

# Energy Landscapes: Remaking Nature

Inside the painter's muscle cells chemical energy is transformed as muscles contract, legs push, the body leaps into the air. Energy changes into the kinetic bodily movements of performing, of stretching canvas, of painting a still image. Inside the filmmaker's video camera silicon sensors capture the leaping image, transforming photonic energy into voltage. Amplified and converted into digital data, the potential energy is stored, manipulated and reproduced as a series of sequential stills projected as flickering illusion.

Infused with the resonance of their environment, Robert Habel's almost still paintings juxtapose and intertwine with the luminance of Cole Larsen's moving narratives. Their sophisticated creative improvisation has been honed over 15 years of collaborative practice, with visual dialogues exploring the environmental and socio-political concerns of topical landscapes. Together they speak of nature remade to accommodate humanities hunger for mineral resources and energy sources.

Over several centuries, landscapes of extraction – mines, oil fields and smokestack industries, have symbolised both the degradation of nature and the romance of progress. Of undoubtable sensuality, the red and pink gashed earth, cut open to retrieve precious Zinc at Strathalbyn's Angas Mine – challenges our preconceptions of nature as exempt from human intervention. Balance and harmony with the environment is never immaculately conceived – but rather composed of aggregates of usage and perspective.

The painter, pristinely clad in a white chemical suit, performs the painting into being against the deep blue night sky. A carnival of light, flame bursts, and sound transforms the Santos Point Lowly gas refinery into a sparkling Disneyesque Magic Kingdom. Layer upon layer of paint builds opacity; cut-aways reveal translucence; midfield merges into close-up; smooth vision transmogrifies into magnificently thick gobs of textured paint. Verdicts of environmental damage are disquietingly dissipated by the playful soundscapes of the filmmaker.

Transposed to tropical Cairns, fossils of the energy landscapes – World War II diesel and oil tanks, are repurposed, reused and heritage-listed. Like the coal canals, oil pipelines and electricity wires which transformed the built environment of the western world, landscapes of transmission enable energy transformation to occur between one place and another - from one system to another.

The painter drags a large canvas towards the twisted, rusting metal frame of deconstructed oil ideology. He splatters and swathes in spray enamels. Subjective perspectives are orchestrated. The filmmaker pulls focus swiftly from contemplative concrete and lush foliage to fluorescent graffiti tags. We shift to depths, then surface, and back to stillness. Did you notice a movement – almost captured in the corner of your eye?

Our imagined green future, occupied by emerging landscapes of renewable energy, wind farms and solar fields, are more affect than reality<sup>4</sup>. Even with the cleanest air in the world, the energy of Tasmania's largest windfarm is sullied by its site. While en plein air was once a revolutionary act, beneath the whirring blades of the bloodied turbine landscape the performer/painter/filmmaker channels cultural colonialism. The 1828 Cape Grim massacre of 30 Pennemukeer people will always remain current.

Landscapes of energy, although of large geographic scale, are often unseen by energy consumers. By exposing their inherent invisibilities and social inequities, Larsen and Habel reveal the cycle of energy conversion and loss – from discovery, realisation and production to destruction. Landscapes, power stations, cities, rivers and continents are in a state of movement – only impermanence is unchanging.



<sup>4</sup> Currently 1.3% of the world's energy comes from non-hydro renewable sources, with the use of coal increasing.

***"The world gets back to burning"*** The Economist, online, June 8th 2011.

Under the harsh glare of a South Australian sun, new compositions spontaneously emerge. The filmmaker multiplies and divides his screens; the painter sketches quickly, storing potential for the studio; later scratching into reflective metal, drawing out refraction, releasing the image moving within. A transformative moment occurs as the distinctive shadow of the filmmaker becomes solid under the hand of the painter. The landscape finds its double.

Energy economies invert as Pike River Woolshed Sun Farm harvests sunshine from dry red earth. The performer parodies propaganda and perceptions as fossil fuels and tidal energy, role-play on commercial news. “We are confident it will be a solution to current problems.” Metal panels mirror other still and moving images in the gallery, capturing the presence of the viewer, implicating both you and me in these energetic topical landscape dialogues.

Has humanity’s enslavement to energy lessened? Is an energetic system open or closed? Can sustainable energy landscapes be created that do no harm to biodiversity? Does the still image move and the moving image still?

This dynamic collaboration between painter Habel and filmmaker Larsen illuminates the social and ecological conditions of living within interconnected energy systems. Instead of proposing solutions they speak with journalistic neutrality of interdependencies, impacts, implications. Together, their energy exchange invigorates our analysis and appreciation of the aesthetics and ambiguities of remaking nature.

**Dr Melinda Rackham**  
Adjunct Professor Media & Communications, RMIT University