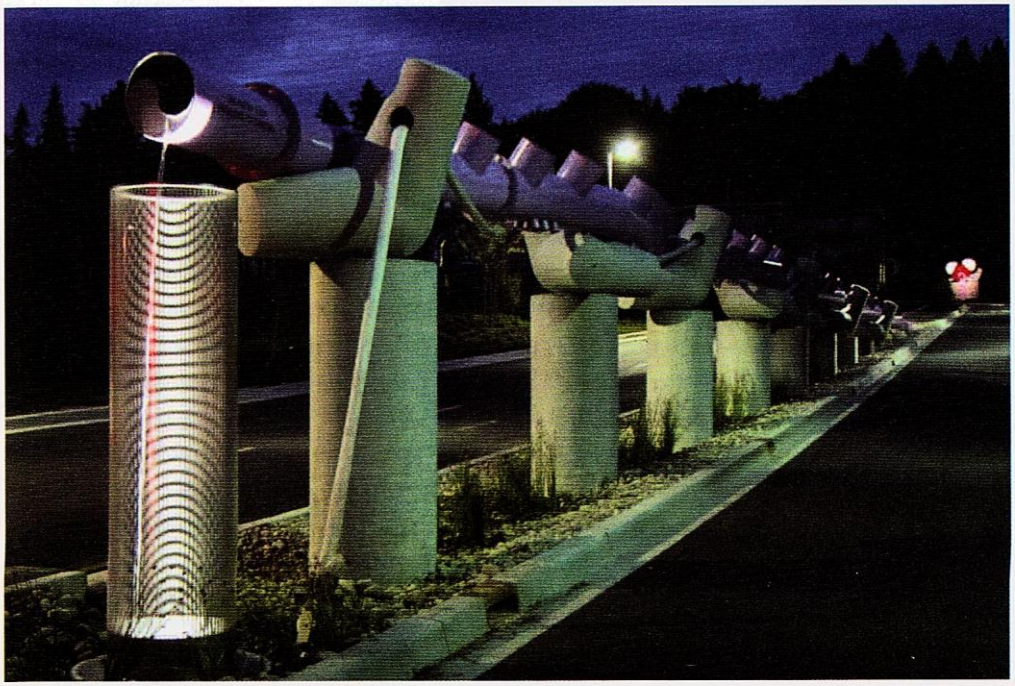
Visualizing the Water Cycle: Buster Simpson, Jann Rosen-Queralt, and Ellen Sollod at Brightwater Treatment System

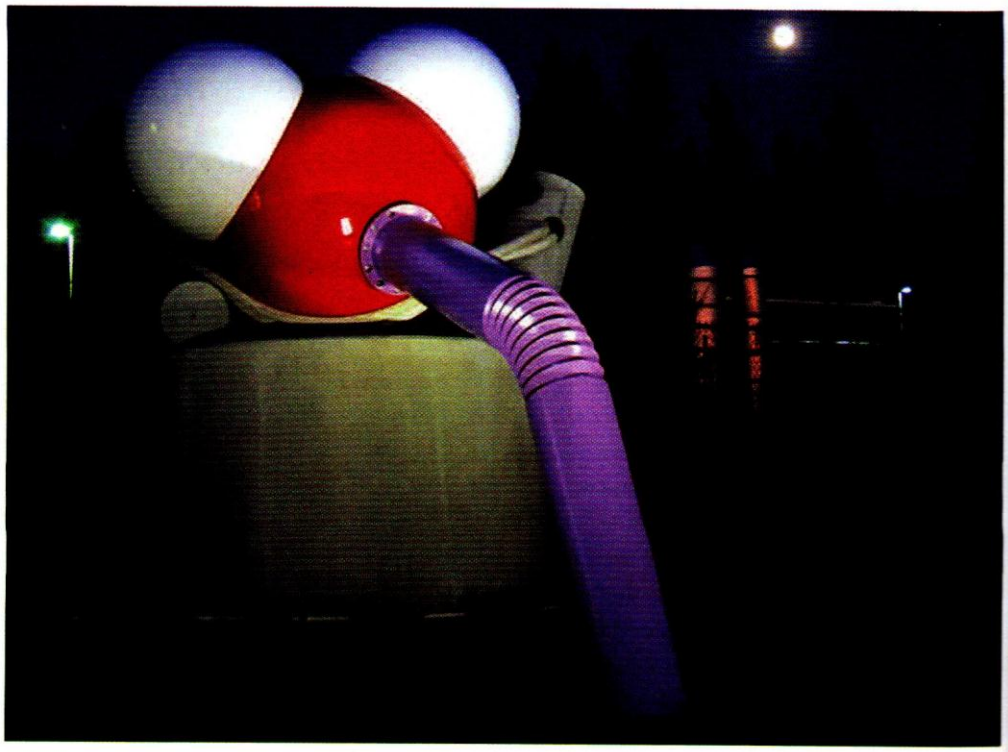
by Susan Platt

Brightwater Treatment System in Northern King County, Washington, is a massive sewage treatment plant with mechanical, biological, and electrical systems for cleaning water, a system of pipes running through deep-bored tunnels to Puget Sound, an Educational Center, and 40 acres of reclaimed land on a salmon-spawning creek. The pipes not only carry wastewater to the plant and treated wastewater to the sound, but also distribute thousands of gallons of treated water for reuse.

In 2002, Buster Simpson, Jann Rosen-Queralt, and Ellen Sollod, in collaboration with Cath Brunner, Director of Public Art for King County, developed an "Art Concept Workbook" for Brightwater. The final art master plan, inspired in part by Lorna Jordan's *Waterworks Gardens* (1996) at the East Division Reclamation Plant in Renton, called for participating artists to create a "vision of sustainability." They were asked to make visible both active treatment and natural cleaning processes, such as detention pools and constructed wetlands. The Brightwater Art Master Plan stands as an

Buster Simpson, *Bio Boulevard Digester and Water Molecule*, 2002–11. Cast concrete, reclaimed water, stainless steel, paint, and LED, 9 x 170 ft.





Buster Simpson, *Water Molecule* (detail), 2002–11. Cast concrete, reclaimed water, stainless steel, paint, and nylon rope, 12 x 8 x 16 ft.

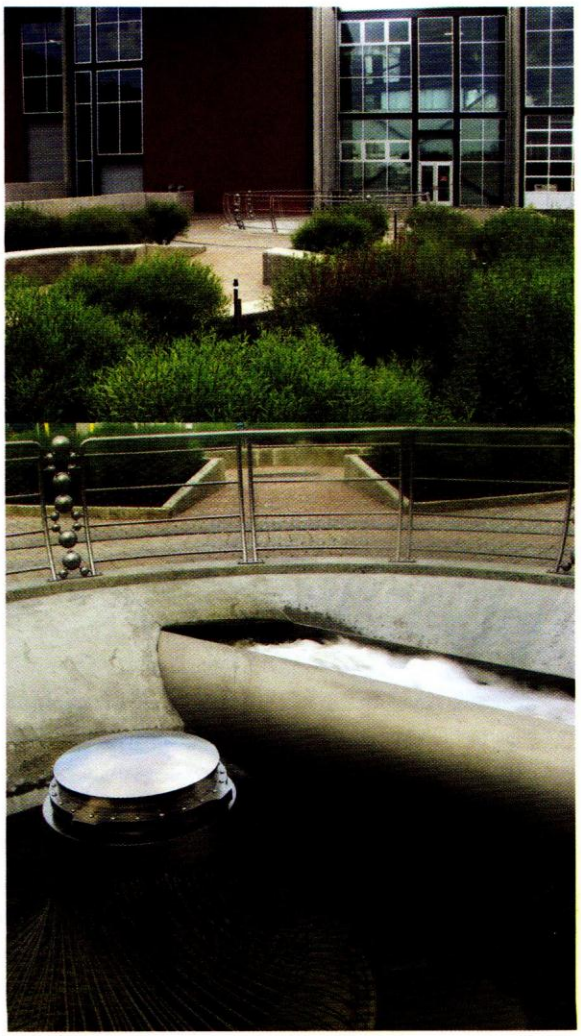
inspiring document of what artists can do when full imaginative potential is wedded to the creation of a green world. The realized projects and those in process document how they have had to adjust their ideas to engineering regulations, economics, and other forces and mind sets.

Simpson addresses reclaimed stormwater in a monumental sculpture at the main entrance to the plant. *Bio Boulevard Digester and Water Molecule* suggests a heroic enterprise with a semi-Pop Art aesthetic. At one end, an enlarged red (hydrogen) and white (oxygen) "water molecule," an icon of the treatment plant itself, passes treated water through a "bubble tea straw" into an underground pipe that emerges in the arms of "heroic plumbers," really concrete tetrapods that evoke the muscled laborers of WPA public art. They "carry" the treated water through a purple pipe (plumbing code for treated water) pierced with holes that expose the water to the sun and allow it to off-gas. At the end of the pipe, the water pours into a six-foot-high coil. The "plumbers" suggest communal collaboration as they collectively support the long purple pipe. The entire 170-foot piece is a metaphor for the function of the plant, in which a 23-mile length of purple pipe distributes water to various uses or to discharge, purging the chlorine disinfectant during transport.

Near the main entry point for sewage entering and treated water leaving the building, Rosen-Queralt's *Confluence* represents the speed and volume of water moving through the plant. Water rushes loudly across a constructed pool, an open pipe reminding us of the enormous amounts of water that we expend in sewage disposal. At the center of the pool is a cone-shaped sculpture that Rosen-Queralt refers to as a breathing "gill." Made of flexible strands of coiled wire, it rises, falls, and twists on its side, evoking the movement of a tidal pool, in and out. A third element comments

on waste, slow drips leaking from holes in the sides. When the water accumulates to 12 inches, it automatically flushes out—the water in the sculpture is already processed, and it uses no energy to function. The well is set in a plaza that includes a concentric tile pattern evoking rings of water. A grove of willow trees, once they reach 10 feet, will represent one percent of the volume of water that moves through the plant. *Confluence* reflects Rosen-Queralt's philosophy of water as part of a system of exchanges and intersections. As she wrote in a proposal for an urbanized watershed at the Baltimore Water Resources Department (September 2010): "Understanding the connectivity between nature and technology...is a reminder of the symbiotic relationships inherent in an ecosystem."

Sollod, Brightwater's third lead artist, also gives much thought to the crucial importance of water in our lives. *Collection and Transformation*, her window display in the Environmental Education and Community Center, features 17 large glass sculptures that evoke aquatic micro-organisms. The forms were made in a residency at the Tacoma Museum of Glass hot shop, based on sketches and sand clay models. The glass micro-organisms will be set into a stainless steel honeycomb structure and lighted with fiber optics to create a suggestion of movement. An adjacent window contains recycled laboratory glass, an increasingly obsolete tool as computers replace hands-on testing.



Top and detail: Jann Rosen-Queralt, *Confluence*, 2005–11. Concrete, stainless steel, water, and willows, 10 x 115 x 55 ft. View of site and detail of open pipe and "gill."

As part of the largest water treatment plant ever built, these three projects and many others (including works by Andrea Wilbur-Sigo, Christian Moeller, Jane Tsong, Jim Blashfield, Cris Bruch, and Claude Zervas) honor the importance of water and give visual form to treatment processes. With plans for temporary projects in the restored wetlands, *Brightwater is intended to be a destination for recreation and education, as well as a model for returning wastewater* to nature. Water as a fixed resource is here returned to the cycle of nature.