

# **Fracked Prospects**

Tarja J. Harney

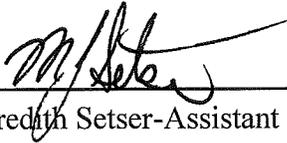
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Indiana University

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Fracked Prospects

By  
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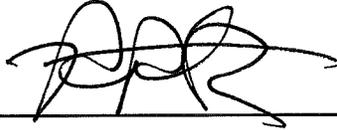
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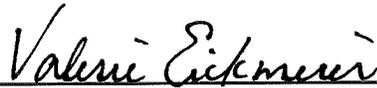
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Date

## Artist Statement

My work is responding to social issues and their negative effects onto the environment. Bringing attention to the effects of hydraulic fracturing and other social issues I am voicing my concern and searching for a dialogue to emerge. I reveal the dangers hidden by the beauty of false truths of corporations that are the cause of environmental issues.

My works are massive yet fragile tar paper structures layered with wax, paint, and charcoal. Using topographic-like lines to build up layers, I interweave my voice into the work. The vast scale of the tar paper installations overwhelms the viewer's peripheral vision. My artwork uses abstract imagery to create a visual language of the negative effects on the environment.

Considering the social issues that are an underlying theme in my work, I think back to the influence of a humanities class that I took in undergraduate school. The class combined art, writing and science. With these three academic disciplines, I began my research into environmental studies. Working towards my art degree, I was still taking environmental classes with Dr. Marcia L. Gillette. She had stated in a syllabus once, "One should have a curiosity about the world around us, and an interest not only in the plight of yourself and your neighbors, but also of those living on other parts of the globe and of the environment in general." In creating work that addresses environmental issues, I provide the starting point to provoke empathy and to initiate a dialogue. My curiosity is what sparks my dialogue within myself and of the work I make which extends to the viewers.

The need for sustainable energy for the survival of a population is reduced in value each time the Earth's surface is broken. "Hydraulic fracturing produces fractures in the rock formation that stimulate the flow of natural gas or oil, increasing the volumes that can be

recovered.”<sup>1</sup> High pressured fluids are pumped down the wellbore in large quantities. The fluids consist of water, proppant and several mixed chemicals. These fluids open the fractures and allow the material to be extracted, even several hundred feet away from the original surface point. Miles below the surface, chemicals mix with thousands of gallons of water and sand as gas is extracted from the shale.

“For each frack, 80-300 tons of chemicals may be used, selected from a menu of up to 600 different chemicals. Though the composition of most fracking chemicals remains protected from disclosure through various ‘trade secret’ exemptions under state or federal law, scientists analyzing fracked fluid have identified volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene - all of which pose significant dangers to human health and welfare...Generally, 2-8 million gallons of water may be used to frack a well. Some wells consume much more. A well may be fracked multiple times, with each frack increasing the chances of chemical leakage into the soil and local water sources.”<sup>2</sup>

The area is contaminated from the fracking drilling which it is, in effect, deconstructing the Earth. Nearby houses are affected by the drilling. Bigger corporations have the upper hand and can manipulate the way the business is run. They have the power to dictate the fine details that effect everyone. The pipelines in North Dakota not only hurt the natives who live there but everywhere that the pipelines will pass through. Many Americans, including myself, started to stand up as a whole and fight against the construction of the

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<sup>1</sup> “The Process of Hydraulic Fracturing.” *EPA*. Environmental Protection Agency, 09 Jan. 2017. Web. 12 Feb. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Gasland 2: A Film by Josh Fox-NOW on HBO.” *Gasland*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Mar. 2017.

pipeline, however, once we stopped the protests the company still moved in and started another deconstruction of the land. The hydraulic fracturing industry may be saving the United States money in natural resources, but at what costs for the future? Will there be healthy people in the future to see tomorrow's dreams that are being bought today? The rich and powerful may see the benefit, but how long will the drilling be sufficient? What is the benefit to the drilling company compared to the tainted water supply or the waste left behind that will evaporates into the atmosphere? What value is the gas that is being excavated compared to the worth of those with health concerns? The bottom line is that these corporations do not care about the effect on the people as long as the money is steadily coming into their pockets. The companies' greed masquerades behind the idea that their industry is saving us, while behind the curtain the severity of their actions are hidden. The land and the people who live in the compromised areas end up overlooked and unheard when they ask for help. Revealing this hidden story through my work, I am committed to do something about what is happening.

### **My Work and Influences**

I began to look at geography and how I represent it through my work. Within geography education there are themes that help frame the study of our impact on nature; one being human and environment interactions: shaping the landscape. This is how humans interact with the geography and then how the environment responds to that interaction. Fracking the land is manipulating and destroying it, along with the people who live in these areas where fracking is happening. Compounding the unjust affects, hydraulic fracturing companies have the means to take advantage of areas of the lower and middle class families.

Fracking is almost always located in impoverished areas. Energy companies come into these areas, far from their own comfortable homes, and exploit the geography. The land is contaminated, its water is undrinkable, and the earthquakes continue; in direct response to the fracking.

As a part of my research, I traveled to a small town in western Pennsylvania to experience the industrial mining method first hand. Staying at a hotel, the psychological stress was palpable. I was concerned about the water, so I drank bottled water I had brought just to be safe. The day started out early. I drove along the back roads looking for drills or any sign of fracking. I found waste water wells, left behind from fracking, I found private properties with cameras watching me as I tried to get close to any development, and I found bulldozers clearing new plots of land for more drills to make their way to hollow out the earth more. Not having any verbal encounters with locals on this issue, I began to read and research first-hand stories leading me to a book of everything I could hope for in getting an insider's point of view of the damage fracking brings upon to these families.

*Digging*<sup>3</sup>

*“As a child, I shoved my hands in dirt, unearthed worms, watched their withering bodies. I studied each segment, gave them names, genders, imbued life to such creatures. I learned & uncovered what was beneath. Now our explorations have expanded: old dinosaur bones, decayed, prehistoric plants turned thick black & settled deep. We create horizontal veins, pump water, high pressure, to extract the black fuel, that history & so the ground*

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<sup>3</sup> Donahue, Michelle. “Digging.” *Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on Fracking in America*. By Taylor Broby and Stefanie Brook Trout. North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube, LLC, 2016. N. Print.

*grows hollow. I look at this earth's horizon, the red of flesh, splashed, bone yellow, the sun threatening to slip beneath that edge. Now: a pump jack, drilling rig, oil moved from rock pores to wells. Once, I held a worm in my palm, its head severed by my metal shovel, my inexpert hand. It jerked & jerked. I kept waiting for it to stop”.*

The fracking drill stands tall on the horizon of the rural landscapes. For locals, this is normal, the drills are unnoticed, gloomy figures casting shadows across the fields in the day, hidden by the dark except for the lights shining out from the metal beams at night. They are forgotten, or just there and the people are unaware of the damage the drilling is causing because what is happening is below the surface. Like a magic trick, we are told to focus on the drill and what is produced from its work, while the sleight of hand of the corporations hide the damage that is occurring. The visible and invisible work together and rely on one another to effectively achieve the results, but at what cost?

Through my art work, I began to explore how I could communicate my concerns with the public. I explored using tarpaper, by cutting it in the shape of states where fracking was occurring. Layering the sheets on top of one another, I paint, rip, and gouge the surface of the states. They varied in size, ranging from 2 to 4 feet in height and width, and hung on the wall. While they were effective, I wanted more from them, they were lacking my voice and concern about the fracking dangers.

With my piece, *United States of Fracking (fig. 1)*, I experimented with melting wax on to charcoal in the piece. This resulted in grimier and gritty textures. I felt that the work was growing more intense with the materials I was exploring. The black paper I used as a backdrop for the wax and charcoal mixture was laser etched with a pattern of the United States' river ways. The mixture of wax and charcoal was put in areas in which hydraulic

fracturing is happening, very similar to the large tarpaper cut out states, but in a cleaner, framed piece of work. Still wondering if I needed to develop the surface more or work with imagery, I began to look more into the drill itself.

In the artworks of my *Below the Surface Series* (fig.2), I went back to work with the fracking drill as my focal point. In previous works, I had printed the drill in black ink on black paper. The drill is hidden and one strains to see what is happening on the paper. Then I started to build up the surface of the drill with charcoal. The paper and drill became heavy, but it was still hard to see what is actually happening. In *Below the Surface*, I laser etched the paper with the drill image, and added white highlights. Below the drill, I added tar cement, charcoal, and wax, giving the paper an object-like presence. Grime and cracks lie beneath the drill. It is deteriorating and yet the drill stands un-phased by the crimes it is responsible for below it.

With the goal of making more confrontational work, I began to work on a larger scale to invoke and immerse the viewer into what lies beneath the surface of the ground. Four long, black sheets of tar paper hang and flow on to the ground in front of the viewer. This is where the start of my thesis, *Fracked Series* (fig. 3-5), begins. Using tarpaper as the base of the structures I embed them with mixtures of paint, melted wax, ground charcoal pieces, sand, and fabric. My assemblage is free and void of any predetermined design. I loosely control the materials to let them take over the tarpaper as they will, much like the acts of hydraulic fracking. The long and narrow structures take over the wall and floor space. The massive and fragile tarpaper structures obtain the space and peripherals. Each piece is a visual indication of how fracking is creeping through the surface of the fracking sites and destroying everything.

*Fracked Prospects* (fig.6) is a massive monolithic structure that stands tall, draping off the wall and flowing onto the floor. Drawing inspiration from scrolls and curtains, the artwork unveils a hidden story. Reading the piece, the story is of destruction and contamination. The colors mix with the charcoal textures and the grittiness is palpable. Seeping from the top of the monolith, hues of black paint, tar cement, and wax come into the viewer's space. The story is center stage for the viewer to take in its entirety. The structure appears strong and tall, yet the surface is fragile and crumbles with too much movement. The earth under the fracking grows weak from the abuse of the extraction of the resources.

The materials I use are reminiscent of industrial work; tar paper, tar cement, and charcoal. These items are used heavily by workers in middle and lower classes, and reference who fracking impacts the most. Instead of the materials generally used in roofing construction, I use tar paper in a deconstructed manner. Tar paper is used to protect homes from leaking water, but I use it to show what is becoming of our water from fracking. The tar paper is not protecting it anymore. The tar cement is not sealing out the bad, but bringing it in for consumption. After I began this series I became aware of the work of Donald Sultan. Exploring similar materials and ideas as Sultan explores in his *Disaster Paintings* from the 1980s, I found his idea of metaphor thought provoking; "The fact that the paintings were made on panels that were made for floors but moved to the walls makes them more like stage sets on a platform structure that holds the floor material onto the horizontal surface of a painting. The platforms are meant as a metaphor to call attention to the seeming indestructibility of the architecture of the painting, and of the actual structures. They also project strength onto fragile things that die and become relics. The image itself conveys the loaded meaning of everything that is contained in the painting. It is circular and

paradoxical.”<sup>4</sup> The work I make uses uncommon materials and stands massively along the wall but with too much movement they can fall apart. *Fracked Prospects*’ structure gives the presence of power of the drill and the materials give a sense of indestructibility, yet the results of the actions are the opposite. The paper with the attached and embedded materials are fragile and crumble. Fracking may seem like it works, but what fragile necessities are breaking down from using the drills?

The presence of the structures in my work brings in the viewer and the abstract imagery together and opens up the discussion within the work. The paper becomes sculpture-like with the layers on top of the piece. The coating of muted colors and textures form different shapes along the surface, from the top of the assemblage to the bottom of it on the ground. Cracks of the wax and paint create fragile sections on the surface with rough pieces of charcoal inlaid, creating a visual abstraction of what fracking is doing to the environment. The beauty of the gestural marks on the tar paper distracts from the damage of fracking actually causes, in contradiction to what the energy companies portray to the general public.

Drawing inspiration from Alberto Burri, who used nontraditional materials in his work, I reflect on his use of fabrics and tar to create hanging object-like paintings. Burri’s work was a translation or reflection from his experiences after the Second World War. He created many different surfaces, for example the *Sacchi* series where he used burlap, which he would stitch and patch in a manner he referred to as wounds. He expressed the actions as if he were trying to repair the damage. In his *Cretti* series, Burri used a craquelure effect in his paintings. “Craquelure is normally a sign of damage and detrimental to a picture. Burri

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<sup>4</sup> Sultan, Donald, Alison Hearst, Charles Wylie, and Max Blagg. Donald Sultan - The Disaster Paintings. Munich; London; New York: DelMonico, Prestel, 2016. Print.

intentionally provided some the wildest, deepest and most pronounced cracks in the history of paintings with his Cretti works”<sup>5</sup> Burri let the chemical process of the cracks occur naturally, but would make subtle adjustments by hand. I take inspiration from Burri’s process and use it in my own work. The abstracted idea of how fracking looks and affects the land in my work is the visual engagement with the viewer, and this leads the viewer to spend time with the works to become informed of what is really happening. Even though I cannot physically repair the damage to the Earth, I can draw attention to the issue. I bring the viewer in and hope to spark an inner conversation; I want people to think about fracking and what can they do, if they choose. This is what I want to have within my work: a dialogue between the viewer and the art.

The conscientious hip hop artist Lupe Fiasco, known for his lyrics on social issues and anti-establishment beliefs, is another influence in my work. Fiasco views his music as a way to tell a story of what is going on in the world around him. Like my practice, he doesn’t want the truths to be hidden, he says “If we’re going to [censor things] that are offensive, then we are going to have to blind and deafen everyone. Come on, man. Let’s focus on education and literacy and poverty.”<sup>6</sup> His point, which I try to also use in my practice, is to keep everything out in the open; bring the shadows out into the light for everyone to see. We have to be aware of what is being told to us, and what lies are being veiled. Fiasco is very open with his point of view and speaks of his beliefs through his songs, but also gives a voice to the underprivileged. His lyrics give me the push to *let it all go*, of all the worries that hold me

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<sup>5</sup> Emily Braun, Megan M. Fontanella, and Carol Stringari, *Alberto Burri: the trauma of painting* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> “'Day of Outrage' Targets Offensive Lyrics in Hip-hop.” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL). N.p., 7 Aug. 2007. Web. 13 Feb. 2017.

back, “I think that all the silence is worse than all the violence /Fear is such a weak emotion that's why I despise it/ We scared of almost everything, afraid to even tell the truth”<sup>7</sup> These lyrics are exactly what I want to do with my artwork. My connection with his words are strong. Using my art to express values and inspire others to do the same such as Lupe has done for me.

### **Theory-Socially Engaged Art**

Grant Kester said, “While it is common for a work of art to provoke dialogue among viewers this typically occurs in response to a finished object. In these projects conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself. It is re-framed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of having the final piece of art be a change of perspective within the observer, and thus having a short duration, I want the impact to have a lasting or evolving and unfolding effect on them as they observe the work. By integrating the idea of dialogical aesthetic into my practice, I am utilizing the natural human communication of thought and dialogue in my work. This allows an unheard voice to be heard and sets up a reflective dialogue between the issue and the observer. I want to set a precedence of what the dialogue is about: the unseen, the invisible, the voiceless. Then the viewer can determine where the

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<sup>7</sup> Fiasco, Lupe, Sarah Green, Skylar Grey, John Legend, Mdma, Matt Mahaffey, Trey Songz, Sway, and Eric Turner. Lasers. WEA International, 2011. MP3. "Words I Never Said"

<sup>8</sup> Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985. By Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. N. Print.

conversation can go. The outcomes of it are not limited, but are unique to each person who engages with the piece.

“Empathetic identification is a necessary component of dialogical practice. It facilitates a reciprocal exchange that allows us to think outside our own lived experience and establish a more compassionate relationship with others.”<sup>9</sup> Here, Kester is saying that empathy plays a crucial role in making socially engaged art; for which I believe my work is truly that. Providing the context of the issues in my work, I am setting the social dialogue. Because I am speaking for issues that are not my own, but feel strongly about, I must provide an authentic point of view. Kester asks, “Is it possible to develop a cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers?”<sup>10</sup> I believe I can develop art that identifies with the families affected by fracking and who I am speaking for, because of my passion and keeping trueness to their voice.

### **Conclusion**

In creating *Fracked Prospects*, I developed that curiosity from Dr. Gillette, to what is now my voice of concern for the earth we all share. The interaction of humans with the environment is a curious thing, we share this land but it can be taken for granted. Drilling companies and natural gas corporations should not be able to hurt and destroy the public with no reparations, nor should the people affected by the damage not be helped. I have set the

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<sup>9</sup>Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. By Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. N. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. By Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. N. Print.

stage for a story to be told. Standing long against the wall and approaching towards the viewer the story unveils itself. The story is one that affects everyone, not just the people who live near hydraulic fracturing sites. The work I create provokes the viewers to learn, listen, and seek action. Standing next to the artwork, they are faced with imagery of the damage that fracking is causing to our environment. Using materials reminiscent of the industrial worker, I compose this contradiction of the natural gas industry's purpose and what real dangers drilling is doing to the land, water, and people. I am voicing my concern for the well-being of the future of our shared earth. I hope to engage the viewer in an empathic approach; a way for them to voice their concern.

Images



Figure 1.  
*United States of Fracking*  
15"x30"  
Laser etched paper with charcoal and wax  
2016



Figure 2.  
*Below the Surface*  
36"x12"  
Laser etched paper with charcoal,  
color pencil and wax  
2016

Figures 3, 4, and 5.

*Fracked Series*

8'x3'

Tar paper with charcoal, fabric,  
paint, sand, and wax

2016



Figure 6.  
*Fracked Prospects*  
15'x9'x4'  
Tar paper with charcoal, paper,  
plaster, paint, sand, tar cement and wax



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