



Strathcona Refineries / August 2010

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On the eastern boundary of the city of Edmonton lies “Refinery Row.” Dominated by the smoke stacks and fractioning columns of the sprawling Esso and Suncor refineries, the surrounding landscape is punctuated by huge storage tanks and criss-crossed by pipelines, high voltage power cables and railway tracks. Living, myself, on the edge of town, I often see the flame and hear the roar of flares, watch steam plumes drift from the cooling towers, and observe the enormous industrial complexes as I drive out of town. Over the years, I have occasionally noticed and attempted to photograph the interesting, almost abstract, shapes and lines of the refineries—but the high-contrast surfaces, the dull colour palette, and the overwhelming clutter and chaos have made it difficult for me to interact as an artist with these imposing industrial neighbours.

On August 19th, 2010 thick smoke from massive forest fires in the British Columbia Interior drifted across central Alberta. Casting a filtered orange-brown light over the landscape, the dense haze created a unique opportunity to photograph the refineries in the unusual atmospheric and lighting conditions. With the severely limited visibility, obscured details, and diffuse, low-contrast

light, I was able to more easily isolate the forms, lines, and patterns created by the refinery infrastructure. While photographing that day, although I knew that B.C. was experiencing their worst fire year in well over a decade, I was amazed that forest fires over six hundred kilometers to the west could so dramatically affect the local atmospheric quality with, in this case, such positive aesthetic consequences. At the same time, I realised that these refineries, which are just a small piece of the oil industry in Alberta, and are symbols of our insatiable consumption of energy from fossil fuels, were themselves having an exacerbating effect on the fires raging through the B.C. forests. One of the widely acknowledged consequences of the warmer, drier climate caused by the industrial-scale release of carbon dioxide is an increase in the frequency and intensity of forest fires. So while the photographer in me appreciated the aesthetic of the refineries shrouded in smoke, I was left with an uneasy feeling—the feeling that, in the end, the trade-off was not worthwhile.

These photographs simultaneously represent the refineries’ visual and environmental impact.