

Oil Topography: Weaving the World of Oil

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Article abstract

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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

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OIL TOPOGRAPHY: WEAVING THE WORLD OF OIL

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RUTH BEER

Taking inspiration from Pendakis and Wilson's (2012) call to "sight, cite, and site" oil, in this piece we consider how interventions in artistic material practice can offer up complementary, and at times entirely unique, modes of engaging with the materialities of oil and petro-media. Building on conversations of the past several years, we make particular reference to Oil Topography (2014), a hand-woven jacquard tapestry created and produced by Ruth Beer.

S'inspirant de l'appel de Pendakis et Wilson (2012) à "voir, citer et situer" le pétrole, nous examinons dans cette pièce comment les interventions dans la pratique matérielle artistique peuvent offrir des modes complémentaires, et parfois tout à fait uniques, d'engagement avec les matérialités du pétrole et des pétro-médias. En nous appuyant sur les conversations de ces dernières années, nous faisons particulièrement référence à Oil Topography (2014), une tapisserie jacquard tissée à la main et produite par Ruth Beer.

Over the past century, visual communication has played a key role in broadening public consciousness of the environmental impacts of extractive industries. On screens, on gallery walls, on wheat-pasted posters, and elsewhere, two-dimensional media forms the basis of much of what we know—and don't know—about oil refinement, transportation, consumption, pollution, and transition. Then, as now, the representational aptness of two-dimensional imagery continues to be seen as almost self-evident, and it is through such imagery that the politico-aesthetics of oil continues to be most prominently visually mediated.

In the case of petro-catastrophes—marine oil spills, pipeline ruptures, breached tailings ponds—this two-dimensional imagery is typically mediated through an aerial perspective. To see things from above—from the God’s eye view, as Donna Haraway might put it—affords a certain legibility to situations of extreme flux and enormity that might otherwise elude human capacities for understanding altogether. So when the Exxon Valdez capsized in the early hours of March 24, 1989, news crews from around the world flew in with cameras aloft, each scrambling to find a more inventive means of communicating the scale and severity of the spill from an ever-greater distance. A media event in the truest sense (Dayan and Katz 1994), aerial telephotography soon became the default mode of visual witness.

The popularity of the aerial perspective is due at least in part to the quality of indisputability it can lend to an image. *My, what an awful lot of oil that is; I wonder how many barrels?* Likewise, the aerial perspective can provide a useful sense of scale and proportion. *I’ve seen bigger spills; at least it doesn’t seem to be nearing the estuary.*

Of course, perspective is and has always been political. As Matt Dyce outlines in a fantastic history of the adoption of aerial photography by government-employed land surveyors in the early 20th century, the ability to take photos from afar and on-high was a critical node in both the project of statecraft and industrial expansion. For government branches like the Geological Survey of Canada or the Dominion Land Survey, it was often the case that “the most truthful pictures were those obtained from the farthest away” (Dyce 2). For consumers and producers of media alike, the truth claims inherent to the aerial perspective remain about as close to the notion of objectivity as visual communication tends to get.

And so, while we remain indebted to aerial strategies as a mode of seeing and knowing oil, we feel that the politico-aesthetics of oil could benefit from a deeper attunement to the contributions and idiosyncrasies of artistic material practice. To do so would involve treating the materialities of communication and the communication of materialities as coeval and equally expressive.¹ Looking beyond

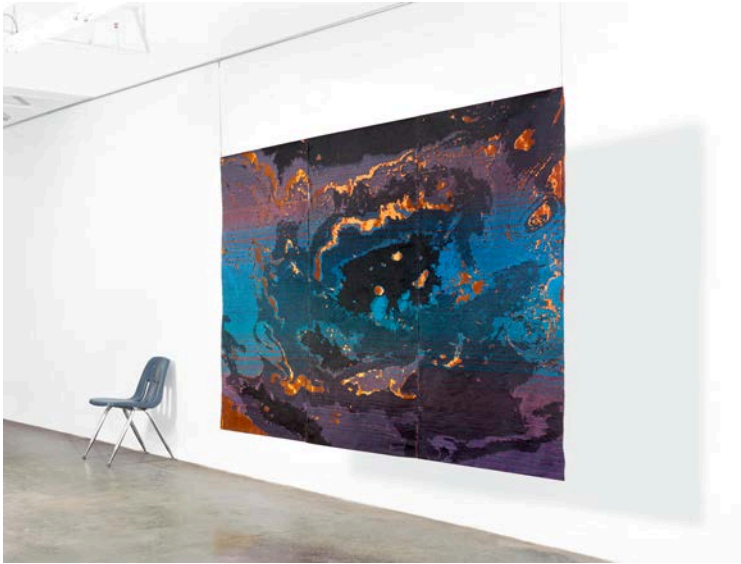


Figure 1: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (2014). Hand-woven jacquard tapestry: copper wire, polyester, cotton, 218 x 305 x 1.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

the content of representation and toward the materials, material conditions, and material infrastructures that make such representation possible, doing so would open up a world composed of “vibrant matter” and “evocative objects” (Bennett, Turkle).

Perhaps *Oil Topography* (2014) may be seen as one such evocative object. A hand-woven, double-weave structure measuring 218 (h) x 305 (w) x 1.5 (d) cm, *Oil Topography* is a jacquard tapestry comprised of copper wire, cotton, and polyester yarn whose three panels are positioned horizontally in a landscape orientation and suspended at eye-level. Experiencing it within the gallery space, viewers are often curious to make sense of the imagery and to know more about the materials and process of its production. *Oil Topography* was produced at the Centre des Textiles Contemporains de Montréal (Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles), an educational facility with one of the largest non-commercial jacquard looms in Canada which

provides research, creation, and dissemination support services for professional artists, designers, and artisans. With the help of a research assistant and the centre's technician, the warp was prepared on the loom and Pointcarré software² was used in order to establish the basic tonal composition design and weave patterns.

The process is essentially one of translation, in which the implicitness of the digital gradually takes on the expressiveness of the material. At once automated and yet visibly not, the work that emerges is in effect a hybrid image-based object, something both to look at and interact with in the space of the gallery. As in the case of a free-standing sculpture, the work is positioned away from the wall, such that the viewer is able to walk toward it and around it, to find changes of compositional focus and variations of pattern, to experience it from whichever angle and distance and height they wish.

From a distance, *Oil Topography* appears to depict a pixelated abstract space or objects, which many viewers have commented could be interpreted as something like a cluster of islands, or a constellation, or an oil slick. In fact, both sides of *Oil Topography* derive from a single base image, taken in aerial view, of the separation of oil and water in the aftermath of the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* disaster.³ Yet neither side can offer much in the way of didactic certainty; where one object ends and the next begins remains open to speculation.

Precisely how the surfaces of the piece are experienced varies in response to ambient light conditions and the position of the viewer. Put differently, it is visually unstable, as the viewer's movement initiates changing reactions to reflected light on the weaving's surface. It is there, in front of you, but always reactive and in movement. Animated by the iridescence of its glinting materials, the two sides of the tapestry offer radically different aesthetic effects. On one side, flashes of warm metallic orange and pink appear more prominently, dancing and enticing across the surface. On the reverse side, sombre hues of blue, purple, and black—colours often associated with water, landscapes, and physical distance—predominate.

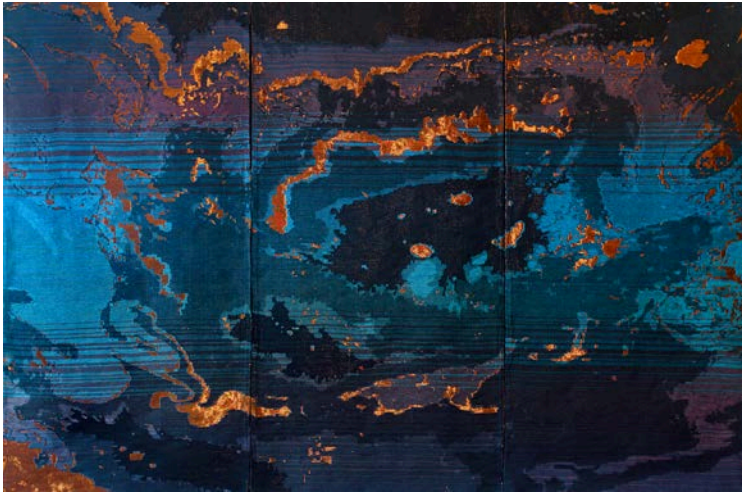


Figure 2: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

By obscuring the base image through abstraction, its evidentiary promise is diluted such that the content of the piece is made secondary to its form (McLuhan). This unsettling condition of viewing, in which the burden of interpretation shifts to the viewer, represents one of the ways in which the work gestures toward the legacies of seeing, and knowing, oil. Using the abstracted base image as a strategy of citation,⁴ *Oil Topography* leverages the “fragmenting of imagery” (Jefferies and Thompson 159) and disruption of stable perspective inherent to jacquard weaving to critique the provenance and representational aptness of two-dimensional imagery.

As the focus moves from content to form, the intimacies of interlaced warp and weft come into fuller view. Slowly, the viewer begins to both appreciate and question the logic of the artwork’s structure. Emerging from a grid,⁵ the tapestry’s surface nevertheless appears uneven, even mottled—a result of the jacquard weaving process and patterning, in which the glitches and inconsistencies involved in the labour of weaving by hand (bodily movements, gestures) are recorded and materialized in the matrix of warp and weft.

The physicality of *Oil Topography* is undeniable. It is haptic, imposing, and possesses a certain “auratic power” (Crimp 96). In the site of the gallery, a space of contemplation, it is experienced not so much as a visual encounter but as a confrontation, a demand for acknowledgment by the thing itself. And yet, despite its heft, the effect of its scale *relative to the viewer’s body* registers more as an invitation to intimacy.⁶

Confronted by their tangibility, the structural entanglement of the work’s constituent materials comes into fuller view. Copper, cotton, and polyester: these are “the debris of industrial capitalism” (Teixeira-Pinto 2), materials which require the viewer to “ask questions not only about what the material is, but also about what is associated with it” (Lyotard 159). Lustrous and glinting, the 22-gauge copper filament is perhaps the most visually arresting of the work’s primary materials, and advances the strategy of citation further by implicating copper’s historic role in the development of visual and telecommunications, from Daguerreotype transfer sheets to copperplate maps to the coaxial cable underlying much of the present-day infrastructure of the Internet. Evoking the double-bind of representation or “problem of visualization” (Pendakis and Wilson 4), the filament thus engages with the image archive of oil disaster *on its own terms*.

Dig a hole along the banks of Prince William Sound and you’ll find that, three decades after the Exxon Valdez disaster first entered the public consciousness, crude oil still seeps forth in a patina of blue and green. It is as if time has stood still. In a world awash with images—and with the understanding that materials do not exist in time, but are the stuff of time itself (Ingold)—*Oil Topography* stands as a counter-monument⁷ to the ubiquity of petro-catastrophe, resituating a seemingly remote event into proximity.

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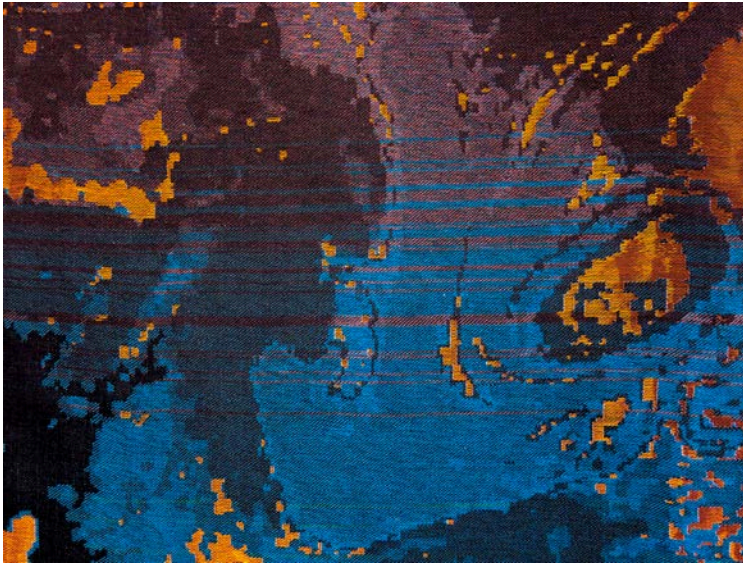


Figure 3: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (2014). Hand-woven jacquard tapestry: copper wire, polyester, cotton, 218 x 305 x 1.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

NOTES

1. This is a characteristic of scholarship in the materialist tradition of media studies, in which the field of view of symbolic actants often includes such extra-textual entities as pipelines, pump-jacks, roads, and rivers. Writing with respect to bitumen, Tollefson and Barney (2019) propose that “the matter is not so much ‘what meaning cannot convey’ as it is ‘what pipelines cannot convey’” (40).↵
2. Effectively a computerized loom, the jacquard machine requires that the weaver use Pointcarré to simplify and deconstruct the base image’s attributes and assign woven structures in such a way that it can be partially-automated.↵
3. The Exxon Valdez disaster is in many ways the quintessential petro-catastrophic media event (Dayan and Katz), having attracted an as-then-unprecedented degree of news media coverage. Deliberately chosen for its ubiquity and ease of digital access, the base image was located through a cursory Google image search using the keywords “Exxon Valdez oil spill.”↵
4. Citation refers to the practice of employing the idioms of one medium in another. As Maiko Tanaka writes, “citation [...] is not only an acknowledgment of sources of inspiration, but also realizes the community it references, performatively bringing it into being” (1). By way of example, artist Gerhard Richter deploys citation in his oil paint recreations of photographic images, through which he disrupts photography’s claim to realism (Hawker 2002).↵
5. With its deep roots in the ideologies of high-modernism, critic Rosalind Krauss has described the grid as “what art looks like when it turns its back on nature” (2). Formalist, antinatural, and anthropocentric, in the world-at-large the grid similarly finds expression as the basic organizational unit of the sprawling networks of power generation, transport, and telecommunications which the project of extractivism both relies upon and self-perpetuates.↵
6. This invitation to intimacy is one of the ways in which *Oil Topography* distinguishes itself as a counter-monument. As Stevens et al. write, whereas traditional monuments primarily, “if not exclusively,” engage “the sense of sight, and many are designed to be viewed from a dis-

tance,” counter-monuments “typically unsettle these conventions of reception by inviting close, bodily encounter” (961).↵

7. Where a monument suggests remembrance in an unconditional sense, a counter-monument is intended to invigorate interest and invites critical scrutiny of commemorative landscapes (Stevens et al.).↵