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Engagements with Petro-Media**
**Guest Editors: Emily Roehl,
Rachel Webb Jekanowski**
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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

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PETRO-LANDSCAPES AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION:
INTERVIEW WITH STEVE ROWELL

EMILY ROEHL
STEVE ROWELL

American artist Steve Rowell has been described in a number of ways: as a curator, collector, archivist, activist, geographer, and archaeologist. In a recent conversation with interdis-



Figure 1: Oil tank emblazoned with a message for passing drivers caring for the globe.

History is often written by the winners, so how do we contend with the largest industry on Earth now that we know the truth? Who will own the narrative of climate change? Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

ciplinary artist and scholar Emily Eliza Scott, he describes himself as a “curator of the landscape.” Over the past twenty years, he has been captivated by the human-altered landscape, first as a frequent collaborator with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), and more recently on a series of long-term projects that use image, sound, and archival practice to interrogate the relationship between humans, industry, and the environment.

Rowell’s work has impressive geographic and political scope, and spans institutional contexts from galleries and arts organizations to universities, archives, and government agencies. For example, in his 2016 “experimental documentary” film, *Midstream at Twilight*, Rowell uses the camera of a drone to follow the oil from the Alberta tar sands through the complex network of pipelines, storage facilities, and financial institutions that keep the contemporary oil industry flowing. For Rowell, landscape is “a site of political imagination.”

In this interview, Rowell and special issue editor Emily Roehl discuss the artist’s background and interest in petro-media and oily landscapes, expanding outward from *Midstream at Twilight* to consider aerial vision, the relationship between landscape and soundscape, and Rowell’s fascination with not only great distances but also deep time.

Q: How did growing up in Houston influence the kind of work you’ve made over the years?

In Houston, everyone is essentially one degree of separation from the fossil fuel industry. My father’s first job was working on oil rigs across Texas and Louisiana as a teenager. My grandfather worked at a plant that made oil drilling bits and rotors. Growing up, we could always tell when the winds were blowing westward from the Gulf of Mexico because the air brought in from the nearly 20 miles of petrochemical plants east of downtown Houston carried that sulfuric stench of rotten eggs or other chemical smells. Generally speaking, it was my access to museums and art classes at an early age which put me on a path towards becoming an artist. Of course all of these institutions are floating on a sea of oil money. It wasn’t until years later, when I began working on environmental themes, that commis-

sions from these institutions began to directly fund my work, which was clearly aimed directly at the same fossil fuel industry. The irony was never lost on me, and I would never accept funding like this if I wasn't allowed to express my beliefs clearly, either as represented in the work or through talks and interviews about my agenda. In 2007 I was given a chance to survey this strange landscape when the Center for Land Use Interpretation was commissioned to create a new research project around the petrochemical industry in Texas. This was exhibited at the Blaffer Gallery in 2008 as *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*. After photographing every single plant from above and on the ground, I now know which plants spew those pollutants I smelled growing up as a kid. My work with the Mitchell Center for the Arts in 2014 during a prototype of my *Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys* project allowed me to further investigate, where I created a dystopian drone soundtrack for a three-channel moving image work. This was made using an experimental sonification of data of atmospheric toxins sampled by a vast array of remote sensing units deployed across hundreds of square miles of the city.

Figures 2-8 (online link)

*Q: Can you say a bit about how *Midstream at Twilight* (2016) came into the world and where it has traveled? As you mention above, this wasn't the first time you addressed extractive landscapes in your work—for example, in *Texas Oil* (2008-2009), *Urban Crude* (2009), and *American Oil, Volume 1* (2009) as part of your collaboration with the Center for Land Use Interpretation. How does *Midstream at Twilight* relate to this earlier work, and how has it influenced the work you've done since?*

Midstream at Twilight was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) in Chicago and the National Resources Defense Council for the 2016 exhibition *Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy*. This was initiated after lawsuits had been filed to close three piles of petroleum coke (petcoke) on the post-industrial south side of Chicago, an area with a long and tragic history of environmental racism against underserved communities. Having developed methodologies for surveying and representing a vast landscape from

the *Texas Oil* project, I wanted to expand that geographically, but along a thin line. In the case of *Midstream at Twilight*, it was the pipelines that link the tar sands in Northern Alberta to Chicago, but also further “downstream” (in oil logistics terminology) to places like Paducah Kentucky and The Port of Long Beach in California, where the petcoke is sent to be burned in extremely “dirty” power plants in other countries like China. Since the *Texas Oil* project targeted hundreds of oil corporations headquartered in Texas, I decided to focus on only a handful of the corporations responsible for this extremely hazardous exploitation of natural resources in Canada but also federal regulation and tax loopholes across the U.S. landscape where the pipelines crisscross. These include Koch Industries and its headquarters and the Koch family estate in Wichita, Kansas. If the CEOs and shareholders of fossil fuel corporations want their companies to be considered “people” as a way of hiding their power and influence, then maybe the people who run these same “corporations” should be viewed as part of the industrial landscape of extraction, profit, and toxic waste? In my eyes, they’re fair game. For more on my stance on shadow money, see my 2016 film *Parallelograms*, which peers into democracy’s dark side, hidden in plain sight, looming above the streets of Washington, D.C.

Figures 9-24 (online link)

Q: How does your work relate to or depart from that of other artists who have documented extractive landscapes from the air? I’m thinking of Edward Burtynsky and Terry Evans in particular—especially of Evans, because of her shared interest in military landscapes.

This could be a very long answer, but maybe it’s best to focus on how it differs? I was inspired by Terry Evans’ *Disarming the Prairie* way back in 2001 or 2002 when I read her book from the project at CLUI. It was an honor to meet her and show alongside her in the *Petcoke* exhibition at the MoCP. Burtynsky is useful to teach and inspiring for students who are in awe of his work, but I find the level of production of his films and photographs excessive and myopic sometimes in its pronouncements. Titling his film *Anthropocene* al-

so struck me as a bit presumptuous, to be honest. An oblique, poetic, or maybe even a slightly obscured view, whether shot from a drone or from the ground, invites the audience to discover on their own as they respond to the questions a work is posing. My work is often combined with abstract and/or sensorially challenging components which allows the work to orbit apart from the more conventional documentary style work many artists in this genre are making. An example might be the use of loud electronic compositions or appropriated music with my moving image work, like the use of Wendy Carlos' soundtrack to *A Clockwork Orange* in *Midstream at Twilight*, or the data sonification drone piece I created, mentioned above, which vacillates between meditative, entrancing, and unsettling due to its dissonance. I departed from the wry didactic style of landscape representation CLUI has become famous for when I made a series of sound installation projects from the automated recordings of sonic booms in 2005-06. The playback levels had to be just above the threshold of pain or it wouldn't honestly represent the reality of imperial militarized airspaces or my political convictions and opinions about them. Of course I provided earplugs—I'm not interested in putting anyone's health at risk or glorifying technologies of violence. Quite the opposite.

Q: I'd love to hear more about the way you use a drone's camera. In your 2020 interview with Alex Teplitzky from Creative Capital you say, "The way I shoot with drones is extremely abstract, usually straight down from above and with color and mirror distortions of the landscape applied in post-production." Could you say more about your motivation for making images in this way?

Explaining my motivation for using drone sequences this way is a response to the overuse of this relatively new technology and consumer-accessible aerial vantage in commercial film, advertising, and art. It's so ubiquitous now, so easy, so boring to be honest. I began using drones in 2013 before stabilized gimbals and high quality lightweight camera drone systems existed. In 2008, Matt Coolidge and I filmed the Texas Oil video 'land scan' sequence using a rented helicopter and nose-mounted 4K professional camera system which came with a human operator in addition to the pilot. It was by far

the most expensive single day event in CLUI's history. When better drones became available, I immediately upgraded and, almost immediately, regretted how slick the footage looked. While the reality of being able to reach a vantage point of a site, otherwise hidden or obscured, on the landscape in seconds is still incredibly empowering and valuable to my work, I've outgrown the aesthetic of the aerial oblique unless it serves some purpose otherwise unattainable. One solution for me is the direct-down shot which resists the wow factor of the oblique and instead sits in that uncanny space below the range and level of detail of satellite aerial photos we've become so accustomed to. I see it like using the drone as a camera on a very high laterally adjustable copy-stand camera where I can hover between a few inches above to hundreds of feet straight up. The mirroring and splitting of imagery I use in my abstract sequences function in the same way as the audio tones I construct from data sources—as methods to entrance the viewer, disorient them, create a sense of wonder and sometimes distrust in what they're hearing and seeing. There's a value in giving the viewer/listener a chance to distrust the work in the same way there's value in giving them room to question the work. The landscapes I feature are all altered. What landscape isn't now? That's the point. These abstract sequences are meant to depart from the more didactic sequences as a means of underscoring loss or active destruction of anything wild, original, pre-human, or "natural" left on the landscape. There's something in that which comes from my interest in annihilating the anthropic bias we inherently have as a species, as impossible as this is. It's an unachievable goal in the same way that we can never be truly objective, especially in regards to how we represent the world around us. I create art because I'm an artist, but my involvement in the subjectivity of what I create, as much as I try to avoid this, is as problematic as it is nourishing and satisfying and necessary. Aerial photography gives me a remote sensing power, beyond the extent of my own senses, and I value that, but it's too easily exploited. I suppose I see my abstraction of this vantage as a way to embrace the artificial quality of how I film with a drone, enhancing it... as a way of allowing the technology to somehow override my involvement as the operator of the drone. If an AI

drone existed that required nothing from me but a point of interest to film, I'd happily let it take over and show me/us what it saw instead. Maybe that's at least one possible future of photography and the moving image?

*Q: Soundscape is also an important aspect of your work. In *Midstream at Twilight*, the audio brings to mind the air cannons that continuously blast over tailings ponds in the Athabasca region as well as military drums or a funeral march. I appreciate the way you include detailed notes about where sounds in a particular work come from (geographically, culturally, temporally). I'd love to know more about your process for creating soundscapes to accompany your films and installations. Put another way: when I watch clips of your aerial video work, I can't help but think of the two senses of "drone": the drone/camera and the drone/sound. What is the relationship between the drone image and the droning quality of your soundscapes?*

The drone-as-homograph is convenient isn't it? Image and audio can work in harmony as well as in disharmony. I like to play with these variances. This question often comes up in Q&A and I don't really have a solid explanation for a relationship which works for every instance. More and more, my editing workflow is intuitive, which tracks with my research and fieldwork relying more and more on discoveries along the way to lead me down avenues and rabbit holes. The drone sounds I use now with my moving image work were inspired by my sound art projects beginning in 2006 when I began composing Shepard tones. Most notable are the installation projects with *SIMPARCH* which were critiques on U.S. militarized air space and, later, as a commissioned score for *O'er the Land*, a film by Deborah Stratman which is another type of critique on the militarized landscape. Shepard tones create aural hallucinations in the listener, during and after playback, much in the way optical illusions trick our eyes and can leave afterimages. I was struck by how these *aftersounds* worked with installations and wanted to deploy that same trance-like effect in my moving image work. In 2008, for the slow-crawl aerial *Texas Oil Landscan* film with CLUI, I used an audio drone track made by the U.K. band, Sleep Research Facility. We chose this not only because it suits the sci-fi/horror industrial landscape pic-

tured, but because the band composed the music as an emulation of the sounds inside the intergalactic ore refinery from the sci-fi/horror film *Alien*. The *Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys* (2013-2020) project includes an audio component which is a sonification of data of atmospheric pollution in one of the worst air-quality cities in America, Houston. It's meant to be both beautiful and unsettling at the same time as it washes over the listener/viewer in waves of dissonance and resonance, often paired with aerial footage or shots of the equipment used to detect and monitor the toxins as well as the industrial sites spewing the chemicals into the air. I've been told my work embraces the sinister. The world we've made has a lot of sinister in it but I don't acknowledge it to glorify destructive technology, capitalism, or industry. I turn it back on itself as a strategy for targeting it and to inspire viewers to develop their own ways to do the same. Power in numbers.

Q: In your recent exhibition at the University of Oregon, Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys, you display a number of what might be called "documents" of the natural world—film, photography, maps, cameras, field recordings, etc. In a virtual conversation with Emily Eliza Scott that accompanied the exhibition, you mentioned that only a small percentage of the material you collected or created made its way into the installation. This makes me think about the relationship between art-making processes—especially those concerned with landscape and the environment—and environmental research or natural history archives. How do you think about your work in relation to the academic and archival resources you draw on?

This is a very hot topic right now with a collaborative workshop I'm running with my partner, Priyanka Basu, at the HKW (House of World Cultures) in Berlin in a congress called the *Whole Life Academy*. We're interrogating the institutional archive and exploring unconventional archives in the fringe spaces in and around Berlin. Stay tuned on that as things are developing rapidly over the winter months of 2021-22.

Q: How has the response to your work shifted over the years? I ask this because I imagine reactions (and perhaps even the questions you are



Figure 25: Kilgore, TX is the home to the East Texas Oil Museum, known for its uncanny animatronic figures. Seen here with his face lit by a projected video of an actor is the self-taught geologist Pattillo Higgins telling the history of the Spindletop gusher. Nicknamed the “Prophet of Spindletop,” Pattillo lost an arm in 1885 during a shoot-out with deputies after they responded to a complaint that he was threatening African Americans at a local church. He was 17 years old. After striking black gold aka Texas Tea, he became the world’s first oil millionaire. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

asked in interviews like these) have changed as more folks have become aware of pipeline opposition across North America—particularly Indigenous-led struggles—and as concern over fossil-fueled climate change has grown.

The 2016 film *Midstream at Twilight* was started in the summer of 2015, six months or so before the Dakota Access Pipeline crisis began. By the time the film premiered at the MoCP in Chicago in the summer of 2016, millions of people around the world were suddenly made aware of the politics of oil extraction and how that’s been impacting Indigenous communities not only in the U.S. and Canada, but around the world, since the first oil rush a hundred years prior. The

response to my work and the work of others in the field hasn't shifted, it's been made more articulate. People now know how the infrastructure of oil and gas distribution plays a role in their lives. We all are reliant on and addicted to oil products and by-products whether we admit it or not. Limiting this reliance and breaking the addiction is something we all must grapple with.

Q: A lot of your work seems to ruminate not only on humans' relationship with the environment but also the ways this has shifted over time (both recent and deep time). How has your engagement with extractive landscapes and oil in particular influenced the way you think about time in and through your work?

Once we understand the time required for things like oil to form over millions of years, we understand what the headlong exploitation of the planet's resources, buried or not, is doing to life on Earth, indeed to Earth itself as a biosphere. Geology has long fascinated me. When I was able to visit the location that inspired James Hutton to develop geology as a science and deep time as a concept, it really sunk in. This extreme "long view"—both reverse-looking into the depths of history as well as the unknown speculative futures we face—seems, to me, like an absolutely vital mindset to have. I can't understand how any active citizen of the world can comprehend the complexities of life in the 21st century without it. This includes anyone, from student to scholar, who's even vaguely interested in race, gender, intersectionality, decolonialism, accelerationism, critical landscape studies, or what it means to be invested on any level with environmental issues. Art just seems like the best place for all of this to intersect in ways that can be productive, creative, even world changing.



Figure 26: The Permian Basin oilfield covers 86,000 square miles. Countless perforations of the Earth's crust pockmark the land from horizon to horizon as far as the eye can see in far west Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Oil tank emblazoned with a message for passing drivers caring for the globe. History is often written by the winners, so how do we contend with the largest industry on Earth now that we know the truth? Who will own the narrative of climate change? Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 2: Vopak Terminal Deer Park. The Dutch company Vopak operates a large tank farm, rail, and ship dock terminal here on the south side of Houston's Ship Channel, for storing and shipping petrochemical products entering and leaving through this, the heart of the nation's largest petrochemical corridor. Vopak is one of the largest bulk liquid handling companies in the world, with 80 terminals in 32 nations. The terminal is adjacent to the locally owned and operated Intercontinental Terminals Company, which performs a similar function. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 3: Drilling pipe manufacturer in East Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 4: Lots of love at one of the first oil wells in the world. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 5: Marathon Corporate Headquarters, 5555 San Felipe Road, Houston. Marathon, based in Houston, is the fourth-largest U.S.-based integrated oil and gas company, after ExxonMobil, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips. Founded as the Ohio Oil Company in 1887, it grew by acquiring other oil and pipeline companies, and by expanding its operations into West Texas, Alaska, Canada, and elsewhere. It took the Marathon name in 1962, and moved its headquarters to Houston in 1990. Its revenue in 2007 was \$65 billion. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 6: Coke Dock, Port Arthur. Located in the port area at the southern end of the city, Port Arthur's Coke Dock is a major transfer point for petroleum coke produced by the region's refineries. The black solid material is mostly carbon, and is used in a variety of industrial applications, including steel production. Most refineries produce some

amount of the product. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 7: Considered the oil gusher that started the U.S. oil industry as we know it, the historic Spindletop oil well can be best understood these days at this museum in Beaumont, Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 8: Enter the 19th century-era fossil fuel universe at warp speed at one of the dozens of museums in Texas dedicated to inspiring a new generation of oil product consumers. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 9: Enbridge owns many of the pipelines bringing tar sands oil to the USA from Canada. Just south of the border, in northern North Dakota, markers alert farmers, construction crews, and drivers, warning them to not dig and carry on, ignoring the infrastructure. If not for regulations, these markers wouldn't exist and the pipelines would be completely covert. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 10: The industry protects its reputation and relations with the public through visitor centres and carefully curated museums such as the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 11: "Returned to Nature" claim by the company Syncrude Canada Ltd., which owns 400 square miles of open-pit mines, refineries, man camps, and toxic tailings lakes in the area. Resembling a nature preserve, Gateway Hill is a privately owned estate of roughly 100 square miles of evenly planted conifers, rectangular ponds, and grids of sod, sand, and muskeg. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 12: The abandoned historic ground zero of the ongoing tar sands experiment being conducted on the environment locally as well as globally. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 13: Part of the Athabasca Tribal Council, the Fort McKay First Nation is comprised of members of Cree, Métis, and Dene heritage. Beneath this land is the McMurray Basal Water Sands Aquifer which is at risk of contamination due to activities at the various oil sands operations on

the reservation. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 14: Syncrude frozen tailings lakes foreground the mine and plant sites at the Athabasca Oil Sands, Alberta, Canada. The dramatic ricocheting sounds of gunshots heard at all hours of the day and night are, in fact, sensor-triggered propane cannons deterring birds from landing on the toxic slush. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 15: Syncrude is the world's largest producer of synthetic crude oil from oil sands. They produce 350,000 barrels per day and have leases on 12 billion barrels worth of oil sands, which will keep them mining and producing for another 90-100 years at this capacity. Most of this oil is pumped across North America through thousands of miles of buried pipelines. Their corporate flag is often seen flying above the Canadian national flag. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 16: Reclamation billboard advertisement with tailings waste lake. Syncrude uses the word reclamation loosely. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 17: A man camp which houses thousands of mostly male employees of companies like Syncrude and Suncor. Miners are rotated out in regular shifts of weeks-on / weeks-off to allow them to return to family across Canada's provinces. Like an offshore rig, tanker vessel, or orbiting space station, these remote habitats are entirely enclosed and self-sufficient with local power stations, waste treatment facilities, recreation, and dormitories. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 18: Picnic spot and interpretive signage explaining the surrounding altered surface of the land. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 19: Roadside attraction of decommissioned mining equipment such as this giant bucketwheel which uses carbide tipped incisors to gouge the muskeg peat and soil, exposing the oil-rich sands beneath. In the background is a dragline which is used to carry away extracted material. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 20: Autonomous, radar activated robo-hawk bird deterrents awaiting the thaw of a frozen waste filled tailings lake adjacent to Syncrude's

Mildred Lake tar sands plant. The retaining dam built to form this basin is one of the largest earth structures in the world. The water is so toxic that birds can die within minutes of exposure. Each dead bird costs the responsible company \$120,000 Canadian dollars, if reported. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 21: Tar Sands diluted bitumen pipelines run beneath this clear swath of land, dividing this subdivision in suburban Edmonton, Alberta. The oil in these pipelines, owned by Enbridge Inc., flows at five miles per hour across the plains of North America, terminating at refineries in Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, and Texas. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 22: Barges carrying petcoke from bitumen oil refineries in the Midwest move down the confluence of the great Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to ports in the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 23: Storage tanks of tar sands oil along the Marathon Pipeline site in Vernon, Illinois. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 24: Koch Industries, Inc. KCBX petcoke terminal, South Chicago. This terminal is anything but. Petcoke, a waste product of the refining of crude oil and tar sands bitumen, is sent downstream by rail and barge and, eventually, by tanker to countries in Asia like China where it is burned in power plants. The material accretion of the North American fossil fuel industry may terminate in those furnaces, but the chemical toxins return home, in the form of global greenhouse gases and runaway climate change. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

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