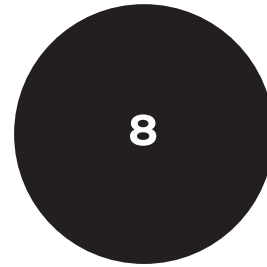




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Degrees of Visibility: Mishka Henner's Views From Above

"Intellectual property is the oil of the twenty-first century," Mark Getty, owner of Getty images once declared. Of course, the grandson of famed oil baron John Paul Getty II and one of the leading proprietors of intellectual property – images – would know where to place his bets, the "hallucinatory realm" of likenesses, or what the World Intellectual Property Organization more broadly calls "creations of the mind."¹ Amorphous a definition as that might seem, creations of the mind, and especially images, have attained the status of commodities, bought and sold, kept under lock and key, and circulated under strict legal provisions. Getty has capitalized on this market.

And yet, on the flip side of this coin, a cataract of pictures seems to engulf us all, or at least those of us with access to the Internet. The sweep of much of the world has not gone undetected by Google Earth's undiscerning eye, either bringing into closer proximity realms far away, or otherwise dislocating our terrestrial perspective so far afield that viewers might glimpse the earth from outer space on a regular basis. In their sheer prevalence, vast swaths of earth, captured from these vertical heights, are less alienating than familiar.

If Getty analogized images with crude, then to "find the valuable stuff" Belgian artist Mishka Henner proposes, "is as difficult as finding oil,"² especially among a limitless archive of pictures of the earth's many corners. Henner's subjects, meat and oil, two of the United States' biggest cash cows, are subjects not of his own camera, but of the seemingly omniscient eye of satellite vision. "Just like the ocean is unfathomable," Henner observes, "so is the quantity of imagery" one might find in the cloud.

Thus gathering the images for his series, entitled *Feedlots* and *Pumped*, required filtering through the dross of satellite and surveillance images. In this way, his process diverges from the forcefully persuasive view of a documentarian on such hot button issues, proffering something a bit cooler, detached even. The choice of

subjects is not insignificant, since both commodities share a great deal in common, as The New York Times writer Mark Bittman points out: “Like oil, meat is subsidized by the federal government. Like oil, meat is subject to accelerating demand as nations become wealthier, and this, in turn, sends prices higher. Finally—like oil—meat is something people are encouraged to consume less of, as the toll exacted by industrial production increases, and becomes increasingly visible.” Henner plays on this visibility; he plays on the novel and particular degree of visibility meat and oil share when captured from the earth’s upper atmosphere. The result is an apparently objective perspective of solitary oil wells and large-scale animal feeding operations found throughout the US, taken from the automated eye of satellite imaging. But rather than knocking viewers on the head, the images abrade, they scratch at sensibilities, pose inquiries, cast doubt, eventually nudging observers to look deeper, harder; some images foreclose meaning promptly, others beg a second, more prolonged look. All in all, they manifest the mundane and the disquieting.

The series *Pumped* (2012) comprises of an animated GIF and twelve individual photographs of pump jacks located in various topographies across the United States.

A *Wired* article humorously described these images with the bombastic headline: “Big Oil Seems Downright Puny When Seen from Outer Space.”³ Indeed the pump jacks, at the center of each photograph, appear miniscule, even incidental when pictured from above and circumscribed by land that drastically changes face in each photograph, from uniform and verdant to variable and arid. In one image, *API 21902673 Levelland TX*, the pump jack at center, and thin vertical striations suggesting phone lines, breaks up an otherwise unchanging camel-colored arid terrain (fig. 1). The pump jack is at the end of a well-trodden path, suspended like all

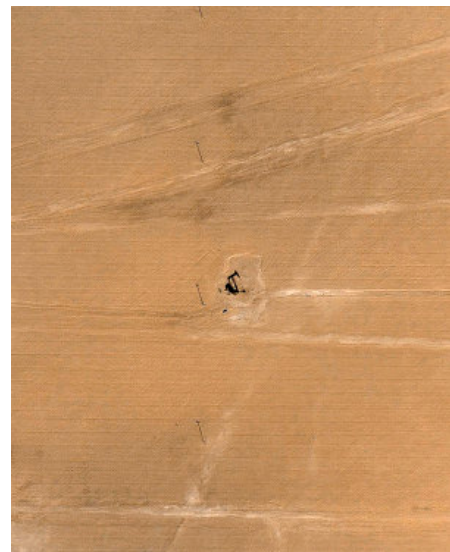


Fig. 1. Mishka Henner, *API 21902673 Levelland, TX*

the others in the midst of its work. In *API 21931252 San Andres, TX*, the same format holds, except that the landscape surrounding the pump is decidedly irregular, a desiccated and muted indigo terrain, marked by a constellation of white specks, and evocative of the surface of a cracked and timeworn oil painting (fig. 2). A thistle-shaped patch of cream-colored ground, which the pump jack inhabits,

interrupts the fissured blue expanse. Alternately, in *API 02914653 Mountain View, CA*, the pump jack occupies a green rectangle, surrounded by uniformly arranged trees and plots of land, a visual junction between rurality and modern geometry (fig. 3).⁴

The design for the pump jack, the counter-balanced oil well that punctuates the American landscape, is nearly a century old, hailing, unsurprisingly, from Texas. Otherwise known as the Big Texan, Thirsty Bird, or Donkey, amongst other names, individual pump jacks produce on average less than ten barrels of oil per day in their respective locations.⁵ But with millions in operation, these jacks, seesawing into the depths, contribute significantly to the overall production of oil in the US. Perhaps what the *Wired* title relays, as much as the photographs themselves suggest, is that these pump jacks are inconspicuous markers of a rather conspicuous boom and bust industry. This gains resonance given that in the US in recent months oil prices have drastically plunged. Signaling a global downturn in the oil industry, in part because domestic supply has nearly doubled in the last six years, producers from Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and other petrostates are pressured to look for new markets. Those new markets have, in turn, demanded lower prices, pushing prices ever lower. So, with current rhetoric both threatening and foretelling the end of fossil fuels, it now seems to the contrary that there is an oversupply of oil, one that for all intents and purposes has gone unregulated by oil producers.⁶

The serial images of pump jacks belie a place within this complex global network of supply and demand. They appear cut off from the world, solitary in their one-track purpose. We might otherwise glimpse them from a car window, if at all, haphazardly viewed as they rush by, located alongside more ubiquitous power lines, reminders of other forms of connectivity. Rather, we catch the pump jacks from an oblique, vertical angle, stilled in an indexical instant. This stillness—apprehended from above—counters their interminable plunging motion, like a metronome that refuses to yield. Their unceasing work pulsing, in and out, day and night is, as Henner opines, “Not unlike the expectation of human labor in an unchecked and unchallenged version of capitalism. In their isolated and atomized



Fig. 2. Mishka Henner, *API 21931252 San Andres, TX*

selves, you begin to wonder if they stand for more than just oil extraction.”⁷ As individual, atomized selves, the pump jacks gesture towards a nexus of precarious markets that transform the material, crude, into the abstract—a commodity to be exchanged.

In the series *Feedlots*, (2013) the visual markers of broad scale human activity and agrobusiness are much more palpable than the single, lonely pump jacks. The opening image, flatly titled *Coronado Feeders, Dalhart, Texas*, depicts a massive, blood red cavity that ruptures the otherwise arid, nondescript terrain (fig. 4). Ominous and shapeless, the crimson cavity conjures the likeness of a black hole threatening to draw in the surrounding landscape or otherwise explode from within its confines. Picturing a waste lagoon attached to a commercial cattle feedlot, this most intrusive image of the series plies between abjection and uncertainty, observers wondering what lies before their eyes.

The waste lagoon, located in Dalhart, Texas, at Coronado Feeders, a subsidiary of JBS, otherwise known in the industry as an anaerobic lagoon, is a man-made pit filled with animal waste in the process of open decomposition.⁸ These pits, not impervious to perforation, often overwhelm “the absorptive capacity of the soil,” thus leaking into groundwater, as the National Association of Local Boards Health explains. In addition, they emit air-pollutants that adversely affect surrounding communities as well as greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.⁹

At the heart of these feedlots—emerging like terrestrial soars—are the cattle themselves. Similar in appearance to larvae, they inhabit countless square and rectangular lots in a picture of assembly line efficiency. Without any horizon line (like the whole series), *Randall County, Amarillo, Texas* shows a series of feedlots that multiply ad infinitum, whereas the image of *Tascosa Feedyard, Texas* reveals the proximity of another waste lagoon to livestock (fig. 5,6). This time the lagoon takes on a nuclear green color; a close-up reveals its edges pitted and singed, akin in texture to a burnt photograph. Here, the visceral quality of the waste pit threatens the uniformity and flatness of the adjoining space, just as

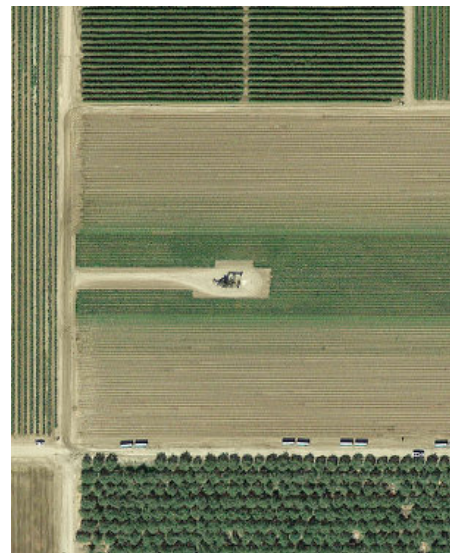


Fig. 3. Mishka Henner, *API 02914653*
Mountain View, CA

the actual pit overwhelms its receptacle. From this aerial point of view, the lagoon appears like a wound that spurns its own healing.

Though Henner zeros in on Texas, just one of several states where JBS produces meat (Idaho, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and even Alberta, Canada), livestock production takes up as much as thirty percent of the earth's surface (excluding the parts covered by ice), creating a demand for grain, corn and soy to sustain a cattle industry that has led, in part, to the razing of rainforests in Latin America. It comes as no surprise that the US consumes twice as much meat as the global average and, with only five percent of the world's population, grows and butchers nearly fifteen percent of the world's total meat.¹⁰ To bring this point home, Henner has presented a short film titled *Precious Commodities*, comprising footage from a Louisiana news station celebrating June as "beef month." As the campy female narrator recounts the history of beef production in the US in a southern drawl, we see news footage of feedlots interspersed with images from the series, alternating between scenes of 1950's diners and Henner's appropriated aerial images, including the vivid waste lagoons. The narrator ends the newscast with a clichéd witticism: "Some feedlots have as many as 100,000 head of cattle, giving you more beef for your buck." Portraying the meat industry not as a harbinger of ecological decline or industry abuses and instead as a bastion of progress, the celebratory news footage contrasts the mocking, darker sentiment the film, with its dissonant interruptions, maintains.

It seems appropriate that the film derives and recasts most of its content from news footage, reframing the words of others to reveal the absurdity of "beef month." *Precious Commodities* also makes an indirect claim about the nature of waging criticism at the meat industry. In fact, after the passage of Ag-Gag laws, anti-whistleblower laws that criminalize whistleblowers for attempting to disclose bad practices on factory farms, feedlots across five states have become "off limits landscapes," to anyone wishing "to defame the facility or its owner."¹¹ Those who attempt to reveal the abuses of the meat industry, a topic at least since Upton Sinclair penned *The Jungle*, may be subject to "The Animal and Ecological Terrorism Act,"



Fig. 4. Mishka Henner, *Coronado Feeders, Dalhart, TX*

legislation, passed under the auspices of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). The term terrorism is not coincidental given that ALEC began pushing its agenda in September 2003, only two years after 9/11, its publications comparing environmental militants to Al-Qaeda.¹²

We might look at Henner's series anew in a climate in which images of feedlots are illegal in some states when taken without the permission of the owner. These images, however, are not the handiwork of an undercover documentarian or whistleblower. They are but one consequence of satellite vision and government surveillance, a non-human gaze already at work. The almost unintentional, random and even undiscerning nature of the process under which these pictures are apprehended from the skies lends to their air of objectivity, even if the terms of the individual images' isolation, distribution and display gain the potential for taboo.

Significantly, the relationship of fact to objectivity plays into Henner's practice. "I really liked what Ed Ruscha said once, that all he wanted to do was photograph the facts. He just wanted to see if it was possible, with his gasoline stations and parking lots and all the rest of it." While the age-old argument that photographs are factual has always been under scrutiny, that Henner sees fact as one possible outcome of photography is perhaps the result of how the images have always already foreclosed a "subjective presence or influence" in their very making.¹³ The images are, in a word, detached. They are decidedly unaffectionate. In them the photographer's role of "being there", that Roland Barthes wrote of in *Camera Lucida*, is emptied. And thus, in a strange turn, the approach Henner takes to his work mirrors the cool objectivity with which capitalism's markets work. The end, however, is quite different. "...if you dig really deep down there's my outrage...I think of the image with the red lagoon, and it's almost like Munch's scream. Only it's my scream."¹⁴ Here, the content overwhelms the means of the image's production, eliciting a scream, a black hole, a wound gaping open, a punctum.

In a sense, then, Henner understands *Feedlots* in similar terms as *Pumped*, suggesting that upon considering them in more depth "the design of feedlots could be a model for the ways in which our society is designed, and how it reflects everyday life. In our society every single life is reduced to a productive unit, and if you're not productive in society then you're a waste of time. That's very much the feedlot concept at work there."¹⁵ And so a perfect union is formed by the two

together: a non-human view capturing all of late capitalism's dehumanizing effects.

To that end, the images are not classically beautiful, or even beautiful at all. Some are boring. Others still, vile. But each, despite their differences, possesses an ability to express something about landscape, and especially landscape in the American West, as irrevocably altered.

The aerial gaze allows a more broad scale view of alteration, inconspicuous and conspicuous alike. And captured from this vertical perspective, vast swaths of

rural terrain continue to command our aerial gaze, having commanded it for almost a century, since the emergence of the airplane and photo technology that allowed for rapid exposure times. In fact, aerial photography was taken up by the US government as the primary means of charting agricultural progress and land management during and after the Great Depression.¹⁶ Now satellite vision continuously registers the uses, and one might say abuses, of natural resources over time. Henner's images are compelling in this way because they fit into a longstanding chronology of aerial vision and rurality, echoing the application of aerial photography in earlier years. They diverge, however by showing us the culmination of modern progress in the form of gross mass production and agrobusiness.

Perhaps more poignantly, the abject and banal images diverge from a landscape imaginary that prevails in the American West. For many aesthetes of the twentieth century, the West signaled an untapped, even uncultured terrain, providing fodder for the genre of landscape to flourish. And yet even earlier, in distinct contrast, the dawn of landscape as a genre and cultural medium reflected the dawn of property relations and early capitalism. According to theorists, such as W. J. T. Mitchell, the landscape imaginary's production of edenic terrain obscured the realities of labor relations, naturalizing, all the while, phenomena such as manifest destiny, deterritorialization of indigenous peoples, and social, racial and class divisions.¹⁷

The course of landscape, as a genre and cultural medium, is currently changing. Perhaps that is because the face of land is also radically changing. Given rising environmental and geopolitical concerns, current artists and writers around the



Fig. 5. Mishka Henner, *Randall County Feedyard, TX (detail)*

globe, as well as scientists, geographers and nongovernmental activists have renewed their interest in issues of land and land use, taking stands on subjects ranging from nuclear pollution to global warming. These new modes of engagement with land reject universalizing claims to beauty, reflecting in their wake contemporary concerns surrounding degradation, contamination and sprawl.¹⁸

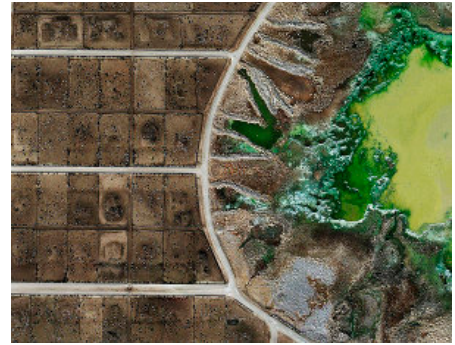


Fig. 6. Mishka Henner, *Tascosa Feedyard, Bushland, TX (detail)*

Henner's images might fall into this latter category. However, they do not disclose their contents easily and the objectivity they extend only adds to their ambivalence. This is particularly palpable given that the images are unpopulated by people. In that sense, they appear empty. That lack of humanity keeps the "shaping power of sociality" obscured, or at the very least, thinly veiled.¹⁹ As a result, they produce a giant question mark, begging to be engaged, but in their detachment maintaining their distance, creating a push and pull that keeps observers returning. "I've always been frustrated by the dramatic and reactive language of photojournalism. You can't learn much about the mechanics of power by focusing solely on its consequences," Henner asserts. "There are other agendas at work."²⁰ Without using reactive language, Henner's images beckon viewers to bridge the interstices between detachment and wonder, abjection, and banality and in so doing resist easy, or one-dimensional conclusions. Indeed it is easy to be reactive. However, it is more complicated to acknowledge that as consumers we are already implicated in by some margin, large or small, in the abuses of Capitalism, by participating in an economy of meat, oil and images, a set of profitable relations that are not lost on Mark Getty. It is self-reflexivity, then, that is a byproduct of engaging these images, a sense that we (the West) might in some way be culpable for perpetuating these agendas. To be sure, these images do not blatantly confront viewers. Therein lies their potency. Precluding subjective presence on the surface, they elicit viewers to come to terms with mass production.

Footnotes

- 1 "What is Intellectual Property," World Intellectual Property Organization, <http://www.wipo.int/about-ip/en/>, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 2 Jonathan Blaustein, "Interview with Mishka Henner, Part 1," aPhotoEditor, June 27, 2014, <http://www.aphotoeditor.com/2014/06/27/mishka-henner-interview-part-1/>, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 3 Doug Bierend, "Big Oil Seems Downright Puny When Seen from Space," *Wired*, October 16, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/2013/10/looking-down-on-the-oil-industry-with-photographs-taken-from-space/>, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 4 Titles for individual works follow a standard format: American Petroleum Institute (API) number, city and state. The API number allows for access to information on specific pump jacks, including age, location and depth. See American Petroleum Institute, last modified 2014, <http://www.api.org/>.
- 5 "All Pumped Up: Oil Technology," American Oil and Gas Historical Society, <http://aoghs.org/technology/oil-well-pump/>, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 6 Clifford Krauss, "What's Behind the Drop, Simple Economics," *New York Times*, January 22, 2015, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/01/13/business/energy-environment/oil-prices.html?referrer>, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 7 Fierend, "Big Oil Seems Downright Puny When Seen from Space."
- 8 Founded in 1953, JBS is named after its Brazilian founder José Batista Sobrinho. After acquiring plants in Brazil and Argentina, JBS acquired SWIFT, a major American protein producer, in 2007 and continues to expand operations in Australia to become a chief global conglomerate in the protein production industry.
- 9 Carrie Hribar, *Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and Their Impact on Communities* (National Association of Local Boards of Health, 2010), 3, http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Docs/Understanding_CAFOs_NALBOH.pdf, accessed January 15, 2015.
- 10 Mark Bittman, "Rethinking the Meat Guzzler," *New York Times*, January 27,

2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/weekinreview/27bittman.html>, accessed January 15, 2015.

11 Nicola Twilley, "Feed Lots," *Edible Geography*, August 2, 2013, <http://www.ediblegeography.com/feed-lots/>, accessed January 17, 2015. Also see Bill Moyers' account of Ag-Gag laws, "Ag-Gags Silence Whistleblowers," Bill Moyers, June 10, 2013, <http://billmoyers.com/2013/07/10/alec-activists-and-ag-gag/>, accessed January 15, 2015.

12 "Ag-Gags Silence Whistleblowers," Ag-Gag laws have passed in Arkansas, Missouri, Utah, South Carolina and Iowa.

13 I borrow this phrase from James Nisbet's writing on the photography of *The Lightning Field*. See Nisbet, "A Brief Moment in the History of Photo-Energy: Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*," *Greyroom* 50 (Winter 2013), 78.

14 Blaustein, "Interview with Mishka Henner, Part I."

15 "On Lies, Leaks and the Commodification of Life," *BlouinArt Info*, April 22, 2014, <http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1027988/mishka-henner-on-lies-leaks-and-the-commodification-of-life#sthash.u4m1xYk0.dpuf>, accessed January 26, 2015.

16 Jason Weems, "Barnstorming the Prairies: Flight, Aerial Views and the Idea of the Midwest," dissertation (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003).

17 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power, 2nd Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

18 Just of the recent publications and exhibition catalogues on new engagements with land, landscape and environment: Emily Aptor, "The Aesthetics of Critical Habitat," *October* 99(2002): 21-44; T. J. Demos, "The Politics of Sustainability: Contemporary Art and Ecology," in Francesco Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds, *Radical Nature in a Changing Planet: Art and Architecture, 1969-2009* (Koenig/Barbican: London, 2009); Kelly Baum, *Nobody's Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010* (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010); *Late Harvest: 2014 Art and the Environment Conference* (Muenchen, Germany: Hermer Publishers, 2014)

19 Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and*

the Urgency of Space (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 9.

20 "On Lies, Leaks and the Commodification of Life."