

FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

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Butler, Carolyn K. "Time After Time: William Christenberry Embraces the Impermanent." *Smithsonian Magazine* (Jan. 2007): 12-14.

Jakle, John, and Keith Sculle. *The Gas Station in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Schlegel, Amy I. *Post-Pastoral: New Images of the New England Landscape*. Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1998.

CHECKLIST

Subhankar Banerjee, Indian, born 1967  
*Known and Unknown Tracks*, from the series *Oil and the Geese*,  
negative 2006; print 2009  
Digital chromogenic print face-mounted to Plexiglas  
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; 2009.42.1

William Christenberry, American, born 1936  
*Pure Oil Sign in Landscape, Near Marion, Alabama*, 1977  
Dye transfer photograph  
Purchased through the Fund for Contemporary Photography  
in honor of Marc Efron, Class of 1965; PH.2003.35

Alex MacLean, American, born 1947  
*Central Vermont, Subdivision Street Front*, 1995  
Cibachrome  
Purchased through gifts from Peter A. Vogt, Class of 1947,  
and Robert Eckerson, Class of 1948; PH.998.35.2

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A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE



Subhankar Banerjee, *Known and Unknown Tracks*, from the series *Oil and the Geese*,  
negative 2006, print 2009, digital chromogenic print face-mounted to Plexiglas.  
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; 2009.42.1.



## TELLING LANDSCAPES

### Images of American Development



Alex MacLean, *Central Vermont, Subdivision Street Front*, 1995, Cibachrome. Purchased through gifts from Peter A. Vogt, Class of 1947, and Robert Eckerson, Class of 1948; PH.998.35.2.

Subhankar Banerjee’s photograph *Known and Unknown Tracks*, from his series *Oil and the Geese*, is a powerful statement about the effects of the oil industry’s push to drill in protected areas of the American Arctic despite the laws against doing so. Its installation alongside *Pure Oil Sign in Landscape, Near Marion, Alabama* by William Christenberry and *Central Vermont, Subdivision Streetfront* by Alex MacLean is meant to contextualize oil as a commodity integral to the American way of life. Taken together, these three artworks present a disturbing picture of the progress of American development and the use of natural resources to that end.

*Known and Unknown Tracks*, taken in 2006, depicts the wetlands surrounding the

Teshekpuk Lake in the north-central Alaskan wilderness. This area is a critical habitat for molting geese who have returned from their wintering locations as far away as Mexico. In 2006 the Bush administration moved to open this region up for oil drilling, despite the fact that the U.S. Congress had designated it as a “special area” in 1977, protecting it from this kind of use. Met with resistance that included lawsuits from various environmental conservation groups, many of which used Banerjee’s work in their advocacy materials to stir the sympathies of people who could not imagine the land without having seen it, the Bush administration ultimately abandoned its plans.

Though the manmade tracks in this image point to illegal oil prospecting expeditions, we are first struck by the breathtaking beauty of the landscape that contains them. The tracks’ parallel, perfectly straight progression to the horizon is a compelling counterpoint to the irregularly shaped lakes and shadows of clouds that otherwise fill the vast terrain. The manmade tracks also appear to oppose the other tracks in the image—the delicate and irregular threads that crisscross the land and assert the other presences here, though no creatures are present. This subtle pulse is made all the more powerful by the manmade tracks’ jarring unnaturalness.

William Christenberry’s *Pure Oil Sign*, like *Known and Unknown Tracks*, depicts the mark of a now departed human hand upon a quiet landscape. This small image shows the remains of a Pure Oil gas station, one of many that were abandoned in the 1960s and 1970s as the interstates were constructed, the rural routes bypassed, and the gas stations that accompanied them abandoned in favor of new transportation hubs (Jackle and Sculle, 1994). Though Christenberry’s photograph (printed in 1977) is not specifically meant as an environmentalist commentary, the deserted gas station and the road stretched out alongside it bring to mind both America’s dependence on oil and the environmental changes that have resulted from it. Still, Christenberry is concerned with the disappearance of a different environment. His image reflects nostalgia for a vernacular aesthetic that was rapidly being succeeded by a more modern mode of development (Butler, 2007). He said, “Sadly, for me, a lot of true vernacular architecture is rapidly disappearing. What you often see, much to my disdain, is a mobile home—a flat-roof, aluminum-sided building moved in. And it’ll have to be a whole other generation of artists that, in time, might be interested in those” (Butler, 2007).

In some ways, Alex MacLean is one such artist. While Christenberry documented the American landscape of his youth as it was being superseded by newer trends, MacLean works with that incoming development itself, and his interests are more obviously political as well. *Central Vermont, Subdivision Streetfront* uses a single vertical line (the road) to insure that the viewer bears witness to the monotony and repetitiveness of the neighborhood. MacLean utilizes an aerial perspective to emphasize the lifestyle of the neighborhood—note the multiple cars in each driveway, and the lack of sidewalks (Schlegel, 1998). It is a perspective that gives the viewer both a literal and a figurative distance from the image, which in turn encourages the viewer to question some of the everyday practices of modern society.

The expansive and dynamic Arctic tundra seems worlds away from the over-developed yet somehow static subdivision. However, all three

of these photographs are ultimately images of the same dangerous trend, in which a push for further development is automatic enough that any means seem justifiable, and any ends, natural. All three artists ask their viewers to take a step back and examine the landscapes that their cameras have captured from a new perspective.

On first viewing the three photographs, the scene of the subdivision (taken nearby in Vermont) may seem the most familiar, while the Arctic seems the most foreign. Upon reflection, however, the subdivision and deserted gas station are the images that feel the most unnatural, while the only unnatural aspect of *Known and Unknown Tracks* is, of course, the manmade tracks themselves. This may at first seem self evident, but it is a disturbing indicator of our disconnection with the natural world—the scene that is the most natural is also the most strikingly foreign. Furthermore, the oil-thirsty culture that MacLean and Christenberry document is the same that threatens the distant wilderness of the Teshekpuk Lake.

In seeing these images together, the viewer might be struck by humanity’s lack of attention to its place in a larger landscape. We seek development without regard for the environmental sacrifices that get us there. We seek new ways of doing things that are more efficient, but they are also more impersonal. These three photographs knit together a troubling narrative of development and the insatiable need for natural resources it demands, though each artist highlights a different part of a much larger story.

Katy Briggs ’10, Programming Intern

William Christenberry, *Pure Oil Sign in Landscape, Near Marion, Alabama*, 1977, dye transfer photograph. Purchased through the Fund for Contemporary Photography in honor of Marc Efron, Class of 1965; PH.2003.35.

