

ownership
responsibility
reliability
care

Alana Bartol's Orphan Well Adoption Agency

In November 2018, The National Observer exposed documents revealing the estimated cost for cleaning up mining operations, including the reclamation of inactive and orphan wells in Alberta, to be \$130 billion. This number far exceeds any estimates previously made public by both industry and the provincial government. A mere \$1.4 billion has currently been secured by the oil industry itself leaving residents of Alberta responsible for the remaining balance.¹

The burden of responsibility for the oil industry has been the focus of Alana Bartol's practice since moving to Alberta in 2015. Bartol does not focus only on where the financial burden of mining will fall but rather draws attention to a more holistic burden of care. The OWAA's mandate is twofold, to encourage symbolic adoptions of abandoned oil wells that dot the Alberta landscape and to create new ways of reading and assessing damage to mine sites; drawing attention to both well abandonment and their respective remediation processes.

The Orphan Well Adoption Agency is a small shed-cum-office constructed within a gallery space reminiscent of the temporary offices used by the oil and gas industry all over the province. Visitors are greeted by an agent to assist with the paperwork associated with the adoption process and a questionnaire determines if they're ready to take on the responsibility of adopting one of the 2,000 wells that are currently up for adoption. 80,000 more wells are currently inactive and failing a total resurgence in fossil fuel use and extraction, these too will find their way to the orphanage. The Orphan Well Adoption Agency provides letters from our province's orphans. They are melancholic and remorseful; they are from real wells, given nicknames by the artist. The letters anthropomorphize them, forcing one to confront the legacies of a recklessly managed industry. Their portraits monumentalize them, adding to the sympathy one feels for them. The portraits, letters, and GPS coordinates affirm yes, they exist. They are our children, birthed from collection action and collective inaction and you can either proactively take on their care or it's only a matter of time until the responsibility will be unwittingly thrust upon you.

This entire project infuses notions of care into the landscape through the care of abandoned wells and former well sites and causes one to ask avoided and unanswered questions about the oil and gas industry. What is the lifespan of a well? What is the lifespan of an industry? How can an oil company be responsible for their wells, not only during the company's lifespan but also for the well's lifespan—from inception to reclamation? How are they, or even, can they be cleaned up? Perhaps we should require more of people who want to bring wells into this world. An online component of the project provides resources for the public to gain the knowledge needed to better understand well abandonment, reclamation, and the industry as a whole.

¹ McIntosh, Emma; Wechsler, Steph; Jarvis, Carolyn; De Souza, Mike. "Alberta regulator privately estimates oilpatch's financial liabilities are hundreds of billions more than what it told the public." *The National Observer* 1 Nov. 2018. Web. 26 Nov. 2018.

The Orphan Well Adoption Agency is concerned not only with the wells' adoption but also with how we communicate with the wells and their surrounding land. The artist uses various divination tactics to read a well and assess its toxicity.

Parallels between orphan well site remediation and divining are delightfully complex. Equally abstruse, divination and remediation share a certain leap of faith. Both have believers and sceptics, both esoteric and both could be argued to take shape only in the human imagination. Divination has been used for centuries to locate resources in the land, from water, to precious metals, to oil. So couldn't it also be used to determine the toxicity of a place? How can we determine if a reclaimed site is safe? Can the oil and gas industry be held accountable? Through divination the artist offers a level of personal agency in the face of an opaque oil industry lacking oversight.

The success of Bartol's OWAA is that it forces viewers to ask questions and confront all that they do not know or understand about oil and gas and mining. Divination and adoption are abstract and symbolic, contradictorily offering tools to work through our powerlessness within the current system and find creative methods of working against it. Through the work we confront the cost of our economic wealth and address what has been offset in the name of economic growth and realize that it is every citizen of the province and arguably the world who will become responsible for shouldering the repercussions.

- Lindsey V. Sharman

Lindsey V. Sharman is a curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta and adjunct professor with the Department of Art at the University of Calgary. Sharman has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland, and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich. From 2012-2018 she was the first curator of the Founders' Gallery at the Military Museums in Calgary, an academic appointment through the University of Calgary. Her primary area of research is politically and socially engaged art practice. Curatorial projects of note include *Seeing Soldiering: in theatre with those who serve* by Althea Thauberger; *TRENCH*, a durational performance by Adrian Stimson; *Felled Trees* an exhibition deconstructing national identity at Canada House, London; *Gassed Redux* by Adad Hannah; and the nationally touring retrospective and corresponding publication *The Writing on the Wall: Works of Dr. Joane Cardinal Schubert*.