



Susan Derges

The dream life of water

Water form is a gift of nature. Mysterious, it is also a way into the emergent 'web of life' sciences. **Susan Derges'** photographic record of catching water forms in the instant involves a unique approach, returning her art to its source whilst beautifully illuminating Chaos and Complexity's relationship to the natural world.

Barnstaple, another place where a river meets the ocean. The river is the river Taw, which runs from its source on Dartmoor out into the wide crest of North Devon's Bideford Bay, eventually flowing along the side of this old, originally Roman market town.

The Taw is one of Devon's several rivers, each of which, says the photographer and artist Susan Derges, has its own distinctive qualities and character. Derges has been investigating the qualities of rivers and the water that flows along them, for most of her professional life. She talks of each river as embodying different, quite separate spirits, in part comprised of the geology, rock and soil formation, in part the actual differences of landscape, bleak moorland, or rolling hill, and in part the vegetation, trees, plant, animal and bird life which go to make up the sense of place each river gives off, emanates.

During the cycle of the year of 1998 Derges chronicled the changing, maturing ebb and flow of the life of the Taw through a photographic visual report of the river's varying water forms. Unusually, for photography at the edge of the twenty-first century, this is accomplished without a camera. Rather, Derges actually

submerges photographic emulsion paper underwater on an aluminium tray, and after that at the right moment lets off a flash light. A flash light, because she's doing this in the extended dark room of night time. An image of the water which was flowing over the paper, at the moment the light goes off, is recorded.

In the moment the flash goes off, the luscious shapes of the water emerge, like the photograph in the half light of the dark room, out of the emulsion of the specially coated paper. And what is revealed of the water, to the unsuspecting or innocent eye is completely wondrous and extraordinary, that if you have no idea that it is there, will make you cast your eyes at the medium anew.

The water, frozen in the photographic instant, is a turmoil of form and shape. Turbulent, whorls, cusps, vortices of untutored anarchy, which on the life-size pictures are revealed as containing astonishing and perhaps unsuspected intricacy. The colours too are intense; purples, dark blues and pinks merging across the paper, at times strangely reminiscent, to me, of distant nebulae, an apparent likeness of the macrocosmos found within this instant of the microcosmos.

It's noticeable that the process Derges uses, photographs, is basically a part of the traditional ensemble of