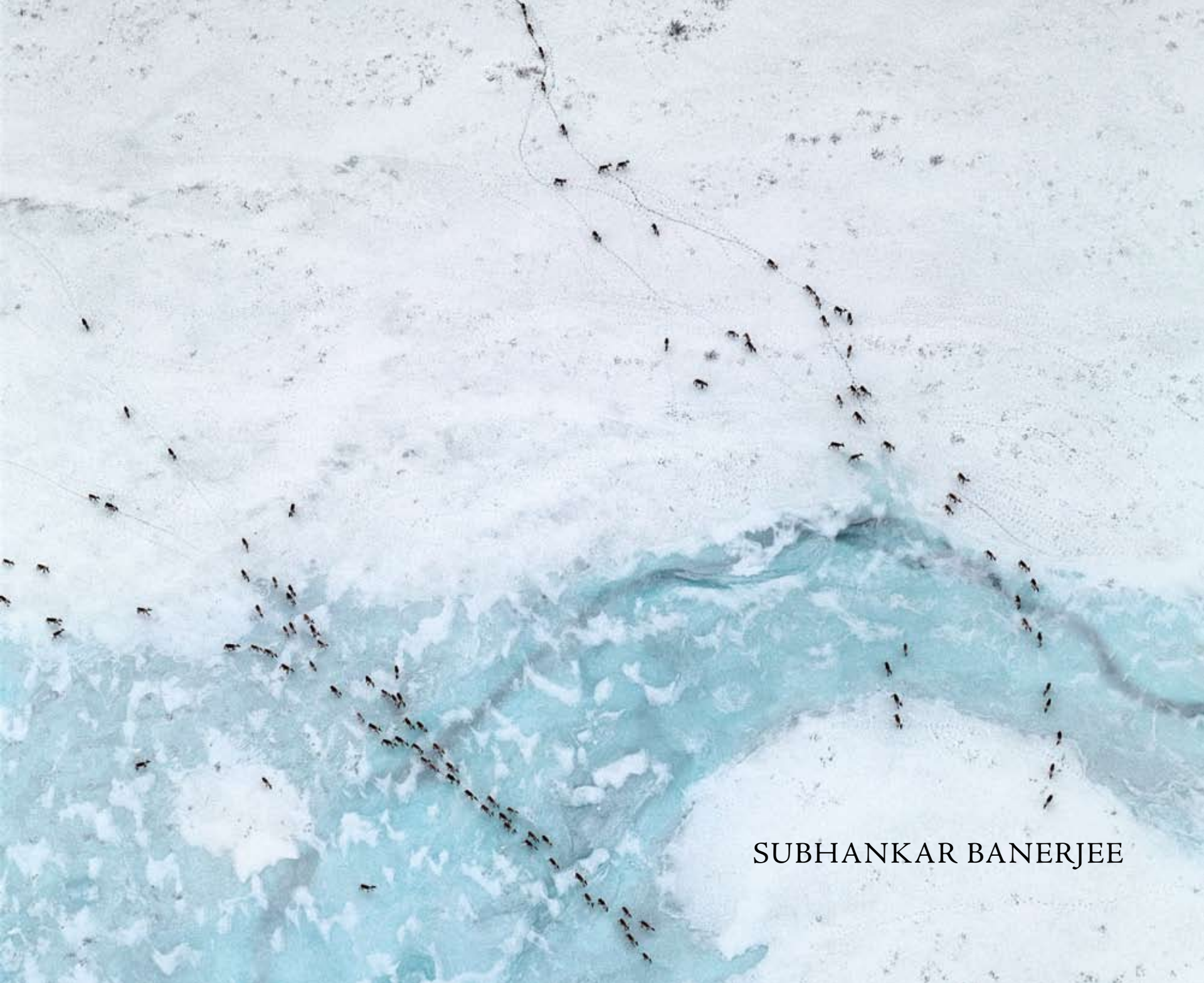
SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

For Peter Matthiessen

SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

Artist-in-Residence, Winter 2009

January 13 – February 8, 2009
Jaffe-Friede Gallery
Hopkins Center for the Arts
Dartmouth College

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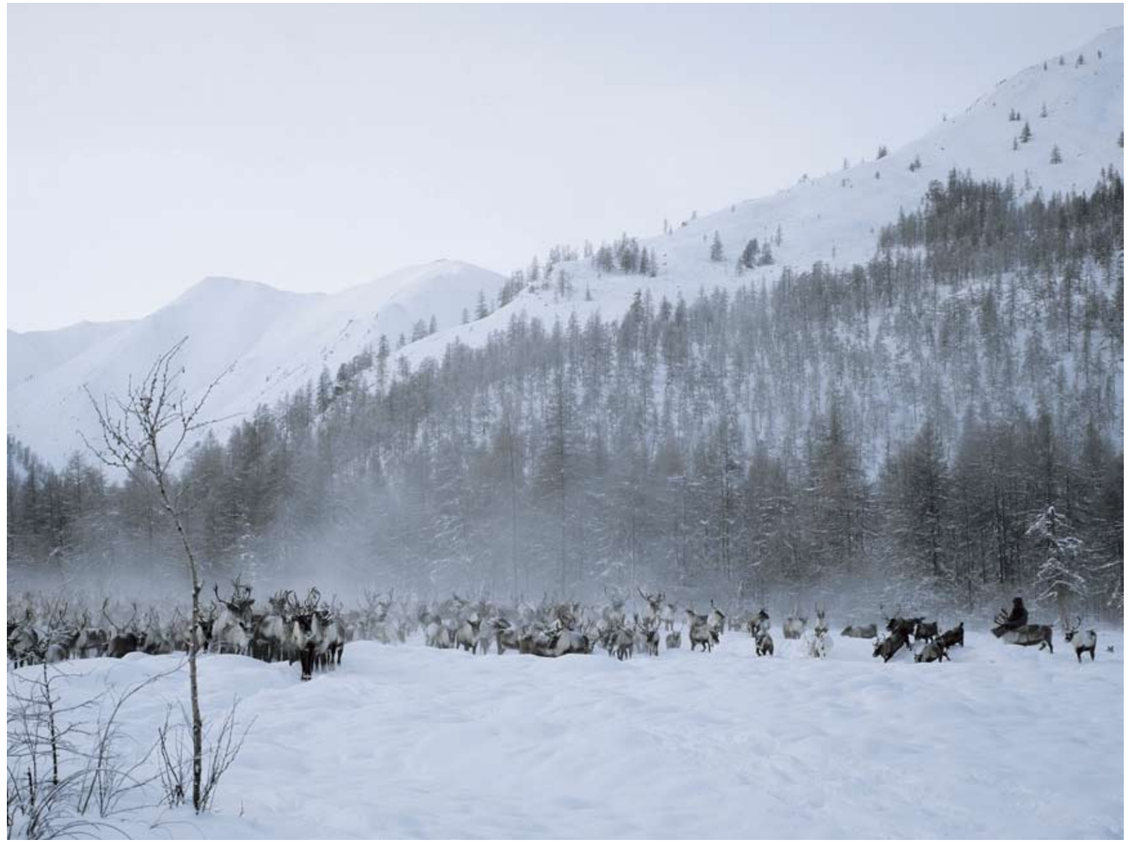
The Near North

KARL JACOBY

The word *arctic* is derived from the ancient Greeks, for whom *arktos* meant the Bear (or North) Star. To those of us who live amidst today's suburbs and strip malls—places where space shuttles and satellite TV have become familiar topics of everyday conversation—the stars may now seem far closer than they did to the ancient Greeks. In contrast, the Arctic evoked with such stark beauty in Subhankar Banerjee's photos remains a remote and forbidding world. Food, rather than appearing neatly encapsulated in plastic shrink-wrap at the local supermarket, is in the Arctic encased in fur, blood, and blubber, graphically revealing the connection between human sustenance and living creatures. No less telling is the fact that the indigenous peoples inhabiting the Far North—the Gwich'in, Inupiat, Yupik, Athabaskan, Yukaghir, Even, and others—constitute some of the last representatives of humanity's hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Although *Homo sapiens* once hunted and gathered across the globe, this mode of existence is now confined to those few areas like the Arctic where climate does not allow for the cultivation of the agricultural staples—corn, wheat, soybeans, rice—on which the vast majority of the world's population today depends.

Because of their elemental hunter-gatherer existence, one may be tempted to view the indigenous communities peopling Banerjee's photos as vestiges of an almost vanished past, inhabitants of a time and place centuries removed from our own. Indeed, a powerful strain of salvage ethnography running through the American artistic tradi-



At the Corral – Nikolayev Matvey Gathering Reindeer | Even and The Climate | 2007 | 59 x 74 in.

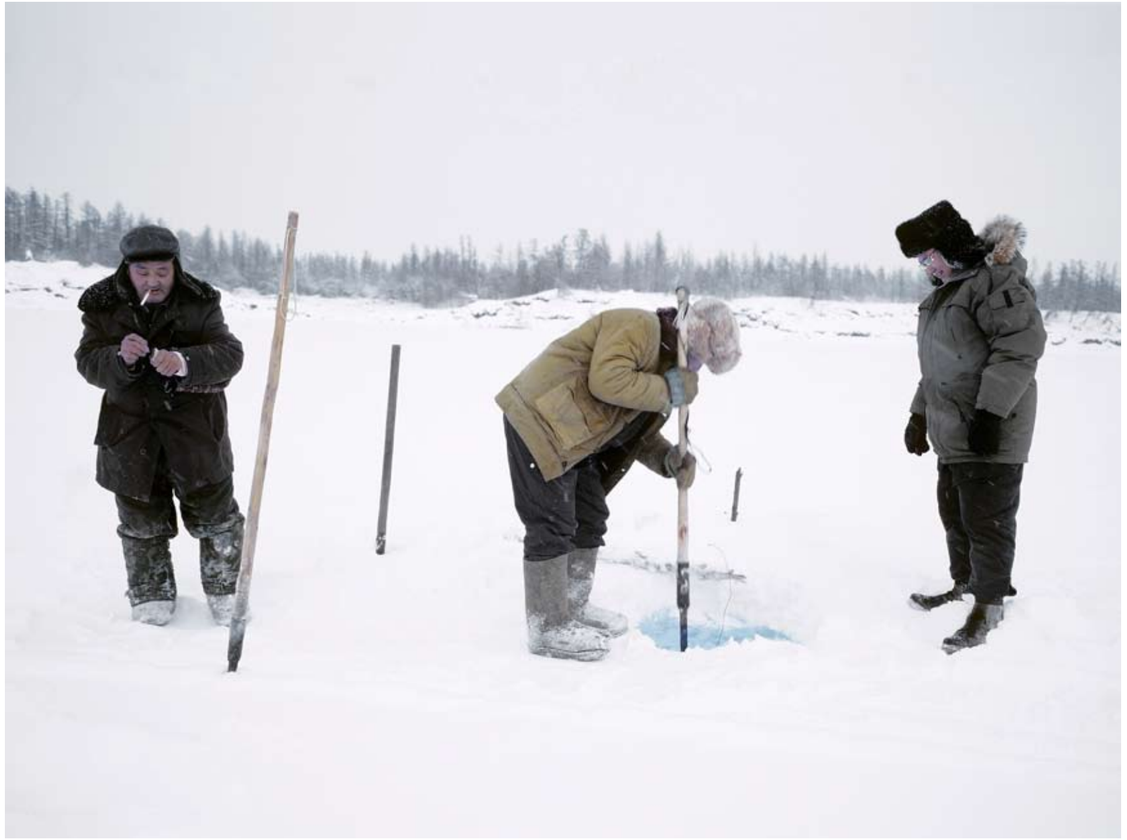
tion predisposes audiences for just such an interpretation. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, George Catlin, Edward S. Curtis, and numerous other celebrated painters and photographers journeyed to remote corners of North America to document what they believed to be the last traces of American Indians' fast-disappearing way of life. Such projects produced images that remain iconic even today. But they seldom sought to give their viewers anything more than a nostalgic last glance at what was imagined to be a doomed and dying world.[1]

What might happen, however, if we were to reverse this long-standing salvage impulse and, rather than viewing the Arctic and its residents as existing across some sort of unbridgeable temporal divide, consider them instead as existing in the same moment in time as ourselves? For the Arctic that Banerjee's photos so poignantly capture is far more modern than many of us care to acknowledge, and in ways that go far beyond the stray snowmobiles, parkas, and steel tools incorporated into its communities' daily lives.

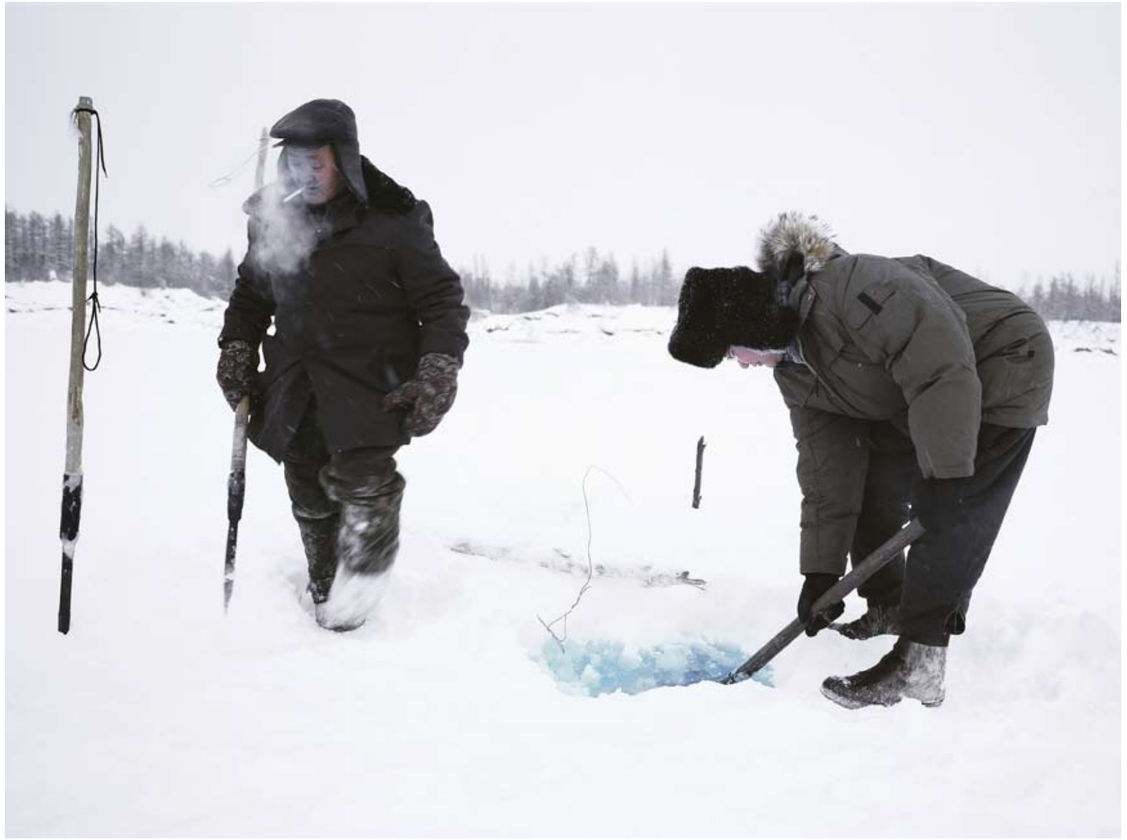
Consider, for example, the caribou herds and beluga whale pods that inhabit so many of Banerjee's images. These creatures make their annual migrations over some of the last untapped reserves of petroleum available in our ever-more energy-hungry world. According to recent U.S. Geological Survey predictions, one-fifth of the planet's yet-to-be-discovered oil and natural gas is located north of the Arctic Circle, making the region, in the agency's words, "the largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on earth."[2]

That the world would look north for its energy needs is a development abounding in ironies. For the past two centuries, the industrializing nations of Western Europe, North America, and Asia have burned vast quantities of fossil fuels, the very substances now being sought in the Arctic. This unparalleled energy consumption has led, in turn, to a steady increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, from 275 parts per million in the 1700s to 385 parts per million today.

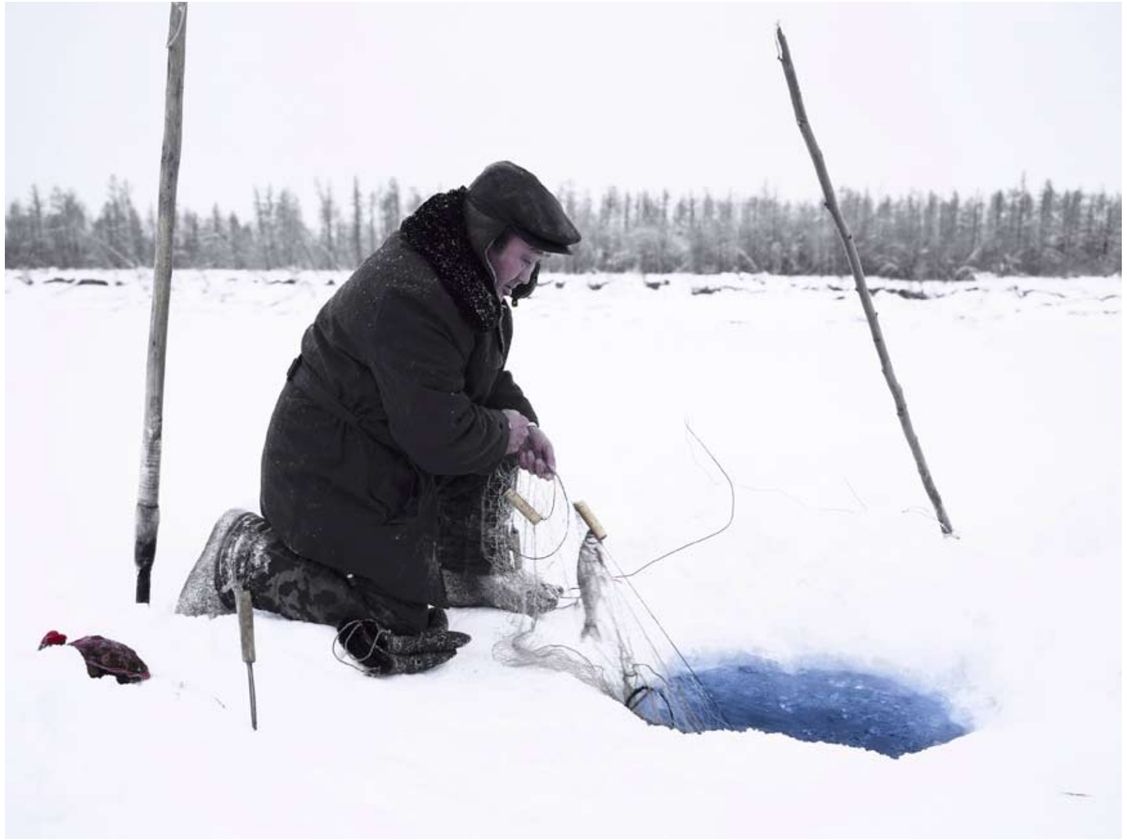
At the Corral – Counting and Separating Reindeer | Even and The Climate | 2007 | 59 x 74 in.



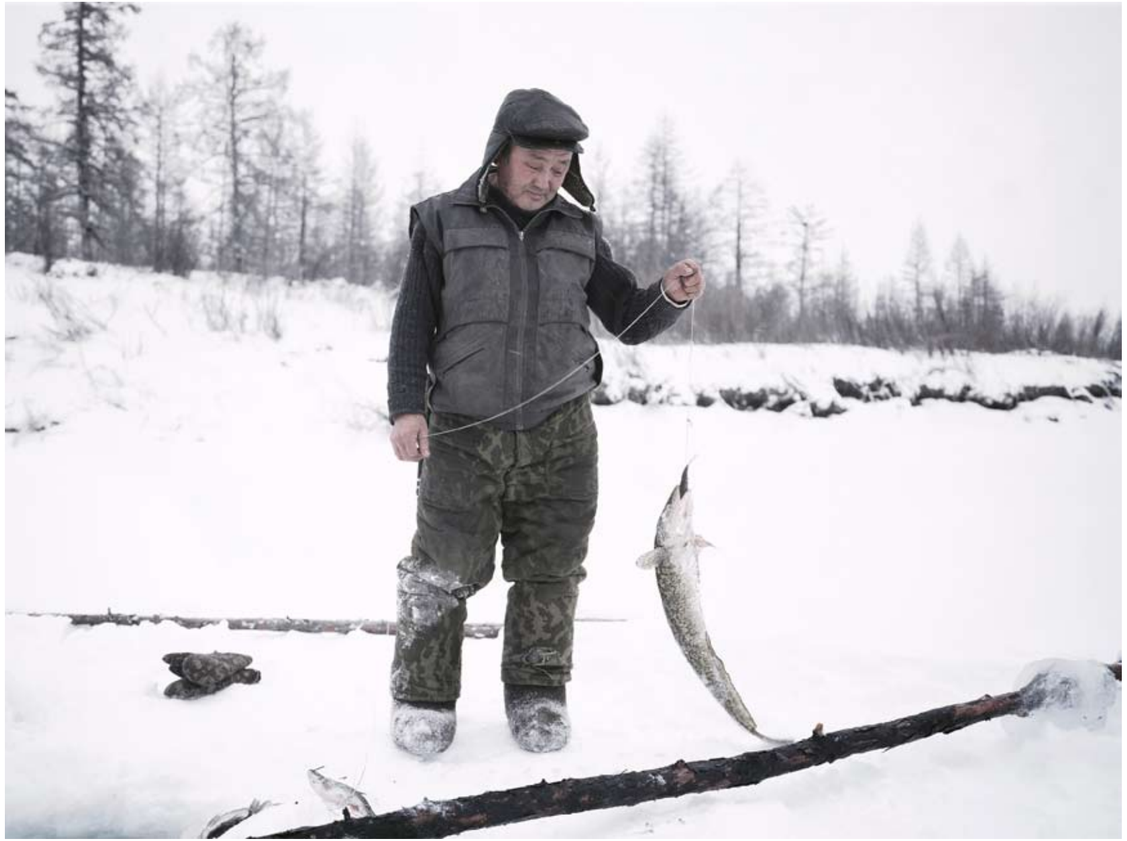
Ice Fishing – Nikolai Shalugin, Yuri Shalugin, and Vyacheslav Shadrin | Yukaghir and The Climate | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.



Ice Fishing – Nikolai Shalugin and Vyacheslav Shadrin | Yukaghir and The Climate | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.



Ice Fishing – Nikolai Shalugin | Yukaghir and The Climate | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.



Ice Fishing – Nikolai Shalugin with a Lingcod | Yukaghir and The Climate | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.

It is now widely accepted that this rise in carbon dioxide has contributed to a warming of the global climate—and that this warming trend is taking place twice as fast in the earth's northern latitudes as anywhere else on earth.

For those who know where to look, signs of climate change are everywhere in the Arctic Circle. The permafrost that undergirded the region for centuries is no longer so permanent. As the soil thaws, it produces "drunken forests"—acres and acres of trees that lean at odd, surreal angles as the ground literally shifts beneath them. Storms in the Arctic now contain less snow and far more freezing rain than ever before. As a result, the lichens that nourish the Far North's caribou are often trapped beneath layers of ice, leading to the mass starvation of many herds. The region's most notable feature—the ice cap covering the North Pole—has shrunk by half since the 1950s.[3]

Paradoxically, it is many of these very same changes—above all, the retreat of the Arctic ice sheet—that have made it possible for energy companies to imagine extracting the Far North's oil and natural-gas reserves. Once removed, refined, and shipped to the rest of the world, these fuels will, of course, only contribute more carbon to the atmosphere. In other words, we find ourselves having set in motion a cycle in which the residents of the Arctic are asked not only to tolerate the climatic shifts created by the industrialized nations but also to contribute their resources to this process—to become, as it were, both the leading suppliers and the leading subjects of humanity's current experiment in warming the planet.

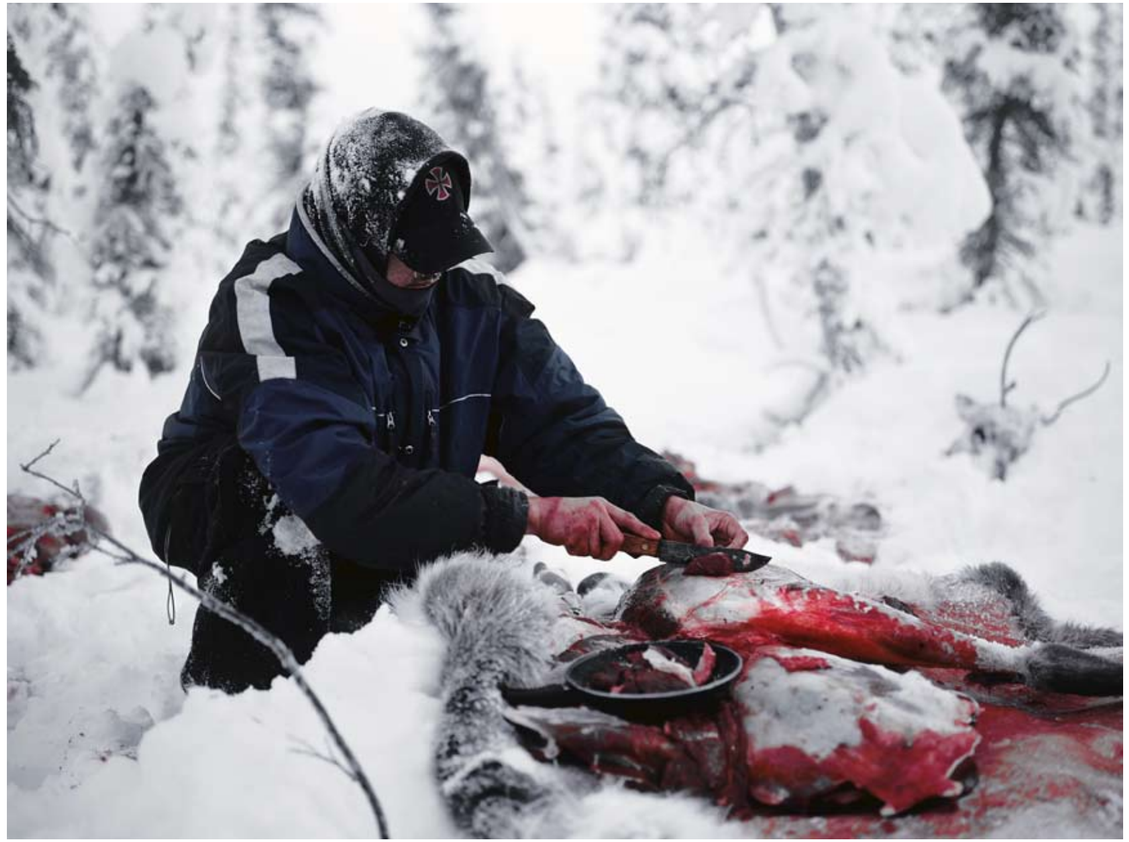
The connections between the Far North and the rest of the modern world do not stop at climate change. Over the past few decades, scientists have discovered, much to their surprise, the "Arctic paradox." Even though the top of the world may be one of the most remote spots on earth, it is also, it turns out, one of the most polluted. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT), mercury—all examples of what Rachel Carson once called the

Caribou Tracks on Coal Seams II | Coal and The Caribou | 2006 | 62 x 70 in.

Caribou Hunt – Charlie Swaney and Jimmy John | Gwich'in and The Caribou | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.

Caribou Hunt – Danny Gimmel and Rocky John | Gwich'in and The Caribou | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.

Caribou Hunt – Jimmy John | Gwich'in and The Caribou | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.



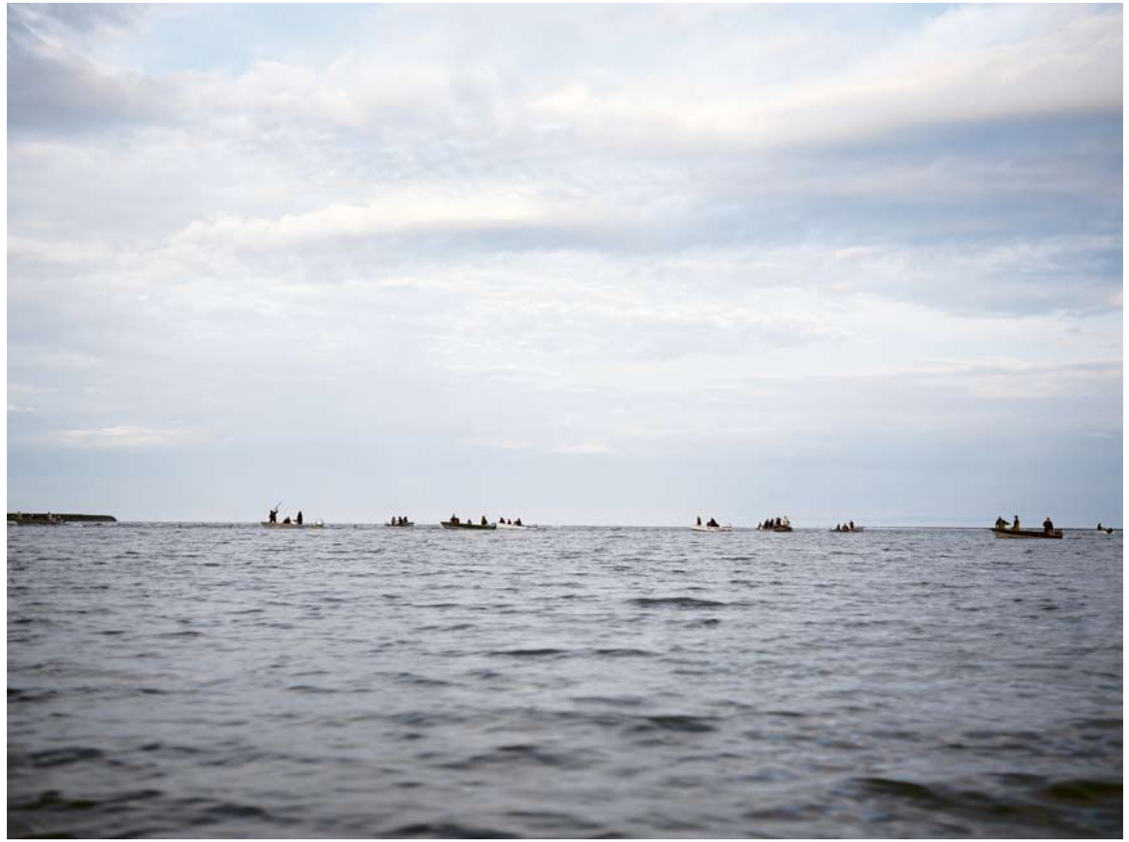
Caribou Hunt – Danny Gimmel | Gwich'in and The Caribou | 2007 | 18 x 24 in.

industrial world's "elixirs of death"—are highly mobile. Once released into the environment, they are spread far and wide by wind and tide, their migration halting only when cooler temperatures cause them to precipitate out of the air and water. Over the years, this process has caused PCBs, DDT, mercury, and other deadly substances to pool in the coldest spot in the northern hemisphere, the Arctic.[4]

As they collect in the polar ecosystem, these toxins are incorporated into the living tissues of the region's biota. They then move up the food chain, becoming more concentrated in the fatty tissues of their hosts with each step. As a result, the indigenous peoples of the Far North—simultaneous occupants of the top of the world and the top of the Arctic food chain and avid consumers of whale blubber and other high-fat foods—contain within their bodies some of the highest concentrations of toxic chemicals ever recorded in world history. In fact, the breast milk of some Inuit mothers is so contaminated that it should be classed, according to current scientific standards, as toxic waste. The North's peoples thus face the awful dilemma of wondering whether they should abandon the hunting and fishing practices that have nourished them for generations—and, if they do, what new forms of subsistence could ever emerge to take their place.

Other residents of the Arctic, of course, are not even able to contemplate such a switch. The North Pole's bears, ringed seals, sea otters, narwhals, and other nonhuman predators also exhibit unprecedented toxin loads and a corresponding host of health problems. At high concentrations, PCBs and other organochlorines disrupt their host's hormone system. It is likely that the osteoporosis, suppressed immune systems, pseudohermaphroditism, and other maladies that have increasingly been documented among polar animals represent a manifestation of their ongoing exposure to the contaminants filtering up to the Far North.

So as much as Subhankar Banerjee's photos reveal an unfamiliar and austere physical landscape, they also open up a new and

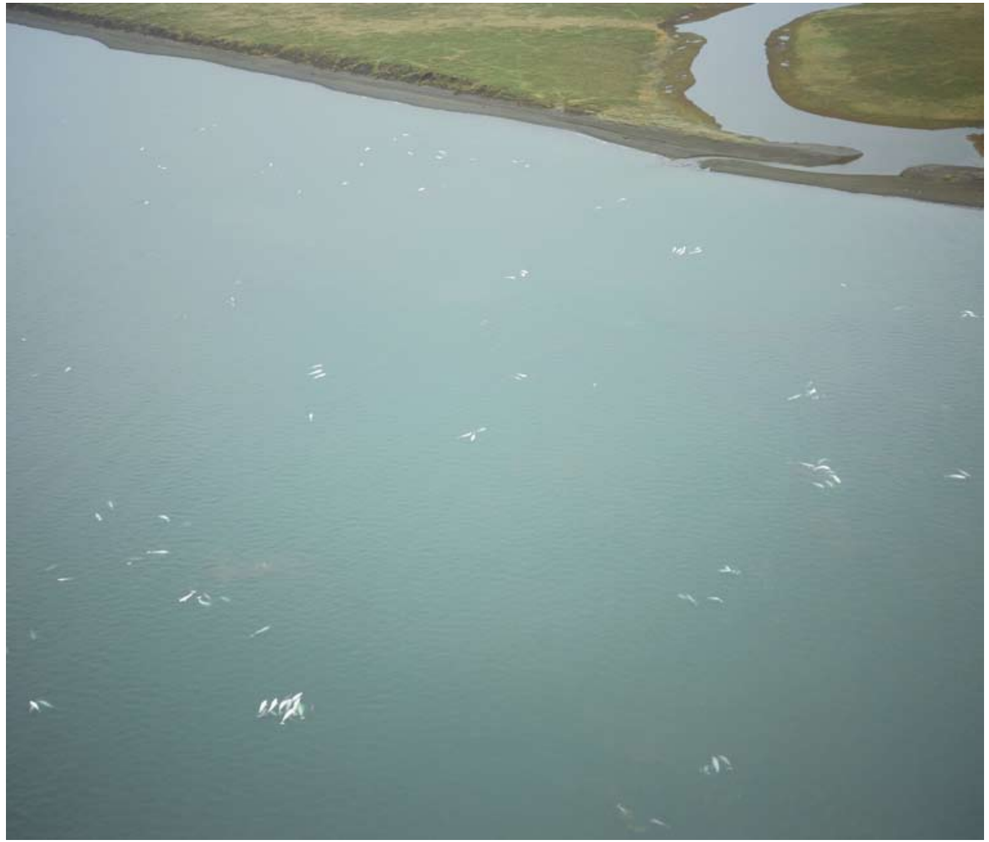


Beluga Whale Hunt | Inupiat and The Whales | 2007 | 59 x 74 in.

discomforting intellectual terrain. Above all, the images invite us, the viewers, to think of ourselves—even those of us living thousands of miles from the Arctic—as fellow inhabitants of the Far North. Our knowledge of the Arctic ecosystem may be vastly impoverished, compared with that of the region's indigenous peoples. Our claims over the Northlands may be tenuous in comparison to those of Native communities who have inhabited them for millennia. We may never even set foot in the landscapes depicted here. Yet how distant can the Arctic be when its resources sustain us? When the tissues and immune systems of the animals dwelling in the North—and of the indigenous hunters who consume them—are burdened with fearful quantities of toxins from our industrial society?

Almost a century ago, John Muir observed that "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." Muir's statement is often interpreted as anticipating the modern science of ecology, with its emphasis on capturing the multistranded web of life. But it really underscores an even larger insight about "environmental" problems. As much as we might like to imagine otherwise—as much as our language itself invites a division of one topic from the next—the challenges of human existence cannot be discretely parceled out into environmental, social, or economic concerns; these facets all converge and interconnect. The dilemmas that the inhabitants of the Far North face are rooted not only in the Pole's peculiar ecology but also in the residents' status as indigenous peoples, the prevailing pollution regime of the industrialized world, geopolitical concerns over energy and national security, the exigencies of a growing world population, and many other similar concerns.[5]

If such issues were to be distilled down to a single category, it would ultimately be not society or economics or ecology but, rather, ethics. We are in the process of creating a planet in which some of us extract scarce resources of great value from the Arctic yet offer its inhabitants little in return except for species loss, altered climate, and



Beluga Whales with Calves | Oil and The Whales | 2006 | 59 x 74 in.

toxic waste. No doubt few among us would find such a state of affairs acceptable if the roles were reversed—and yet we nonetheless tolerate this scenario in its present form. It ought to be enough to ask ourselves what our moral responsibility toward the Gwich'in, Inupiat, Yupik, Athabaskan, Yukaghir, Even, and other native inhabitants of the top of the world is as fellow human beings. But if it is not, we might do well to ponder the fact that, as Banerjee's images remind us, the Arctic, despite its name, is not as distant as the stars, and its inhabitants do not dwell in a world geographically or chronologically separate from our own. Whatever happens in the Arctic will eventually happen—indeed, has already begun to happen—to us all.

Notes

1 For more on Catlin's vision of Native Americans as a "doomed" and "dying race," see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 181–88.

2 Jad Mouawad, "Energy Hunt Is Focusing on the Arctic," *New York Times*, July 24, 2008, C:1–4.

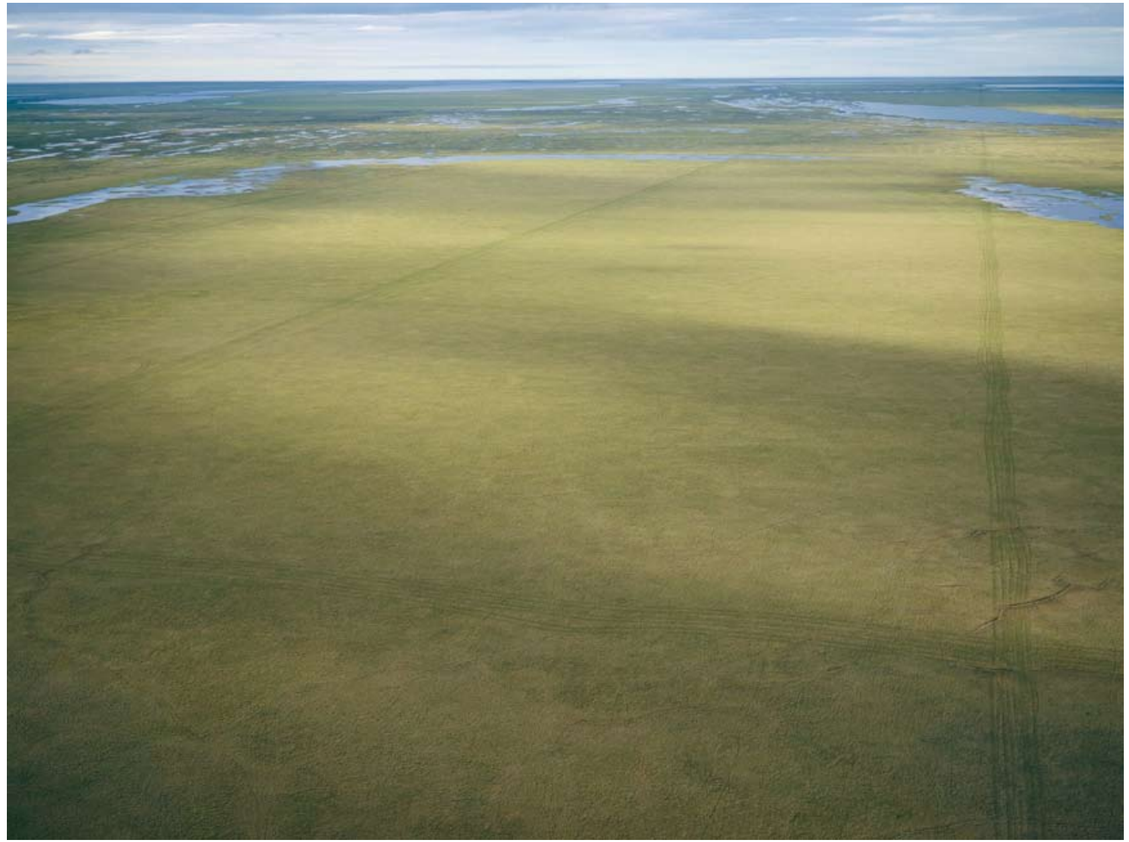
3 Alex Shoumatoff, "The Arctic Oil Rush," *Vanity Fair* 573 (May 2008): 237–39.

4 The "Arctic paradox" is explored at length in Marla Cone, *Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic* (New York: Grove Press, 2005); her research underlies this paragraph and the two below it. Rachel Carson had a chapter entitled "Elixirs of Death" in *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

5 John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 110.

About the author

Karl Jacoby is an associate professor of history at Brown University. His scholarship and teaching focus on environmental history, indigenous history, and the history of U.S. expansion. His books include *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); the latter title features a companion website at www.brown.edu/aravaipa.



Known and Unknown Tracks | Oil and The Geese | 2006 | 68 x 86 in.

Even and The Climate

Nikolayev Matvey is the head of camp 11 in the Tomponski Region of Siberia, the coldest inhabited place on earth. He talked about his perceptions of climate change on the Even reindeer herders. He noted that it used to be very cold and the snow very dry, but now they have wetter snow and even freezing rain during the winter months, which creates a thin layer of ice on top of the snow. The reindeer find it difficult to forage through the ice. Matvey said that at times he has to take the reindeer higher up the mountain to find food during winter months. Matvey also talked about the willows growing taller and bushier, which impacts reindeer migration. Caribou (North American forms of *Rangifer tarandus*) and reindeer (Eurasian forms of the same species) are of primary importance to people throughout the Arctic for food, shelter, fuel, tools, and other cultural items. Caribou and reindeer herds depend on the availability of abundant tundra vegetation and good foraging conditions, especially during the calving season. Climate-induced changes to Arctic tundra are projected to cause vegetation zones to shift significantly northward, reducing the area of tundra and the traditional forage for these herds. Freeze-thaw cycles and freezing rain are also projected to increase in frequency. These changes will have significant implications for the ability of the caribou and reindeer populations to find food and raise their calves. Future climate change could thus mean a potential decline in caribou and reindeer populations, threatening human nutrition for many indigenous households and a whole way of life for some Arctic communities.

Yukaghir and The Climate

The Yukaghir people of Nelemnoye in the Verkne Kolymsk region (upper Kolyma River area) of Siberia primarily depend on subsistence hunting and fishing. The fish that Nikolai Shalugin caught during our visit were primarily broad whitefish, with some grayling and two lingcod. Climate change, as predicted by the scientific community, may severely impact local fish and, therefore, the Yukaghir culture. Decreased abundance and local and global extinctions of Arctic-adapted fish species are projected for this century. Southernmost species are projected to shift northward, competing with northern species for resources. The broad whitefish, Arctic char, and Arctic cisco are particularly vulnerable to displacement as they are wholly or primarily northern species. As water temperatures rise, spawning grounds for cold-water species will shift northward and are likely to diminish. As southerly species move northward, they may introduce parasites and diseases to which Arctic fish are not adapted, increasing the risk of death for Arctic species. The implications of these changes for both commercial and subsistence fishing in far northern areas are potentially devastating, as the most vulnerable species are often the only fishable species present. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Yukaghir people occupied the vast and entire territory of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), which is the largest subnational entity in the world and roughly the size of Western Europe. For many reasons, including Tsarist expansion, Sovietization, disease, and the expansion of other indigenous tribes, the Yukaghir population has declined rapidly, and today they inhabit only two communities in the Verkne Kolymsk and Nizhne Kolymsk (lower Kolyma River area) regions.

Gwich'in and The Caribou

The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the core calving area of the Porcupine River caribou herd. It is also the most argued-over public land in United States history—the debate about whether to open up this land to oil and gas development or preserve it has been raging in the halls of the United States Congress for over thirty years. Numerous indigenous communities living within the herd's range have depended on the caribou for subsistence. The Gwich'in people of Alaska and the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada live on or near the migratory route of the herd and have relied upon the caribou for many millennia for subsistence as well as their cultural and spiritual needs. The Gwich'in are caribou people. They call the calving ground of the caribou *Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit* (The Sacred Place Where Life Begins). To open up the caribou calving ground to oil and gas development is a human-rights issue for the Gwich'in Nation. In addition to the perceived threat of oil development in their calving grounds, the caribou herd has been severely affected by climate change in recent years. The international scientific community has stated that climate change has impacted this herd more than most of the other large caribou herds across the circumpolar Arctic. Their numbers have declined steadily at 3.5 percent per year since 1989—from 178,000 animals to a low of 123,000 in 2001. Warmer, wetter autumns, resulting in more frequent icing conditions; warmer, wetter winters, resulting in deeper and denser snow; and warmer springs, resulting in more freeze-thaw days and faster spring melt, are among the key negative climate-change impacts on the caribou and their habitat.

Inupiat and The Whales

The United States government has made a strong effort in the past few years to open up the entire Chukchi Sea and the portion of the Beaufort Sea in the Alaskan Arctic to oil and gas development. Several leases have already been sold in the Beaufort Sea, and leases were sold on the entire 33.8 million acres of the Chukchi Sea Planning Area in spring 2008. Inupiat communities all across the North Slope of Alaska depend on marine mammals of the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, including bowhead and beluga whales, seals, and walrus. These communities oppose offshore oil and gas development, fearing that such development would seriously impact the whales and their migration and, subsequently, the Inupiat culture. The Kasegaluk Lagoon, along the northern Chukchi seacoast, is one of the most important lagoon systems in the circumpolar Arctic. The lagoon is 125 miles long, and five major rivers drain into the lagoon, creating a unique and rich ecological habitat for a host of species. Approximately three to four thousand beluga whales come to the lagoon and its shores each summer. They are also known to calve along the Kasegaluk and the small Oomalik Lagoon just south of it. Kasegaluk Lagoon and its nearby habitat are important for a host of nesting birds and are also critical staging areas for birds that come to the lagoon from other regions of the Alaskan Arctic. The Inupiat people of Point Lay, along the Kasegaluk Lagoon, depend primarily on beluga whales for their subsistence. An estimated ten thousand bowhead and over sixty thousand beluga whales migrate through these northern seas.

Coal and The Caribou

The upland Utukok River area is the core calving area of the Western Arctic caribou herd, the largest herd in Alaska. The herd ranges over a 140,000-square-mile area and about forty communities—including Inupiat, Yupik, and Athabascan peoples—are located within the herd's range. For these indigenous people, the herd is both a vital link to their cultural heritage and a staple of their diet. Underneath the herd's calving ground lies the largest coal deposit in North America, an estimated four trillion tons of bituminous coal—about ten percent of world's known coal reserves. Although coal is heavy and difficult to transport, there are renewed proposals now to mine the area for coal. We have seen tracks on coal seams made by the caribou herd over a long period. The tracks are deeply etched into the surface, meaning that the coal is right on the surface, and any development here most likely would employ a relatively recent mining process known as mountain-top removal. This type of mining has been used in the Appalachian Mountains, where only from the air can one grasp the magnitude of the devastation, with dark craters and large black ponds filled with a toxic by-product called coal slurry. In 2006 the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation signed an agreement with BHP Billiton, a Canadian mining company, to explore and develop coal deposits outside the Petroleum Reserve, and exploration started the same year despite opposition from traditional Inupiat communities. Besides the threat from development, the caribou herd has suffered significant decline in recent years, from a population estimate of 490,000 in 2003 to 377,000 in 2007. Scientists speculate that one of the primary causes of this decline is winter rain followed by freezing, which makes it difficult for the caribou to forage during winter months.

Oil and The Geese

The Teshekpuk Lake and its surrounding wetlands in the north-central Alaskan Arctic constitute one of the most important wetland complexes and goose-molting habitats in the circumpolar North. The Teshekpuk Lake wetlands provide habitat for molting geese from Mexico, Canada, and Siberia and nesting birds from six continents. As many as 37,000 brant—up to thirty percent of all Pacific brant—gather each summer to molt north and east of the lake. These brant come from elsewhere on the North Slope of Alaska, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta to the south, the western Canadian High Arctic, and Siberia. The numbers of greater white-fronted geese molting at Teshekpuk Lake are increasing and range as high as thirty-five thousand. These geese are part of the mid-continental population, wintering in Gulf coastal states in the U.S. and Mexico. Thousands of Canada and snow geese also gather to molt in the safety of this unique wetland complex. The U.S. government has made a strong effort in the past few years to open up the entire 1.7 million acres of the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area to oil and gas development. The Inupiat people of the North Slope who depend on this wetland oppose development in the most sensitive caribou and geese habitats. In addition to the threat of development, the international scientific community is projecting the serious impact of climate change on many bird species, as important breeding and nesting areas are projected to decrease sharply as the tree line advances northward, encroaching on the tundra, and because the timing of the birds' arrival in the Arctic might no longer coincide with the availability of their insect food sources. At the same time, a rise in sealevel will erode the extent of tundra from the north, further shrinking important habitat for many species.

Subhankar Banerjee is an artist, educator, and activist. He uses his photography to raise awareness about issues that threaten the health and well-being of our planet. Since late 2000 he has focused all his efforts on indigenous human rights and land-conservation issues in the Arctic. His photographic work has been instrumental in the ongoing conservation efforts of the ecologically and culturally significant areas of the American Arctic, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Teshekpuk Lake wetlands, Utukok River uplands, and the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. He works closely with the Gwich'in and Inupiat indigenous communities of Alaska and the Canadian Yukon and, most recently, with the Yukaghir and the Even indigenous communities of Siberia. His Arctic photographs have been exhibited in nearly forty one-person and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe, including at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. In 2009 Banerjee's work will be exhibited in the group exhibition *IMPACT: Living in the Age of Climate Change*, which will open in Copenhagen at the Statens Museum for Kunst and at Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, and will travel to Iceland, Norway, and Sweden through 2010. Banerjee has given over fifty lectures, including presentations at the United Nations and at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia universities. He received an inaugural Green Leaf Artist Award from the United Nations Environment Programme and an inaugural Cultural Freedom Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation. Banerjee serves on the advisory board of the Blue Earth Alliance and has been a visiting scholar at the College of Humanities at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and a visiting artist at F.A.R. (Future Arts Research) at Arizona State University in Phoenix. Banerjee and his wife, Nora, live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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—SB

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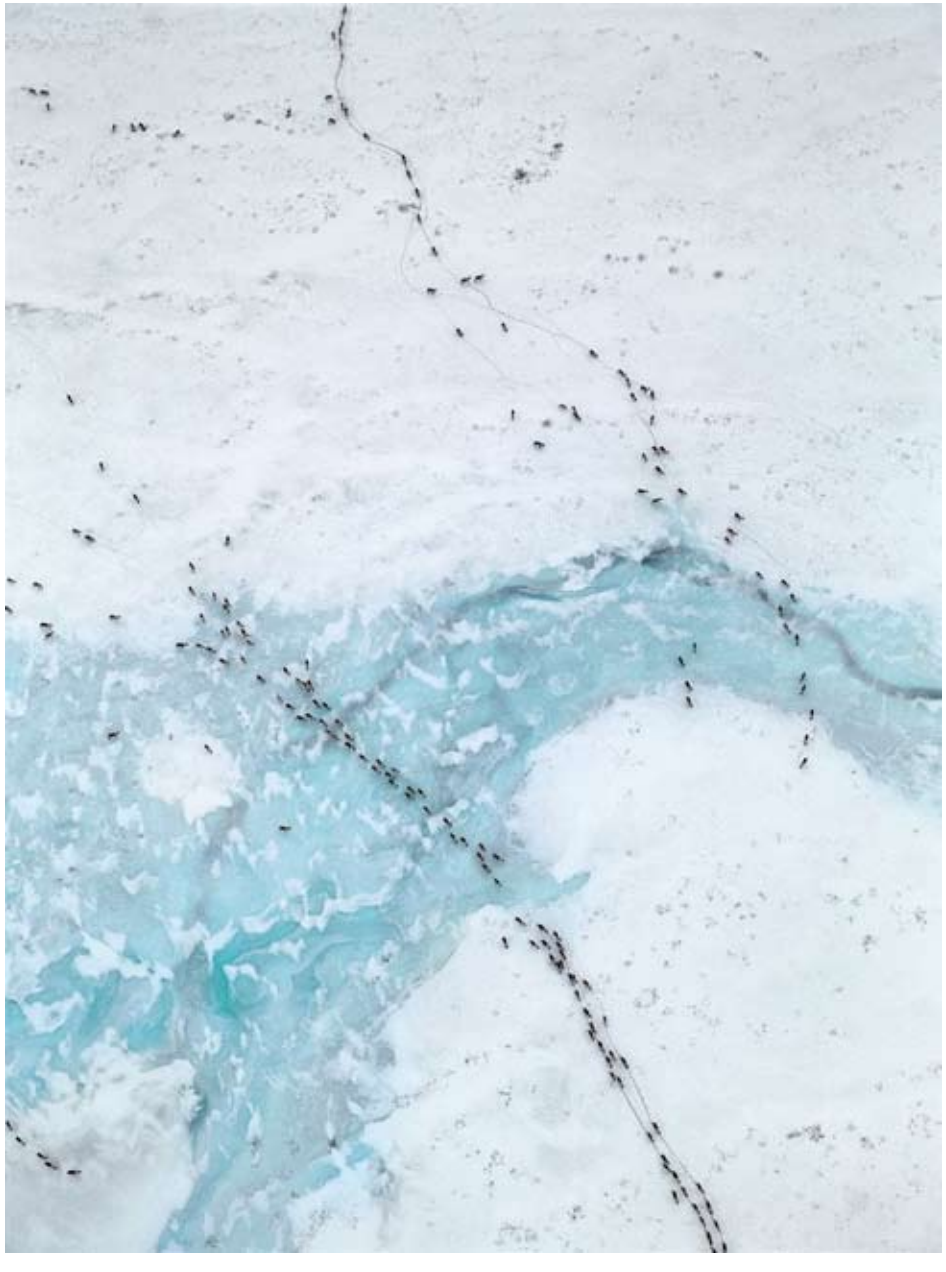

Caribou Migration I | Oil and The Caribou | 2002 | 86 x 68 in.