

The Creators Project Staff, "Fracking, Hazmat Suits And Body Bag For Deer: The Insidious Poetics of Marina Zurkow," *The Creators Project*, January 30, 2013

the creators project

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Still from "Mesocosm (Wink, TX)," 2012. Courtesy of bitforms gallery.

Multi-disciplinary artist Marina Zurkow has consistently questioned and explored the relationship we as humans have with animals, plants, and the weather in works that equally draw from the traditions of illustration, folk art, performance, and new media. Known for her engaging landscape animations, often based on site-specific environmental research, Zurkow is exhibiting several new works developed during a research residency in West Texas in a new exhibition at bitforms gallery.

Called *Necrocracy*, the exhibition takes a playful approach to confronting an addictive relationship that's hundreds of years in the making—society's bittersweet romance with oil. Zurkow investigates the politics of petroleum geology and explores the culture of petrochemical production, while also touching on the mythology and idolatry that emerges alongside. By touching on the role of hydrocarbons in a modern landscape, Zurkow engages with the cycle of life, rebirth, and even immortality. She tackles some hot button issues like fracking and the ecological implications of our oil addiction in a way that avoids many of the typical didactic pitfalls.

We caught up with Zurkow over email to learn more about her time researching the oil production process in West Texas and the "insidious poetics" that bring about change.

The Creators Project: You set up residency in West Texas to conduct research for many of the pieces in this exhibition. What was your time there like?

Marina Zurkow: I drove around for two weeks meeting people (oil men, naturalists, ranchers, activists) and photographing, trying to get a sense of the landscape in person, its character. I also spent time in the archives of The Petroleum Museum in Midland.

What sort of preconceptions did you have when embarking on this research project? How did the experience confirm/defy your expectations?

There is a vivid dualism of geological and human time and space. Many years ago I read John McPhee’s book Basin and Range, which stuck with me. The West Texas landscape is comprised of ancient, long-buried landscapes including the 250,000,000-year-old Permian Basin, that lies far beneath the present Southern Great Plains. The Permian Basin has yielded over 15 billion barrels of oil. I am interested in landscapes that have been at least partly shaped by humans (such as the high moors of Northern England which have been transformed since the Iron Age), and in inherent tensions such as the uneasy relations between oil and water.

It was humorous trying to convince invested locals that I wasn’t in Texas to confirm my biases, In fact, everyone suspected me of being a snoop (right-wing spy to the activists, left-wing enviro to the pro-oil majority). My own interrelations with oil got a lot murkier than when I set out. My initial sketches are very apocalyptic, a sky full of smoke and parched land densely populated with oil derricks and pump jacks. My vision was ridiculously East Coast.

The area I focused on, the Southern Great Plains, is also known as the Llano Estacado. There is not much other business besides oil and gas production here (some cattle and cotton). People call it the Big Empty, but I discovered that it has a subtle beauty. Historically, native people did not live in the Southern High Plains because of the absence of potable water. In Midland, a naturalist took me on a tour of the immediate surrounds, where we saw sandhill cranes wading in water treatment ponds, “pocket forests” where tree-climbing grey foxes live, where I could imagine the October Monarch migrations coloring every drab and dusty bush orange. There are seasons, some very fleeting there as well. You just have to have your senses tuned by someone intimate with it.

How did you settle on the small town of Wink, Texas as the subject of your Mesocosm animation?

Before I went on the research residency, I was looking on Google satellite at the aerial landscape. It’s generally dung-colored, regularly punctuated by the pump jacks, whose pads scrape away the top soil and expose the chalky caliche. So when I saw an inky-black perfectly round spot near the teeny town of Wink, Texas, I had to investigate. The black spot turned out to be the Wink Sink 2, a sinkhole that had opened up on oil company property in 2006, which probably resulted from flushing high pressure water through the drill holes, which can hollow the rock below. A county commissioner agreed to let me in to photograph the hole. It’s beautiful. I thought of it as a secret beauty destination, one that even though it was an unnatural geological event, could merit rest stop or scenic lookout status.

Where do you see your next animated landscape taking place?

I want to do one portraying the Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo, and one with a re-envisioned Times Square.



“Mesocosm (Wink, TX),” 2012.
Courtesy of bitforms gallery.



“NeoGeo I,” 2012.
Courtesy of bitforms gallery.

What brought your interest to petroleum production?

Before I went to West Texas, I spent a couple days in Texas City and also looking at the CLUI field office in Houston. Texas City is the heart of the vast petrochemical corridor, a mind-blowing array of facilities that crack crude petroleum into constituent chemicals. Besides getting detained for my suspicious activity of photographing from public roads, I started to wonder deeply about how this all worked. Petroleum is a magic medium that can be turned into a dizzying array of particular plastics (polymers), which in turn become just about everything we interact with. It is scalable, and practically immortal (plastics certainly outlive us). And yet, it's made from tiny marine creatures and plant life. It was once like us... just... hydrocarbons (which we will become when we decompose). It went far beyond my complicity as a consumer, and into the metaphysical.

The Creators Project: Fracking has been making lots of headlines lately. Has the heated debate around this topic influenced your work? As an artist, what do you feel your role is in the conversation?

It is my role as a citizen to be outspoken about fracking and other issues that I think have unknown and known harmful consequences. But fracking is part of a larger body of concerns that require such a large shift in consciousness that making didactic art about them will not help. Art has the potential to crawl inside and haunt you, and the only way (for me) that paradigm shifts can occur on the level of the individual is through insidious poetics.

"The Thirsty Bird" deals directly (if symbolically) with the issues around fracking and the risks of water contamination.

While "NeoGeo" (which people assume is a comment on fracking) is actually a demonstration of straight ahead drilling, and aims to understand what the drill bit is seeing, how rock is plastic over long periods of time, and how oil men are like gamblers, dazzled by possibility.



Installation view "Body Bag for Cats (High Density Polyethylene / HDPE)," 2013. Courtesy of bitforms gallery.