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Oil Field Visit Inspires Artist's Floating Black Mass

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One major environmental decision the Obama Administration faces in the coming weeks is whether to approve the controversial [Keystone XL pipeline](#) that will carry tar sands oil from Canada across the North American continent to coastal refineries in Louisiana.

Supporters say the pipeline will bring jobs and energy security, while opponents argue that tar sands oil will harm the environment.

A Canadian artist has stepped into the controversy with a tangle of foam logs, tar paper, shredded tires and black wings suspended from a glass dome at the [Corcoran Gallery of Art](#) in Washington.

The floating black mass is the work of Canadian artist [Mia Feuer](#) and it's based on a visit she made to a Canadian tar sands remediation site, where she saw toxic debris from oil production shoveled back into the mining pit.

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Oil Field Visit Inspires

"They put a little layer of top soil and tried to grow trees. The trees, of course, can not grow," Feuer said. "So then they planted wheat. The hope is that the wheat will cleanse soil beneath it."

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The chemically soaked wheat field did little cleaning. It was overrun by mice. In an effort to control the infestation, the oil company planted dead birch trees, roots to the air as a nest for predatory birds that would kill off the mice. It became, as Feuer titles her piece, [An Unkindness](#).

"It was surreal. It was like a twisted, nightmarish nursery rhyme," she said. "That one moment of seeing these upside down trees in the landscape, it was so right there in front of me. I went to the tar sands because I was curious. I was really curious and I was hungry for firsthand experience and I went there, and I had no idea that I was going to see a landscape like this."

Under her ghoulish floating artwork, Feuer has installed an oval ice rink, a symbol of her hockey-loving native homeland, but the surface is a shiny black synthetic.

"It is black to reference, obviously, the color of oil," she said, "but almost like the grim and dark sort of moment we are in considering our addiction to oil."

Skates are provided and museum-goers like Justin Boland take a solitary spin. But there is little joy.

"The sculpture above, I have got to say, is really quite horrific," Boland said.

Other works in the show are inspired by an expedition to the Arctic in a sailing ship.

It was like we were there at this moment that was fleeting, and it was one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen in my whole life," Feuer said.

Feuer bears witness to the changing landscape and collects plastic garbage that washes to shore. She uses scraps of tar paper and rope to build a full-size dog sled on the deck of the ship. And she creates a midnight sun with colored light bulbs, a replica of a clock she found in an abandoned coal town. Another large piece re-imagines the collapsed coal mine with a jumble of planks and cascading blue tiles.

All the materials for this work, foam and plastic, are oil-based. Feuer says she is tied to oil as much as anyone else.

"I am more interested in making work that is relevant to the times that we exist in," she said. "I just want people who come to the show to have a response. I do not know if it is my job to tell people what they should be feeling when they experience the work."



Artist's Floating Black Mass



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George Bozzini, a retired English professor, definitely had a strong response to the exhibit. "It looks like all the pictures of all the destruction in Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan that we see every day, utter destruction."

Sarah Newman, the Corcoran's curator of contemporary art, sees that and more. She says every visitor adds to the narrative, which she says explains the success of Feuer's work.

"You can see that she moves people and she is making connections and evoking an environment that you can not get to another way," Newman said. "And her connections are poetic, and they are emotional and they are terrifying often."

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