

## Review: Subhankar Banerjee, *Long Environmentalism of the Near North*

Exhibited at the University of New Mexico Art Museum, curated by Arif Khan, Director of the UNMAM, and Subhankar Banerjee. The work was featured from June 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, until March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018.

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As I sit down to write this article, an email notice pops up in the right-hand corner of my screen. It's from Subhankar Banerjee, artist, activist and the Lannan Endowed Chair of Land Arts of the American West and Professor of Art and Ecology at the University of New Mexico. The email is a call for scholars across the globe to endorse a letter to Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, advocating against the Department's plan to expedite leasing and development of oil and gas in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The email, like other such calls put out by Banerjee, is only one facet of a working dedication to what Banerjee calls, "long environmentalism" – an intergenerational dedication to advocating for the ecologies of the Arctic, and part of the title for his latest exhibition at the University of New Mexico Museum of Art, *Long Environmentalism in the Near North*.

For nearly two decades Banerjee has dedicated himself and his art practice to conservation efforts in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and surrounding regions. These biologically and culturally rich landscapes in Alaska and adjacent Canada have been threatened by oil and gas development for decades, and continue to be. As global temperatures rise and energy consumption grows, the problems the Arctic faces are multilayered and complex. Banerjee recognizes this and employs a similarly multifaceted approach to calling for action and change. The work in *Long Environmentalism of the Near North* is evidence of this. Each section of the exhibition positions large-scale photography, text, info graphics, news and politics symbiotically, allowing each element to enhance the arguments of the whole.

Large, often aerial, photographs of primarily the Alaskan Arctic provide the perfect entry point for audiences visiting the exhibition. The pictures are beautiful and sublime, featuring frosted tundra and wild animals in migration. They are also contemporary, giving the viewer insight into the lives of the Alaskan Arctic indigenous peoples as hunters and as activists fighting to protect their way of life.

I was particularly struck by the relationship between two images: *Caribou Hunt-Charlie Swaney and Jimmy John*, 2007 and *After the Listening Session*, 2006 (see figures 1 and 2). In *Caribou Hunt*, two Gwich'in men are beginning the process of skinning a caribou. The black of their winter gear, gun and snowmobile stands out against the white world. Contemporary means of travel and modern-day weapons

help these men do what they have always done to survive. Similarly, Inupiat, Gwich'in and non-native environmentalists come together as non-traditional allies and human weapons to fight for the survival of a sense of home they share. Banerjee does an excellent job of encapsulating in these photographs the "do what you need to do" mentality of survival.



Fig. 1) Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Hunt- Charlie Swaney and Jimmy John*, 2007. Courtesy of the Lannan Foundation.



Fig.2) Subhankar Banerjee, *After the Listening Session*, 2006. Courtesy of the Lannan Foundation.

Because of Banerjee's skill with the camera and his impeccable eye for composition, the photographs in the exhibition immediately capture attention. But, as Banerjee points out in a portion of wall text displayed in the museum, the photographs are less about their ability to "induce pleasure" or "spark intrigue" and more about their function as a "portal to activism and knowledge – collaborative social-environmental activism and interdisciplinary production of knowledge." Acting as a portal, they do this well.

The rest of the exhibition consists of personal narratives of Banerjee's time in the Arctic (printed on placards accompanying the photographic prints), poster campaigns and info graphics advocating for protection of ANWR from industrial exploitation and reading tables with a variety of news feeds highlighting the political fight surrounding this area. All these pieces work in tandem with the photographic prints to paint a complex picture of the Arctic and the issues it faces.

For the visitor willing to spend time with the text, Banerjee connects the dots by offering up the 16 years of research he has compiled in his fight to save this vital ecological mecca. The willing visitor will walk away from *Long Environmentalism in the Near North* understanding that for the Gwich'in people the Coast Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is "The Sacred Place Where All Life Begins." It is the calving grounds for the Porcupine Caribou Herd that sustains the lives of the Gwich'in people themselves. Conversely, the visitor will also come to understand that to many others it is a "flat white nothingness" (poster quote from Gale Norton, Former US Secretary of the Interior) that should be exploited for the oil, gas and wealth they bring. The battle between these two ways of thinking is made ever-present when the visitor sits down at a reading table to browse article after article outlining the struggle between these disparate ideologies.

The comprehensive visual and written statements offered up by Banerjee are compelling and sobering. But, as Banerjee himself is all too aware, the efforts of a single exhibition are not enough to tackle the behemoths of multinational extraction companies. To this end, the reach of Banerjee's exhibition was extended by the organization of *The Last Oil – a multispecies justice symposium on Arctic Alaska and beyond* at University of New Mexico. The photographs and texts in *Long Environmentalism of the Near North* set the stage for this three-day series of lectures, panels and events. By utilizing the museum, and the university itself, as a democratic space for multi-cultural engagement, an added layer of dimension is brought to Banerjee's work. The symposium's own website, resource page, scholar campaigns and video links to watch the discussions online, offer a portal for participants to travel deeper into the Arctic north – even for those who many never see the tundra or coastal plains with their own eyes.

Working for several years as associate director of Land Arts of the American West with Bill Gilbert, its founder and the first Lannan Endowed Chair at the University of New Mexico, I have a particular affinity for how Subhankar Banerjee's work operates. After dedicating my own creative and pedagogical practice to investments in particular environments, I have come to realize that the world is nothing if it is not complex. The work in *Long Environmentalism of the Near North* clearly paints a picture of that complexity by creating relationships for those who, before visiting the exhibition at the UNM Museum of Art, would have considered the Arctic North a distant landscape with very little relationship to their own lives. Through the use of photography, writing, organizing, blogging and teaching, Subhankar Banerjee shows us that the ecologies of the North American Arctic are in fact, "near" – intrinsically intertwined with our own narratives and deserving of our protection and care.