Transformations of Oil: Visibility, Scale, and Climate in Warren Cariou’s Petrography

Elysia H. French

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Résumé de l'article
Dans cet article, j’examine la série Petrography (2014 au présent), dans laquelle Warren Cariou commente sur les perceptions et représentations de l’énergie pétrolière. Utilisant une technique inspirée de Nicéphore Niépce, l’artiste multidisciplinaire winnipegois met en évidence dans ces pétrographies (« petroleum-photography ») une question fondamentale de l’anthropocène : la division continue et problématique entre les relations humaines et non humaines, qui découle de la conception du non humain en tant que ressource passive. Mon analyse de cette série met en lumière la façon dont les pétrographies de Cariou réutilisent une ressource naturelle pour attirer notre attention sur notre dépendance au pétrole et la contradiction qui en résulte à cette ère de changement climatique.
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Winnipeg-based multi-disciplinary artist Warren Cariou’s Petrography (2014–ongoing) helps us think through our relationship to the increasingly evident and alarming effects of climate change—annual record-high temperatures, droughts, wildfires, flooding—and our understanding of their complex causes, manifestations, and future implications. The goal of this investigation into Cariou’s series of petrographs is to add to the growing field of the environmental humanities, which is playing a crucial and unique role in generating affective understandings of the perceived conceptual problems of energy crises and climate change. Through Cariou’s work, I explore how the visual culture of oil, by operating on emotional and affective levels, is mobilized to increase knowledge and awareness of environmental issues. Further, I examine the potential for visual culture to serve as an accessible mode of communication by acting as a political expedient that implicates viewers in a manner that may promote new forms of environmental, social, and political understandings.

Cariou’s petrography, or petroleum-photography, begins with the artist photographing seemingly “invisible,” that is, not often seen, sites of oil extraction in the Alberta oil sands. These images are later developed—poignantly, relying on stable weather conditions—using a technique inspired by Nicéphore Niépce’s nineteenth-century photographic process. Cariou’s petrographs intimately visualize sites of oil to highlight a core issue of the anthropocene: the continuing, problematic division between human and nonhuman relations. Cariou’s commitment to visualizing the seemingly invisible helps to complicate the hierarchical structures of human and nonhuman relations by speaking to what political and cultural theorist Jane Bennett has termed “vibrant matter.” Through Cariou’s petrographs, Cariou acknowledges the “vital materiality” and agency of the nonhuman apparatuses of oil. By recognizing such agency, his petrographs repurpose a natural resource to draw attention to our complex relationship with oil, the contradiction this creates in the age of climate change, and the relevance of continuing extractivist practices. Ultimately, Cariou’s work raises larger questions about the efficacy and ethics of artists employing natural resources to comment on these issues.

Cariou describes petrography as the art of creating photographic images through the action of sunlight upon bitumen. He is quite open in his...
kind of inability or unwillingness to see something, to see that places are still Indigenous spaces.” He continues: “There is no accident that these mines, tar sands mines... happen almost entirely, it seems, in Indigenous areas and in areas that are still traditional land of Indigenous people or that have Native communities nearby, because the Native communities are already invisible. So, adding these developments, or destruction to that land, within the colonial imagination, it’s like it is already empty... what I called the new Terra Nullius. I talk about that as Indigenous space as something that is thought to be empty, not in the sense of colonialism in the early era of thought to be empty so that we could take it, but it is thought to be empty because it is wasteland, it is already destroyed, it is already worthless and so it is okay to wreck it even more. And I really think that’s operating in the tar sands in a major way.”


In order to tease out some of these larger issues, I will explore Cariou’s petrography work through a discussion of three concepts: scale, visibility, and climate. In their recent publication, art historian Ross Barrett and cultural theorist Daniel Worden emphasize the complexities of the culture of oil, which is largely secreted out of sight in our society in terms of both extraction and refinery. It is also made invisible, they argue, through mundane daily uses. At the same time, the oil industry is “an underwriter of nearly every major museum, and...petroleum products are used to make film, ink, paint, and countless other tools used to produce art today.” The oil industry, Barrett and Worden conclude, is thus “as ubiquitous and necessary to contemporary life as money.” It is this circular, and often contradictory, relationship we have with oil that Cariou examines in his art. Although we have come to know the Alberta oil sands as spectacle through immense aerial photographs, popularized by photographers such as Edward Burtynsky and Louis Helbig, these sites remain largely inaccessible, unseen, and hidden from mainstream awareness. Cariou’s petrographs, I argue, contribute to the task of making visible the unseen aspects of oil by moving beyond the immense aerial perspectives of mining and subtly drawing awareness to our relentless, yet disconnected, relationship to day-to-day encounters with oil. Further, the pace, care, and labour-intensive process of developing the petrographs counteracts
understandings of larger-scale operations in, for instance, the speed and scale of bitumen extraction at an industrial level. For Cariou, “these petrographs use bitumen itself as a medium of representation, creating a particular perspective on the world: extractive industry viewed through a film of oil.”10 That said, Cariou’s petrographs indeed mobilize the visual language of industrial landscapes, such as the “discourse of immensity,”11 a term coined by Debra J. Davidson and Mike Gismondi to better understand the complexities of the “you have to see it to believe it” mentality. However, Cariou is uniquely able to repurpose the natural resource. He makes its extracted form tangible at the same time as he implicates the viewer by placing their reflected portrait into the frame. Oil is arguably widely perceived as a dirty contaminant but also as a necessary resource on which we have come to rely in order to maintain our contemporary demands, and it is this personal, disconnected, and contradictory relationship that Cariou addresses.

Scale

To be sure, visualizing and documenting resource extraction practices in Canada is not new: Davidson and Gismondi explain that “at the turn of the last century, government officials, commercial promoters, and historians constructed Canada’s northwest landscape as a storehouse of hidden riches in the attic.”12 Early twentieth-century travellers to the oil sands, explorers, and geological surveyors alike described sites that held a surplus of oil as an accessible resource waiting to be extracted for new and exciting endeavours (such as asphalt for paving roads for the growing automobile industry). Numerous documents and reports of the time implied that oil was seeping from the sand and earth, which as Davidson and Gismondi point out, would have “excite[d] the imaginations of journalists, governments, and others, at a time when the


6. Cariou’s development process shares similarities to the “oil sands extraction demonstration” performed at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta (http://history.alberta.ca/oilsands/docs/Oilsands-Daily-Schedule-2015.pdf).


12. Ibid., 41.
world was only just discovering the potential for oil.”

Oil sands extraction became understood as only a small and expendable fragment of the non-human world, as though the vast and prosperous wilderness was gifting this resource to humanity.

The complicated relationship of the industrial (and later toxic) sublime with extractive and romantic gazes remains a dominant issue in contemporary oil sands photography. For instance, a bird’s-eye view can indicate not only the sheer scale of industrial development and resource extraction, but also how the awe-inspiring sublime wilderness is now being replaced with awe-inspiring advancements in science and technology. Davidson and Gismondi argue that this particular visual storytelling has “established an authoritative industrial discourse in support of corporate investment, government assistance, the inevitability of commercial-scale exploitation, and ultimately the human domination of passive nature.” This statement suggests what the current motivations in the oil industry might be, and highlights the sometimes-hostile relationship between the human and non-human worlds. Furthermore, it demonstrates what Peter Hodgins and Peter Thompson have described as the trouble with romanticism and environmental thought: “continued acceptance of extractive capitalism in Canada and elsewhere is predicated on the continued mutual implication of the romantic and extractive gazes.”

When we think of the oil sands in terms of artistic production, we often conjure the type of imagery popularized by Burtynsky. These large-scale photographs offer the viewer an opportunity to observe the sheer magnitude of oil production and land devastation from a perspective they likely would not otherwise encounter. However, in Burtynsky’s approach, the viewer is also presented with an aestheticized view, a purposeful tactic the artist utilizes in hopes of welcoming environmental, political, and even economic contemplation. Burtynsky’s aestheticized scale complies with the discourse of immensity while also demonstrating a lack of commitment to either condemn or celebrate the oil sands. He has explained that he would like viewers to bring their own experiences and knowledge to the evaluation of the work and to fix their own meanings to the images.

According to Cariou then, aerial perspective photographs risk not only aestheticizing the object, but also distancing the viewer from the frame, and from reality, by creating a spectacle of the site, although they can also play a crucial role in capturing the scale of extraction for viewers who are unable to visit the sites, and therefore serve to document a seemingly invisible site. Cariou, in his Bitumen Mine Landscape with Five Trucks, offers

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13. Ibid.
17. Edward Burtynsky, interview with George Stroumboulopoulos, The Hour, CBC, October 23, 2008. See also Burtynsky’s website: www.edwardburtynsky.com
In petrographs such as Suncor—Smoke, Steel and Water | fig. 2 | Cariou has to all extent and purposes removed all recognizable references to the nonhuman world; the brown, amber, and gold glow of the plates create a historic aesthetic, as though this object is a relic, an image of an extinct site of industrialization from past civilizations. Furthermore, the mirrored and reflective varnish of the petrograph is conducive to a more laboured viewing experience. This focuses our attention on the documented landscape—we need to work and commit our time to reveal its content—as it emerges in the light and withdraws in the shadows. The mirrored surface, however, also works to distract the viewer from the documented landscape. As cultural theorist

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Jon Gordon argues, the image becomes a form of self-portraiture due to the viewer’s reflection, which is also the only evident human body in most of the petrographs. Gordon writes, “the way we see ourselves through the bitumen of a petrograph, one’s own face reflected in the images, is a way of showing the viewers their implication in the process of development that the images depict.” He further explains how, “without the extreme detail and depth of field, without the emphasis on abstract pattern, and without a full spectrum of colours, petrographs do less to aestheticize the scenes.”

Cariou’s petrographs thus address Szeman’s contention that the visual culture of oil can reveal the unseen landscapes by drawing our attention to the “apparatuses and infrastructures that produce and are produced by oil, from sites of extraction largely hidden from view.” Cariou’s petrographs offer the viewer an opportunity to consume the hidden sites of the oil sands through an implicated self-reflection that complicates our viewing experience and understanding of industrial and environmental landscapes. As Cariou states, “It just seemed to be this very massive visible thing that no one was really looking at.”

The role of visibility also works to highlight our human relationship with the nonhuman world. For Cariou, the idea of repurposing bitumen is also about finding a way to make visible our relationship with oil—seeing ourselves through, or as, oil. He states, “Because with energy of all kinds, but certainly with oil, right now in the modern way in which our energy regime works, we do have a relationship with this stuff but we don’t know that, or we are separated from it.” As such, visibility operates on multiple levels in this project: it makes visible both the apparatuses of oil and our strained relationship with the resource. As Cariou explains, we put it in our cars, for instance, and we may have a slight whiff of it, but we do not really have a direct connection with it. “That was a thing that I found very interesting,” he explains, “to

26. Ibid.

Figure 2. Warren Cariou, Suncor—Smoke, Steel and Water, 2015. Petrograph, version 1/3. 21.6 × 27.9 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
Figure 3. Warren Cariou, *Open Earth With Pipeline*, 2015. Petrograph, version 1/3. 21.6 × 27.9 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 4. Detail of Warren Cariou, *Open Earth With Pipeline*. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
use oil in a way that doesn’t make it disappear, that in fact just keeps it there in front of you.” 27 Although viewers are not in attendance during the developing process of the petrographs—they do not smell the toxic materials or see the objects as they are manufactured—they become aware in viewing them that they are actually looking at oil. “They’re in a relationship with that stuff,” Cariou states, “and hopefully that will make them reflect on other ways they are in a relationship with it.” 28

Climate
In order to maximize the 30% chance of success of each petrograph, Cariou relies heavily on natural resources such as bitumen and lavender. Also crucial to the success of each project are stable weather conditions. In order for the digital transparency to set on the plate, according to his current artistic practice, Cariou must leave the object in direct sunlight for approximately sixteen hours. In Winnipeg, where he currently produces his work, production is limited to the summer months, and as he explains, only certain days in the summer, because if it rains during the exposure process, the petrographs are essentially ruined. He states, “I have to be very vigilant about that, I mean it takes two days of exposure for a petrograph, so the risk of it raining on one is very high.” 29 This also means that he is extremely aware of his environment and of how the weather changes hour-to-hour, day-to-day, year-to-year. The project therefore also functions as a documentation of changing weather patterns, as one year may yield a higher quantity of petrographs based on acceptable and workable days for development. 30 Additionally, Cariou clarifies that even while the plates are out in the sun, he must constantly be conscious of meteorological conditions: “what I tend to do is make them in the morning and then I put them out while I’m writing. But as I am writing I am always looking and listening for the sound of rain or looking for clouds and wind coming...[and] another element is thinking about what is the right time, I look at the forecast and think ‘okay, is this the right time to put the petrographs out today’ because if I am not home I better not.” 31 Cariou’s project is therefore as much about the weather as it is about oil, or at least about the symbiotic relationship between the two. The petrographs rely quite heavily on semi-consistent sunshine and the predictability of stable, seasonal weather conditions, which as Cariou points out, is of course not very accurate: “Even when you’re talking about what may happen this afternoon let alone what will happen in ten-thousand years.” 32

Importantly, Cariou has discovered through trial and error an unintended, and at times unsettling, contribution from the nonhuman world for this project. In Open Earth With Pipeline | fig. 3 | for instance, a fly landed on the plate during the development process and is now entombed in the petrograph. | fig. 4 | This contribution from the nonhuman world serves as a reminder of the larger casualties of oil extraction; the fly is not unlike other wildlife being sacrificed in the oil sands as a result of our reliance and addiction to oil. 33

Furthermore, given that bitumen is made up of once living “things” (organisms such as algae, for instance) and organic compounds (hydrocarbons), the fly on the petrograph is a reminder not only of casualties, but also

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27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Since 2014, Cariou has produced roughly seventy 20.3 × 25.4 cm and 21.6 × 27.9 cm, twenty-five 10.2 × 15.2 cm, and twenty 12.7 × 17.8 cm successful petrographs. To date, each of the three years have been relatively equal in productivity for the project (email correspondence with Elysia French April 29, 2017).
32. Ibid.
33. For further interpretation, see Cariou and Gordon, “Petrography.”
of transformation, time, and the cycle of oil. Bitumen in its natural state can act as a geological artefact, which, as Kirsty Robertson notes, can serve as an “indicator of human impact on the ecology of the Earth...an indicator of the slow violence of massive pollution.” Cariou’s layered documentation of the transformation of the material therefore gestures more toward the cycle of oil and asks us to consider where the material has been, how it has been used, and what will come after oil.

The petrographs are then a product of a unique, circular, and contradictory relationship, that is, the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. The revelation that Cariou relies on stable and predictable weather conditions to work with the bitumen and develop the petrographs needs to be considered in relation to the fact that bitumen, as currently utilized in large-scale industrial pursuits, is in fact a leading contributor to increased greenhouse gases and to changing and unpredictable weather patterns. Through his thoughtful and affective repurposing of bitumen, Cariou’s petrography offers viewers the opportunity to see through oil and to contemplate their relationship with it.

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