

THE SEEN

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[Home](#)[Art Seen: Chicago](#)[Art Seen: National](#)[Art Seen: International](#)[CURRENT ISSUE](#) ▾[About](#)

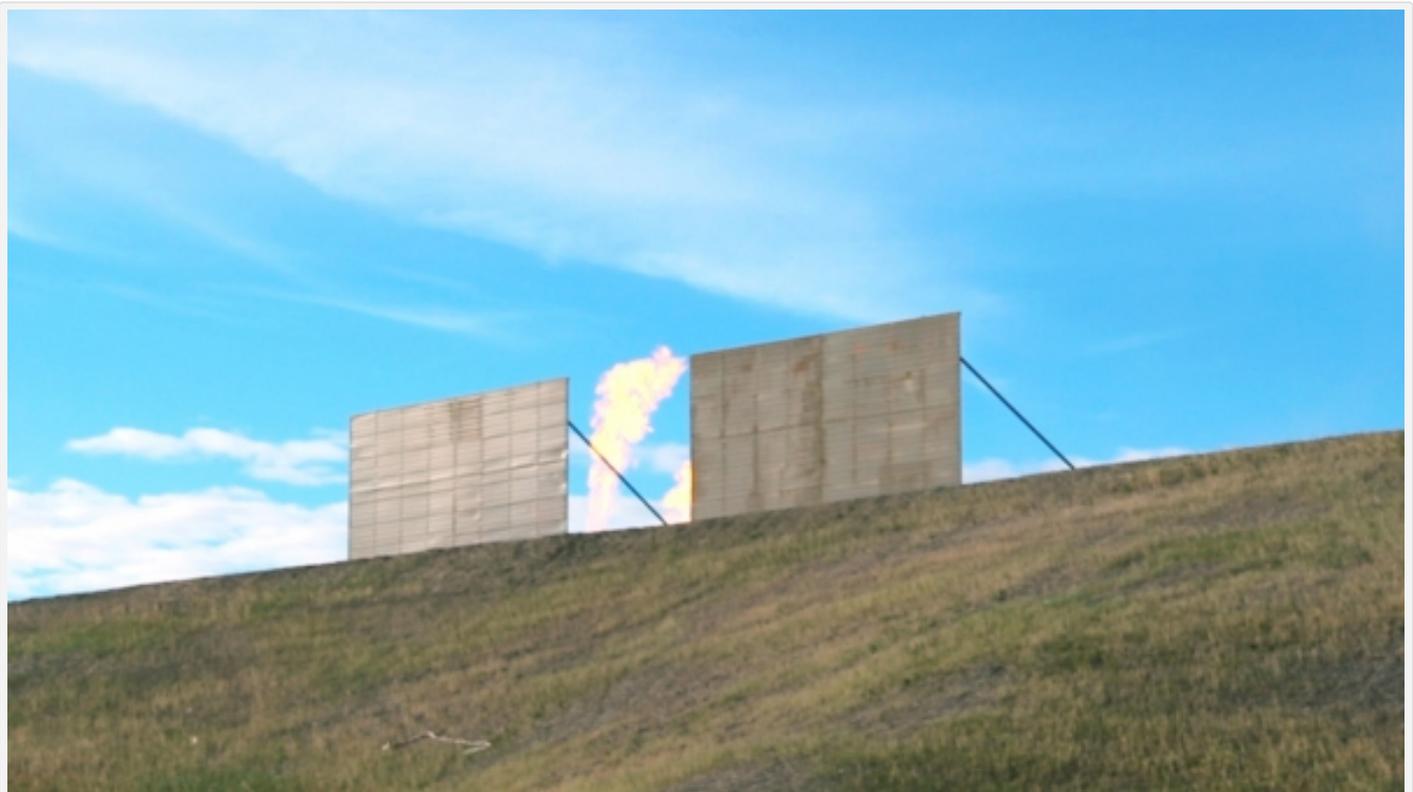
ART SEEN: CHICAGO

MUDROOM // THE MISSION

by Hiba Ali

G+1

In a dimly lit gallery space of *THE MISSION*, Austen Brown's *MUDROOM* (2016) features three television screens hoisted on black poles with looping videos. The videos review the process of shale procurement, an extraction of the mud-based sedimentary rock, and the industry's aftermath in North Dakota's Bakken region. The Bakken shale formation stretches from Montana through North Dakota to the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The exhibition traces this incumbent industry. Extracted and broken down for its rich resources in petroleum and natural gas, the color of the material indicates its mineral concentration; darker shale has a higher likelihood of containing oil or petroleum, lighter shale is more oxygenated and is used in clay or brick production.

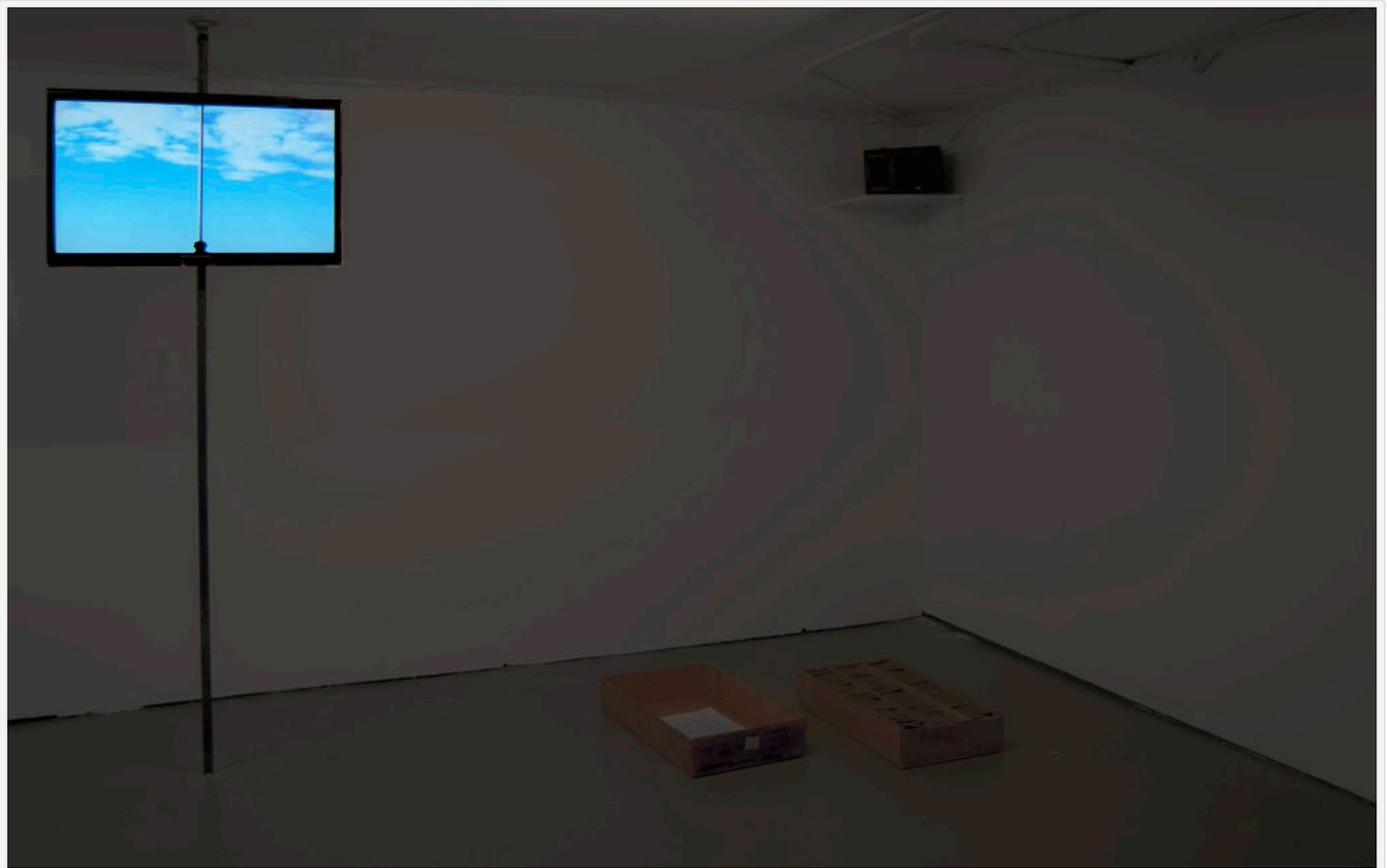


MUDROOM, Video by Austen Brown

This seemingly ordinary material is instrumental to the international energy industry, providing immense revenue to the companies, localities, and people who are a part of it. To depict how this ordinary material has globally shaped and touched an innumerable amount of lives, Brown places two rectangular boxes of Haliburton samples of oil rich shale on the floor, one closely to a television screen that shows a video where two lit fires, bracketed by screens, are burning off gas. The gas flares, located at the entrance of Lewis and Clark State Park, were shot at a time when the state was producing more oil and gas than the infrastructure could handle, resulting in the burning of approximately 40% of produced natural gas, since it could not fit into pipelines.

While the fires burning on-screen depict an open blue sky and green field, they signal a violent change at the precipice, framing the initial stage prior to the process of shale extraction.

The second box of shale core samples is placed beside a series of documents on the floor and wall—including a letter from 2006 from T.J. Cammon, President of Diversified Operation Corporation addressed to Jim AmRhein from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources stating that the Kellams and McAtee sites have “vertical pay potential” and should be explored for shale extraction. Hung below this letter is an application, written eight years later in 2014, filled out for the abandonment or temporary deferral to close off the extraction well. Brown also includes Halliburton survey documents, placed on the floor, indicating numeric listing of the “risk versus reward” analysis of drilling in the McAtee area.



MUDROOM, Installation View, image courtesy of THE MISSION, 2016.

On the second screen, located in the middle of the gallery, a shadowed figure is placed in the context of fracking—high pressure bursts of water, sand, and chemicals pumping into the ground, opening fissures to later extract oil and gas. In the video, the figure enacts the mechanical production of how shale is extracted, before transforming into a series of segmented spaces, showing land, sea, or sky—depicting the inevitably of shale’s dramatic impact on the environment. The dangers of extraction will be passed off, an afterthought—if considered at all. Brown pictures that the access to minerals, previously thought to be out of reach, exhibits a tradeoff; presenting security in place of risking future calamities.[1]



MUDROOM, Installation View, image courtesy of THE MISSION, 2016.

The third video piece, located on right side of the gallery, portrays a temporary shelter. It is a wooden structure, adorned with plastic flaps that loosely separate space, swaying in the wind. When North Dakota's shale boom was at its peak, many itinerant workers moved to the area, resulting in a shortage of housing.[2] With the doubling of population and industrialization, workers constructed makeshift spaces to live in.[3] They now stand void of activity, leaving only abandoned domestic structures.

Individuals are always tied to the landscape in which they inhabit. *MUDROOM* examines the impact of industry; the issues and challenges that force us to imagine that in place of empty pastures and bucolic terrain, this image is what might become of lasting social change.

MUDROOM at the THE MISSION runs through June 25, 2016.

Hiba Ali is an International Contributor for THE SEEN.

[1] Väliaho, Pasi. *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain*. MIT Press. Print.

[2] Nicas, Jack. "Oil Fuels Population Boom in North Dakota City." *Wall Street Journal*. Wall Street Journal, 6 Apr. 2012. Web. 18 May 2016. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304072004577328100938723454>>.

[3] McChesney, John. "Oil Boom Puts Strain On North Dakota Towns." *NPR*. NPR, 2 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 May 2016. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/12/02/142695152/oil-boom-puts-strain-on-north-dakota-towns>>.

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