

POPULAR  

---

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2021

**THE MOTOR VEHICLE:  
A MUSING ON THE AESTHETICS  
OF THE CANADIAN OIL SANDS**

**Megan Green**

Artist and Independent Researcher, Canada

# THE MOTOR VEHICLE: A MUSING ON THE AESTHETICS OF THE CANADIAN OIL SANDS

Megan Green

## Abstract

This article isolates depictions of gender and class that function at cross purposes to environmental concerns, in a critique of the narrative turn associated with the Canadian oilsands. The author isolates a discursive tendency in Petroculture Studies to conflate aesthetics, ethics and class in depictions of a mining community in Northern Alberta, Canada. It lampoons the ubiquity of expository accounts of the 'smell' of the region, and references to banal objects associated with the motor vehicle and conspicuous consumption. Building on the author's past work, the article focuses on the driveway and the motor vehicle as objects of material culture whose meaning is reduced to the context in which they are found. Select academic and popular media is contrasted with artistic production by the author and Kristopher Karklin, two artists from the Fort McMurray area.

## Keywords

Petrocultures, Art practice, Class, Gender, Environmentalism, Consumption.

*Jacked up trucks with trailer hitch balls dangling, passing on the shoulder of a remote northern Canadian highway. A Ford F150 if one is young, a dually (dual rear wheel) of some big three make (GM, Ford, Chrysler) if one has ascended to the ostensible nouveau-riche; better to haul an ATV, skidoo or camping trailer. There may be a decal of the province of Newfoundland's flag in the rear window, perhaps even the flag of the Dominion of Newfoundland, if such an individual is feeling nostalgic. The driver wears his site ID badge to the bar as a status symbol. The pronoun is always he, as the women "round these parts" are either in service of the men and their 'job on site,' or employed in the service industry.*

## 1. Introduction

In Canada, at least among people involved in the study of petrocultures, such a trite description is easily recognised as a specific regional setting. It is typical imagery associated with the northern Albertan oilsands; such narrative flourishes are ubiquitous among the myriad news articles, essays, documentaries, and works of fiction portraying the sociocultural character of the region. Such academic dispatches from research trips into the region are generally written at a somewhat smug arms-length distance. One wouldn't want to get any of that bituminous sand<sup>1</sup> on them; it needs to be refined before it could be at all palatable to the majority of our high-octane energy consuming society.

There lies a problem in how those who live and work in Fort McMurray are depicted. Such an imaginary can create a situation in which it is easier to overlook the quandary of our collective enormous energy consumption, in favour of satirising an easier target. Those who serve as metonymy for fossil fuel energy consumption because their sociocultural markers are aesthetically clearer. Geo Takach writes that

Recent work, drawing on scholars such as Cronon (1995) and Morton (2007), has explored the interplay between the Romantic gaze (sanctifying nature as sublime) and the extractive gaze (viewing nature as a resource to be exploited) in the work of Canadian landscape artists, to conclude that in separating people from nature, both gazes function similarly to subordinate the land to human purposes (Hodgins & Thompson, 2011). Such representations may be positioned in a wider trend in which media visualizations of nature are based on an implicit ideology, tending to perpetuate and justify existing power relations (e. g. Berger, 1972; Sturken & Cartwright, 2008). Those visualizations use images which are increasingly abstract or iconic, and which by repetition, “replace other possible representations, particularly those that locate and connect such issues in actual concrete processes such as globalism and consumerism” (Hansen & Machin, 2008, p. 775).<sup>2</sup>

Moral characterizations of the natural resource industry in general, and the people who work in it aside, utilising class condescension to criticize does not address the problematics of the broader economic and political systems, and cultural undercurrents that generated the Canadian oilsands.

Criticisms of the aesthetics of the built environment and material consumption choices of the people living in the area abound. A formative example for me being the tone of Rob Shields’ description of the town of Fort McMurray in his “Feral Suburbs: Cultural Topologies of Social Reproduction, Fort McMurray, Canada,” in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 wherein he writes

Suburban life in Fort McMurray means to be melancholically governed most of the time by the isolation imposed by the expanse of wilderness, to be fatally forced to respect its climatic extremes, to grimly wrest oil wealth from the strata of the area, or to joyfully respond to its beauties.... It conforms to images and forms of the North American middle class rather than to those of the local, the working class or to the village rubric of the surrounding Métis, Cree and Dene settlements. Indeed, this is a paradise of the lumpen proletariat, wealthy on overtime and double shifts.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this tends to reinforce a capitalist narrative linking social value in this community specifically to the acquisition of the contextually ‘incorrect’ material goods, serving to reinforce the moral superiority of such critics, while instigating a kind of regional and class-based antagonism that is often counterproductively useful to politically conservative lobby groups.

As an object of material culture in the context of the oilsands mining region, the cultural associations related to motor vehicles place a person in a sociocultural context with a particular relationship to the landscape. I am interested in the kinds of encounters possible on the driveways of Fort McMurray.<sup>4</sup>

My interest in examining the driveway as a site of encounters<sup>5</sup> arises from an interest in how, “because of the toxins’ invisibility and banality, individuals often attend to environmental problems not because they are the most dire, pressing, or dangerous, but because they are the most evocatively articulated.”<sup>6</sup> The driveway is a banal and universal marker of fossil fuel consumption everywhere, and yet often images of Fort McMurray feature the driveway in a way that would suggest it is somehow symbolic of the region and its ‘character.’

## **2. Cliché in Depictions of the Oil Sands Mining Region**

First, an article that ran in *The Walrus* in 2013: “Big Mac” featured an image of a pregnant young woman in her driveway power washing a truck on a lift kit with chrome flames emblazoning the sides (2013; fig.1). She and her neighbors are described in the article’s text as living

the good life, Fort Mac style. Parked in the Peckfords’ driveway are two trucks, a Suburban and a Sierra, plus a new trailer that sleeps ten. A For Sale sign is posted on the four-bedroom house next door, which is listed at \$1.5 million. In the playground down the street, kids jockey for position on slides and monkey bars, more evidence of a demographic boom that is seeing up to 150 new births a month in a town with just three obstetricians. The scene recalls North America’s postwar suburban idyll, supersized with hydrocarbons.<sup>7</sup>

The author of the article also describes how while visiting the town he “decide[d] to do what almost nobody here does: go for a walk in the woods.”<sup>8</sup> It seems to be assumed here that an engagement with the environment and working in the oil industry are incompatible, or somehow entirely compartmentalized, as opposed to culturally rationalized in ways that must be understood and confronted. The familiar tropes and “discursive formations”<sup>9</sup> of boomtown ruin better articulate capitalism and issues of class in general than they describe the ostensible culturally bereft quality perceived to exist in mining towns, ‘the good life’ in this context apparently being limited to the

ostentatious consumption of material property. The image, in the context of the article, also implies a kind of heteronormativity, the vehicle and power washer being somewhat symbolically phallic;<sup>10</sup> the woman pictured being pregnant and dutifully washing what might be presumed to be her husband's truck also sends a message. The reality however may be entirely different, and we cannot know how the woman photographed here sees herself in the image, nor the photographer's intent: the image could be empowering to the subject in the context of this subculture, but of course this is not explored in the pages of *The Walrus*. Describing Fort McMurray as suburban is a common rhetorical tool in most analysis of Fort McMurray's built environment;<sup>11</sup> the cultural currency of the suburbs being somewhat derogatory in this context, conveying a sense of artificiality and problematic social values.



Fig 1. Image by Naomi Harris, from Taras Grescoe's "Big Mac: Fort McMurray has ambitions to become more than a one-resource town," *The Walrus Magazine* (Toronto: The Walrus Foundation, 2013). Copyright Naomi Harris, used with permission.

A depiction of the region in a more academic context appears in Warren Cariou's "Tar Hands: A Messy Manifesto." Cariou's hyperbolic description of the region acts as an alternative to a rational argument that the author feels no one, apparently, has accepted or will accept for changing Canada's climate change and energy policy,

What I remember most about the tar sands is the stink. We stood there with our cameras, trying to capture a record of that obliterated landscape, but I could hardly see. The fumes were like hammers: sulfur and benzene and something else – a dead smell, a charnel residue on the back of my tongue. I had a migraine in half a dozen breaths. I breathed into my shirtsleeve, trying not to retch. How could people work in this, day after day? How could the Cree, Metis and Dene people of Fort Mackay live in it? “Oh, I used to smell it, too” one security guard laughed, after warning us to stay off company property. “But after a week or two you don’t notice a thing.”<sup>12</sup>

As someone who has spent most of her life living in the region, I would say that it isn’t really an issue of not noticing oil anymore, the opposite in fact: oil drives the economy of the town and many people are intimately aware of its material qualities and uses as the reason they are employed and able to have the modern conveniences they do. Assuming, based on my experience, that the ‘smell’ in Cariou’s description is either an allegory or an exaggeration for the purpose of persuasion, as a cultural insider I have observed that an intimate awareness of where oil comes from and how much contemporary Canadian life relies on fossil fuel energy has rendered the whole process banal in this community. The banality of cars, plastics and other seemingly easily available energy has been linked to the process of mining in the minds of the people who participate in its extraction, it is linked conceptually to what it makes possible in the contemporary Canadian built environment.

Consider another narrative turn in an academic article by Patchett & Lozowy on the region, On the day that we traveled Highway 63 it was mid-winter, making the already hazardous conditions seriously treacherous, a fact evidenced by the recurrent appearance of wrecked and abandoned vehicles along the hard shoulder of the highway. The four-and-a-half-hour drive north to ‘Fort Mac’ was the longest, most drawn-out white-knuckle ride of my life.

After such a journey, the sight of ‘Fort Mac’ does little to convince that it was worth the risks. Of course, for those working at the Oil Sands the economic rewards to be had there far outweigh the dangers of the drive and the numbing dullness of the town itself. To the tourist, Fort McMurray appears makeshift: a ramshackle grid of functional building blocks that define a boomtown: a place to sleep and eat. Yet the town itself never sleeps. As the urban service centre for the region, it serves the 24/7 production of the Oil Sands. The constant hum of traffic and the repetitive approach, stop, idle and depart at the chartered bus stops which run workers back and forth to the mines make Fort Mac a difficult place to get some sleep for the uninitiated.... The smoking chimneys of a Suncor refinery offered the first visual

indication of mining operations north of the bridge crossing the Athabasca River. As we drove towards them, the air in the car grew thick with the aroma of hydrocarbons.<sup>13</sup>

Somewhat condescendingly from the point of view of the local, the smell in both passages is described as overwhelming, the landscape as bleak, and the people as dull and somehow having become impervious to the smell and the lack of meaning beyond the acquisition of oil money in their lives. In general, this place is described a kind of far-off dangerous place one endures for the economic benefits, the town and industry seemingly as impermanent and ill-conceived as modernity itself; vehicles and the smell associated with them feature heavily in most depictions of the region. If one were to imagine this place as analogous to the experience of the car, it would be the smell of pumping gas, laying down asphalt, changing oil, burning tires and exhaust. The not so flashy side of modernity, the part you don't put in the car commercial.

Many others have written about the sublime projections on an imaginarily uninhabited 'wilderness' as a notion that allowed it to become ripe for colonial expansion,<sup>14</sup> the Romantic/extractive-cum-consumptive gaze,<sup>15</sup> as in the 'petro-poetics'<sup>16</sup> of images of oil, and how this oil imag(e)ineary<sup>17</sup> tends to conceptualise oil as invisible, and also imply a vastness and an emptiness onto the landscape that obscures that these are real finite places that are not empty of people, meaning, or not integral to the way contemporary life is literally fueled. As Jennifer Peebles writes, "Using scale to make the toxic appear sublime comes with risk. It may predispose people to look for toxins in the extraordinary, as opposed to on the shelves of their garages."<sup>18</sup> The sublime conceptualization also allows for fear and moral panic to be projected onto these 'marginal' contexts, locating oil in some other place, rather than where most people might confront it in their everyday lives,<sup>19</sup> running through the cultural territories we inhabit. It might be helpful to broaden conceptualizations of oil, nature and gender.

### **3. Artistic work from within the Oilsands Subculture**

The 2017 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art, *For the Time Being*, featured the work of two artists associated with Fort McMurray. The work of Kristopher Karklin and my own both draw from personal histories spent in the region; our work contrasts with the usual approach to depicting this place as one where the anthropocene could be exemplified.

Peta Rake and Kristy Trinier describe in the *For the Time Being* exhibition catalogue that the biennial orients itself to the notion that the Alberta Biennial is an 'Alberta conversation.' Referring to the curator's onsite interviews with the artists, Rake describes how

the notion of the transitional spaces in-between every 'place' also makes me think of the bodies within them. Mostly about women's bodies and the spaces that were delineated or designated for them, and here I am specifically referring to the 'women's only' floors of the hotels we stayed in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray.... I also want to negate the way that regionalism is seen through rose-coloured glasses, because after the road trip we took and the conversations we had with artists across the province, it was evident that there are some extremely dark and violent parts of this place, like any.<sup>20</sup>

The multiple natural disasters occurring around the province while the biennial was being produced, flooding in Calgary, Canmore, High River, Banff and others, and the massive Fort McMurray wildfire, produced in Trinier

an awareness of the fact that at any time, the world could end-or, more specifically, the world as you know it could end.... We can see that 'world' is over, and a new world will be conceived going forward. What was merging out of instability, or the ominous forces at work environmentally and politically to disrupt the unknown, was really palpable."<sup>21</sup>

Taking Trinier and Rake's writing as an introduction to the situation in this corner of the anthropocene, what do the poetics utilized in cultural production addressing the oil sands and industry towns say about cars vis a vis oil and gender in this context? How are notions produced by dominant cultural narratives projected onto spaces, and what do the assumptions in these notions reveal? The tension in conceptualizations of masculinity and mining associated with the oil sands region in Northern Alberta is explored in our distinct individual artistic practices and is molded by experiences had during formative years spent living and working in a northern space of oil extraction.

Karklin's works in his *New Series* feature nude male figures, some doing what one might consider to be male gendered activities, such as weightlifting, hitting a baseball, working around an oil pipeline, all explicitly in what is generally considered to be a gendered space. In *Backyard (night-time)* (2015; Fig 2) a naked man is pictured doing bicep curls at the edge of his open garage door by his backyard fire pit, it seems like a scene of pathetic masculinity, for readers familiar with 'Fort Mac's' cultural currency the figure also 'works at site.' Ondine Park writes that Karklin's images have an 'eerie' and 'suffocating' quality.<sup>22</sup> It would not be hard to get to such a reading given the poetics associated with and the images that represent the oil sands; the 'toxic sublime'<sup>23</sup> that Peeples describes in the Edward Burtynsky images of oil sands mining being the most iconic.

However, Karklin's process in constructing his images gives context for a more nuanced reading. Karklin's images are based on his own experiences and memories illustrated in



meticulously constructed models that are photographed before a figure is digitally inserted; Karklin appears to be generally representing himself in spaces he has inhabited. Explanatory text on his website reads,

Karklin engages with the sensibility of reality and fiction [...] here events experienced are tangible and definite, our memories of those events are ephemeral, and intangible, causing many details to be lost or gained in the translation.... Karklin recreates a memory which, due to inconsistency and manipulation, alters the reflection of the experience and space being recreated.... An integral component of Karklin's work is his investigation into the relationship between the urban living space and its occupant; where the exchange that occurs is intimate and secure, it is also temporary and homogenous. This idea is manifested in his work where the spaces that he recreates are minimal to the point where there is almost nothing, except the occupant. Due to the sparseness of the environments, the viewer is drawn into the space, and interprets the piece in relation to their own past experiences."<sup>24</sup>

When the built environment of Fort McMurray is pictured, there is generally a certain kind of meaning projected onto the image, and that meaning generally relates to some kind of ethical judgement. Park's interpretation of the images appears to be that the people and spaces depicted are a product of the shallowness, emptiness and the moral bankruptcy of the oil industry. As Karklin's text seems to posit, the viewer of these images interprets them based on their own understanding of the spaces depicted.

While many of Karklin's images are not all obviously interiors and exteriors specific to the oil sands region, this context is integral to readings of his work. Nature in Karklin's images is, as Park writes of *Backyard (Daytime)* (2014; Fig 3), "simulated as a lively world stretching beyond the bounds of human inhabitation but in fact acting as a cover that disguises the expansion of the desiccated, antisocial interior,"<sup>25</sup> that she implies the figure embodies, given that the sort of mining scenes from the Burtynsky images exist just out of frame. Park is imagining the psychological interiority of the figure and projecting it onto the forest; an interiority that seems to come from some notion about the real place and the meaning Park appears to be attributing to it. The sort of masculinity we are seeing here is interpreted in light of a sense of artificiality in the image. Karklin's images are created as a sort of interpretation of his experiences based on memory and emotional texture; therefore, I find this instance to be an interesting case study in what people at a distance from these actual physical spaces imagine when they interpret places that loom large in the Canadian imagination, as the space of the oil sands does. Among built environments, which

are perhaps generally projected upon as masculine, when placed in contrast to 'mother nature,' this particular built environment is generally seen as a hyper-masculine gendered space. One could see this as a kind of assumption about the sort of masculinities one might find here, and the sub-culture of this place particularly, as being as toxic as the spaces in the Burtynsky images.

The tendency to use gendered tropes in discourses about oil and the environment can accurately describe particular kinds of abuses, but this can be a slippery notion easily fitted to ideological aims. It lends itself some implicit claim that women are somehow more 'in tune' with nature, or more like nature, which could seem to come from a patriarchal notion about man as a steward of the earth, and the earth as like a woman to be plundered.<sup>26</sup> Although in *Exposed: Environmental politics and pleasures in Posthuman Times* Stacy Alaimo is writing about 'carbon-heavy masculinity' in modes of consumption in Texas post 9/11 as being somehow related to repressed dread of climate change, the language used is similar to descriptions of the oil sands mining region. She writes that

“a nationalistic stance of impenetrable masculinity [...] serves only to exacerbate the climate crisis [...] it is especially difficult to ignore the parodically hypermasculine modes of consumerism in which bigger and harder is better. “McMansions” mushroom as suburban and exurban sprawl devour formerly open spaces [...] Even more noticeable, perhaps, is the fact that SUVs and pickup trucks have not only grown ludicrously huge but are armed with aggressive impenetrability, covered, as they often are, with armor-like accouterments including big rugged grille guards and hubcaps arrayed with frighteningly metal cones that look like medieval weapons. Some of these vehicles sport large metal testicles that hang from the trailer hitch (the hitch itself becomes the penis in this ensemble). [...] Analyzing transport and overconsumption in terms of gender enables linkages to what Mann calls a ‘militarized masculine aesthetic,’”<sup>27</sup>

a cultural mode of heteronormative masculinist nationalism that Alaimo and Mann link to racism in the United States, and the use of oil as a justification for the Iraq war via neo-colonialism. The automobile is generally considered as a masculine object, used to subdue the landscape by rapidly crossing it. Constructing the environment as feminine and vulnerable also implies that it is malleable, and *under control*, following that cultural logic this would imply that some kind of absolute technological control over the environment is possible, and that environmental harm could be undone.



Fig 2. Kristopher Karklin, *Backyard (Night-time)*, 2015. 36"x54" Inkjet Print, Edition of 7, 'Copyright Kristopher Karklin, used with permission.' Fig 3. Kristopher Karklin, *Backyard (Daytime)*, 2014. 36"x54" Inkjet Print, Edition of 7, 'Copyright Kristopher Karklin, used with permission.'

It is useful to address the spaces of oil as ones of convergence, where globalism, cultural constructions, social relations and injustices play out in ways that are potentially illustrative of something upstream resulting from some cultural psychology. The conditions that made the oil sands possible, the drivers and enablers of the oil industry, exist in a variety of places, in the context of a global market for energy which perpetuates a colonial and capitalist ethos of engaging with natural resources in which we, the people who require energy at this scale, and local, provincial and national governments are in turns complicit in and implicitly bound up in to meet our physical needs and desires.

In my own work I attempt to express a melancholy related to my experience of these issues, having spent my formative years in northern Alberta. The work attempts to express the affect of the space utilising the uncanny, while attempting to facilitate an empathy with the regional subculture; thereby aiming to expose something of the psychology of interactions with the landscape had in the region and what it might say about mining, class and how the landscape is constructed culturally.

Objects and their associated narratives can begin to contextualize oil-sands mining in its specific geo-cultural landscape,<sup>28</sup> they can be used to illuminate issues related class and gender, and how they exist in material culture.<sup>29</sup> Animal remains represent a convenient way to get at the colonial nature of the Canadian relationship with the landscape; there is a through line running from the Canadian fur trade to our current predicament as a petrostate. I utilise my own anecdotal encounters with ‘remains,’ had in northern Alberta in the context of oil sands mining, as a way to unpack a narrative in the Canadian cultural imaginary that conveniently consigns mining to *some-where else* by placing it in the context of regional antagonisms between margin and center; as opposed to confronting the Anthropocene as an epoch brought on by the energy use of a growing global minority, in a progression that will eventually result in a post human world.

*Wildfire Plastic 1* puts a piece of plastic melted in Fort McMurray during the 2016 Horse River wildfire on display; the experience of the fire itself related to an individually visceral experience of the threat of the post human. The sublime, in the form of a wildfire, is a leveling force pointing to the non-primacy of humanity in the landscape; the melted plastic is displayed as an object of value, emerged from a crucible and seized upon as evidence of some reckoning to be put on a pedestal. Ironically in contrast to this reading of the object, the melted plastic sits on a piece of bone, the pedestal is made of velvet and golden mirrored acrylic. Together, this arrangement of objects is menacing, its intent was to empathise with the perspective of local residents employed in mining, who had an extremely visceral encounter with their own potential

destruction; the wildfire, as an entanglement of relationalities<sup>30</sup> illustrating a disturbing relationship with the non-human.

On modernity and the souvenir, Celeste Olalquiaga writes that

Commodification is like the greedy King Midas, who wanted everything he touched to turn to gold, until he realized that everything really did mean all. He almost died of starvation [...] The souvenir is a remembrance kissed by poisoned lips, savoring the lethal touch even as it races to meet a tragic end.<sup>31</sup>

The melted plastic is a menacing souvenir from a kind of apocalypse wreaked upon the bus stops described by Patchett & Lozowy. I conceptually frame the melted plastic as souvenir object as a way to encapsulate the various affects following the event, a smug disaster porn 'I told you so' for some seeking to make easy connections, and a disturbing experience for others.

As someone for whom the apocalyptic images of oilsands mining were banal, as that is the landscape I grew up with, images of oilsands mining are no more disturbing than any other everyday activity enabled by oil and 'cheap' energy; the landscape of industry became the landscape itself.<sup>32</sup> When I first saw the Edward Burtynsky images of the oil sands, my internal response was merely to try to find places that I had been at the sites pictured. The images recalled advertising by industry contract companies, magazines printed for employees and colouring books for their children, and some of my own childhood experiences of being brought to work with my mother. I can recall myself and my pack of future industry employee friends riding a shuttle bus past the sulfur pyramids on the Syncrude site in the late 1990's to watch the adults participate in fire safety competitions. These adults, men primarily, occasionally even 'rescued' my childhood friends made up as casualties with white painted faces in blue employee issue overalls. Industry plying us children with barbequed hotdogs and the chance to be casualties. For me, the images were relatively neutral, and somewhat lacking in the sublime fear, horror and moral panic some attribute to them.<sup>33</sup> If anything, beyond trying to place myself in the images from an aerial perspective, at the time I was vaguely annoyed by the pearl clutching from the settler culture community.

One approach that interests me as a way of undercutting tokenism and simplistic stereotyped narratives around oil that populate references to Fort McMurray, is Nicole Seymour's notion of 'bad environmentalism.' Seymour defines bad environmentalism as "environmental thought that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse."<sup>34</sup>



Fig 4. Megan Green, *2016 Horse River Fire: Melted Plastic 1*, 2018. Melted plastic from the 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfire, bone, mirrored acrylic, foot stool. Fig 5. Megan Green, *Home Décor*, 2014. Found cellphone photo, light box, electronics, found wood carving, antlers, imitation wood paneling. 21x13.5x11 inches

Among the subculture working in the industry, there is a sense that the environmental movement, when limited to a fashion or lifestyle choice, allows outsiders to ignore how

we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness...we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves...aloof from its entanglements... all the while pretending that these things are not an essential part of who we are.<sup>35</sup>

How then, should we negotiate culpability for environmental destruction? How do individuals participating in mining see it? How might some feature of mainstream environmentalism be complicit in enabling “right-wing factions [to] consistently deploy naked class-based arguments against climate and environmental policies [...] based on the presumption that such policies will harm ordinary working people”<sup>36</sup> and what can be done to undermine this class warfare?

*Home Décor* features an image of a Fort McMurray resident holding two severed deer heads, the figure has emerged from a dark driveway and posed with his pickup truck in the background. Modes of natural resource consumption are entangled here; this image, and its simultaneous resource utilisations, signify machismo and membership in a particular subculture. Through my work I am interested in exposing a conceit by “questioning basic environmentalist assumptions: that reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman.”<sup>37</sup>

Every feature of the image in *Home Decor* relates to oil. It explores kitsch as a cultural form and positions markers of petroleum consumption as being like kitsch, with a cultural currency in line with the hunting trophy. Rachel Poliquin writes that

of the genres of taxidermy, hunting trophies are the souvenirs and the story tellers, which is to say, of the genres of taxidermy, hunting trophies are among the most deeply personal and so perhaps necessarily the rawest... Souvenirs are always deeply personal possessions enfolded in our sense of identity, desires, and authenticity.<sup>38</sup>

In hunting done by this subgroup particularly, a pickup truck or ATV is often featured in trophy snapshots, the hunter is

simultaneously participat[ing] in a sportsmen’s culture: the importance of the hunt is not so much the meat but its symbolic resonance within a particular community... a social practice whose meaning is fundamentally shaped by its context.<sup>39</sup>

The work exists in opposition to notions of the problem of oil as somehow invisible, from the point of view of the 'sub-culture' of mining communities this is a "geo-culturally uneven"<sup>40</sup> assumption. The man in *Home Décor* engages with nature as a hunter and as someone employed in oilsands mining. The meaning attributed to both activities is culturally specific; it is obvious to all that oil sands mining is energy inefficient when compared to other oil sources and environmentally harmful; to assume that people from this community do not know that is condescending, as "any given emission is not owned by an individual, but is rather a product of a web of social relations that make the moment of combustion possible."<sup>41</sup> While my work is broadly 'environmentalist,' while "eschewing affects and sensibilities"<sup>42</sup> of the sort attributed to a kind of sentimentalist conceit in mainstream environmentalism, the perspective taken in my work is one that hopes to "utilise irony to disrupt the binarized logic of despair/hope and to dispute mainstream environmentalism's claims to authenticity and straightforwardness."<sup>43</sup>

In my objects and in Karklin's images, 'oil' exists in cultural context and in object relations. In my view this conveys an understanding of oil among people close to it: the built environments it produces, the social reproduction it lends itself to, and the abuses of its acquisition and distribution are not related to some morally abhorrent quality radiating from the substance itself to afflict mining communities, but as a function of how its use reflects a broader cultural undertow that flows from something else. Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom* writes that "kitsch is [the] scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future."<sup>44</sup> From the Ford F-150 ads that paint the vehicles prospective owners as ruggedly masculine – if not cowboys specifically, to the sportscar cum prosthetic penis, back to the futurist aesthetics of 1960's cars and the DMC Delorean, the motor vehicle is an object whose aesthetics reflect the values and aspirations of the sociocultural groups who consume it; oil is a material that reflects our longings, in a way that is analogous to how kitsch objects point to a failure of modernity to produce a utopia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geo Takach, "Selling Nature In a Resource-based Economy: Romantic/Extractive Gazes and Alberta's Bituminous Sands," *Environmental Communications* Vol. 7, No. 2, (2013): 211-230.

<sup>2</sup> Takach, 212.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Shields, "Feral Suburbs: Cultural Topologies of Social Reproduction, Fort McMurray, Canada," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3 (2012): 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Megan Green, "Anecdotal Encounters on Driveways: The Aesthetics of Oil in Northern Alberta and Newfoundland," *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond*, edited by Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 160-174.



- <sup>5</sup> Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic* 2 (1992): 29–34. Graeme Macdonald, "Oil and World Literature." *American Book Review* 33, no. 3 (2012): 7-31. Casey Williams, "Energy Humanities," forthcoming in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Critical and Cultural Theory*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011): 374.
- <sup>7</sup> Taras Grescoe, "Big Mac: Fort McMurray has ambitions to become more than a one-resource town," *The Walrus Magazine* (Toronto: The Walrus Foundation, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Grescoe, *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) 155.
- <sup>10</sup> The reading of the power washer in the above image as specifically phallic was a salient insight had by a peer reviewer on an earlier draft, and so was incorporated here and contextualised within the article.
- <sup>11</sup> Rob Shields. "Feral Suburbs: Cultural Topologies of Social Reproduction, Fort McMurray, Canada." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2012): 1-11. Sage Publications, online.
- <sup>12</sup> Warren Cariou, "Tarhands: a Messy Manifesto," *Imaginations: Sighting Oil* Issue 3-2, 2012, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* (Edmonton: University of Alberta) 20.
- <sup>13</sup> Patchett & Lozowy, "Reframing the Canadian Oil Sands," *Imaginations: Sighting Oil* Issue 3-2, 2012, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* (Edmonton: University of Alberta) 149-150.
- <sup>14</sup> Alan Bewell, "Romanticism and Colonial Natural History," *Stud Romanticism* 43 No. 1 Spring, (2004):5-6
- <sup>15</sup> Takach, 225.
- <sup>16</sup> Graeme Macdonald, "Till a' Seas Gang Dry? Petro-Littorals and Maturing Fields North to South," conference presentation, "Petrocultures 2016: The Offshore," Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1 September 2016.
- <sup>17</sup> Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, "Oil Imag(e)inaries: Critical Realism and the Oil Sands," *Imaginations: Journal of Cross Cultural Image Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012):46-67.
- <sup>18</sup> Peeples, 383.
- <sup>19</sup> Szeman and Whiteman, *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Peta Rake and Kristy Trinier, curatorial statement for *for the time being: 2017 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalog (Edmonton: Art Gallery of Alberta and Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, 2017).
- <sup>21</sup> Rake and Trinier, *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Odine Park, "Private Suburban Home: The Phantasmagoric Interior and the Ghostly Individual," *Sociology of Home: Belonging, Community, and Place in the Canadian Context*, Gillian Anderson, Joseph G. Moore and Laura Suski Ed. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 2016): 78.
- <sup>23</sup> Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011).
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.kristopherkarklin.com/about>, accessed July, 2020.
- <sup>25</sup> Park, 79.
- <sup>26</sup> Grace.
- <sup>27</sup> Stacy Alaimo, "Climate Systems, Carbon-Heavy Masculinity, and Feminist Exposure," *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- <sup>28</sup> Graeme Macdonald, "Research Note: The Resources of Fiction," *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 4, no.2 (2013):7. In reference to Macdonald's description of an awareness of oil that is "geo-culturally uneven," as opposed to how it is generally described as tacitly invisible by the oil humanities in general.
- <sup>29</sup> Megan Green, "Anecdotal Encounters on Driveways: the Aesthetics of Oil in Northern Alberta and Newfoundland," *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond*, artist statement/essay and images by author, edited by Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamonti, for the Energy and Society series edited by Brian Black, West Virginia University Press, 2019.
- <sup>30</sup> Serenella Iovino. "Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism |Introduction." *Past the Human: Narrative Ontologies and Ontological Stories: Part I, Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* Vol. 4, No 1 (2016), 11-20.
- <sup>31</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 79.
- <sup>32</sup> Megan Green, *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the Burtynsky aerial oilsands images see: Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, "Oil Imag(e)inaries: Critical Realism and the Oil Sands," *Imaginations: Journal of Cross Cultural Image Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 46–67. Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011): 373–92.
- <sup>34</sup> Nicole Seymour. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2018), 6.
- <sup>35</sup> William Cronon. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).
- <sup>36</sup> Matthew Huber, "Ecology at the Point of Production: Climate and Class Struggle," *Polygraph Journal*, (2020), 25.
- <sup>37</sup> Seymour, 5.
- <sup>38</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 150.
- <sup>39</sup> Poliquin, *Ibid.*, 142.
- <sup>40</sup> Macdonald, *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Huber, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Seymour, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Olalquiaga, 84.