



STRATA

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an installation by shannon collis
9.20.21 - 12.7.21

An aerial photograph of a landscape, possibly a coastal or rural area. A prominent road or path runs diagonally across the scene. To the right, there is a large, dark, irregularly shaped area that could be a body of water or a dense forest. The terrain is a mix of light and dark patches, suggesting different types of land use or vegetation. The overall tone is somewhat desaturated, with a mix of blues, greys, and earthy tones.

Who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?

Paul Shepard





essay by curator Amanda H. Hellman

The human body can withstand an incredible amount of mistreatment; it can continue to function with elevated cholesterol and blood pressure, blocked arteries, or spinal disc herniations. Ill-health can occur suddenly, the result of a traumatic event, or it could be the consequence of years of eating poorly, sleeping too little, or imbibing too much. One might even live with chronic ailments in such a way that they forget what it felt like or what they could do when their body was in top form. Like the body, the land can function in some capacity after years of abuse and, clouded by nostalgia and economic pressures, one might forget exactly how the land once played a vibrant role in an ecosystem that existed long before humans intervened. Like our health, the destruc-

tion of the landscape can occur over time, in a subtle way; it is not always a bulldozer felling the rainforest, creating a perfect line between the natural world and the palm oil farm; rather, after years of suffocating the land, the outcome can be equally harmful, particularly when the devastation occurs in one's backyard by a company that claims it is helping the community, while ignoring the true effects of their profit. For oil miners working in Boreal Forest in Alberta, Canada, the push and pull of the health of themselves and the land with the economic benefit of an industry that can extract this natural resource for another 200 years at its current rate of production, ecologist Paul Shepard's words ring true: "...why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons, a home in insipid sur-

roundings, a circle of acquaintances who are not quite our enemies, the noise of motors with just enough relief to prevent insanity? who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?"

Situated at the center of an essay such as this one is the oil industry: a major economic contributor, supplying cheap barrels, providing lots of jobs, but also generating vast amounts of waste that cause environmental devastation to the land and to human and animal populations. This is the visual story Shannon Collis sets out to expose in *Strata*, an installation that includes sculptural projections and digital works that explore the Athabasca oil sands, comprising almost 55,000 square miles, roughly the



size of Illinois, and the Syncrude Oil Plant where the oil is extracted from the sand. Collis demonstrates the ways in which the intrusion of these industrial complexes has radically transformed—and caused long-term damage to—the diverse ecology, the local community, and the economy. The title hints at geological and social strata which are further reflected in the multi-screen sculptural projection with surround sound—literal layers that provoke visitors to contemplate the human mark on the land in this moment of unparalleled environmental pressure.

In the oil sands bitumen coats each grain of sand, which is mined and washed with hot water to separate the oil at great expense to the environment. The last two decades have seen an increase in oil sands production as it has finally become profitable, more than doubling over the last decade and a half, while conventional oil production has remained constant. Mining oil in this way adversely impacts the environment. In addition to deforestation, the tailing ponds, which hold the wastewater



and sand after the bitumen has been extracted, contain toxins that contaminate the Athabasca River and also release more greenhouse gases than other forms of oil production because of the energy used to separate the oil from the sand. To facilitate the increase in production, TC Energy attempted to construct the Keystone XL pipeline to transport oil across the United States, the largest importer of oil from Canada (ten percent of its daily consumption comes from the Athabasca oil sands). While three phases of construction, amounting to nearly 3,000 miles of pipeline were completed, phase four, consisting of laying new pipeline from Canada to Nebraska was subject to political ping pong before the Biden administration denied a permit amid protests, including, most famously, at Standing Rock, and the company canceled the project. Amid the destruction, how do we restore the land and the community to health?

As a Canadian artist living in the United States, Collis began creating *Strata* out of an interest to understand how this industry shapes the place she grew up and how to begin to heal the wounds it has caused. In search of the proper medicine, she asks what sound does the earth make? What sound does the earth being punctured make? Collis uses the method of *deep listening* as it was developed by the American composer and accordion player Pauline Oliveros to heighten her ability to

hear and to see. Deep listening is much like close looking, the goal of which is to help one truly see what is in front of them, preventing them from being diverted by what they think they see or they think should be there. In *Strata*, the low hum of the twin engine plane used to capture the raw footage is so integrated into the installation that when the viewers close their eyes, they may still see the layers of landscape passing in front of them—a birds-eye-view woven with scenes filmed from a moving truck along the Athabasca River, through Boreal Forest, and across Fort McMurray, attempting to capture the scale of the Athabasca oil sands. Art installations that envelop the viewer have the potential to make them more aware of the space they inhabit. Collis's images show the lacerations on the surface of the land, but *Strata* alludes to the wounds that also exist out of sight, below the ground. Learning to listen deeply helps all of us hear the sounds of the world and what exists below the surface. Collis's profound research and intense layering of sound and image creates a new, hyper-reality, one that allows the viewer to recognize and connect to what is happening, which is the first step to restore the health of the land and community. •

Paul Shepard, "The Place of Nature in Man's World," Atlantic Naturalist 13 (April-June 1958): 85-89. See Also Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (New York: First Mariner Books, 2002), 12.

T H A N K Y O U

Photography: Shannon Collis & Anna Carnes '19

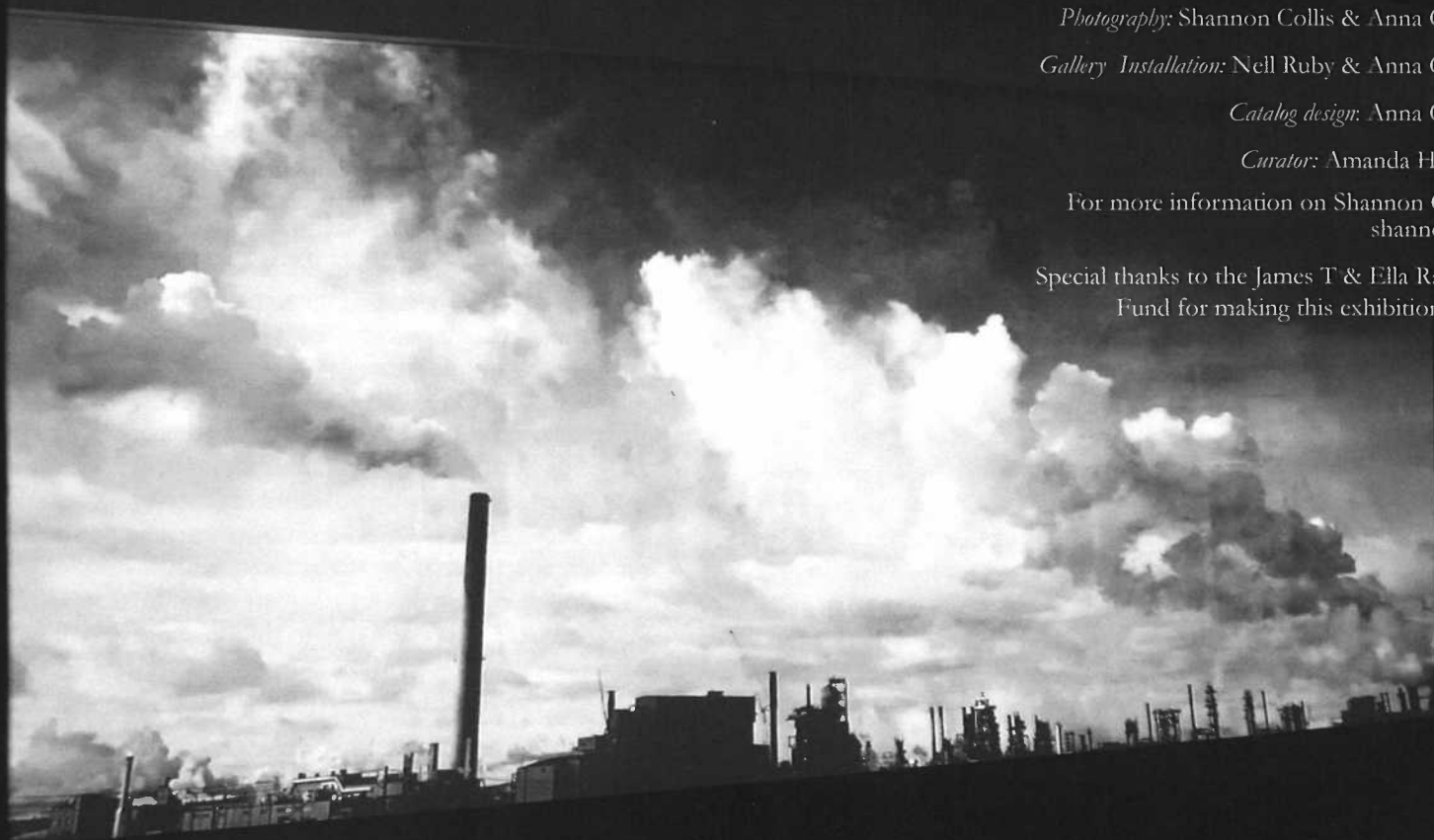
Gallery Installation: Nell Ruby & Anna Carnes '19

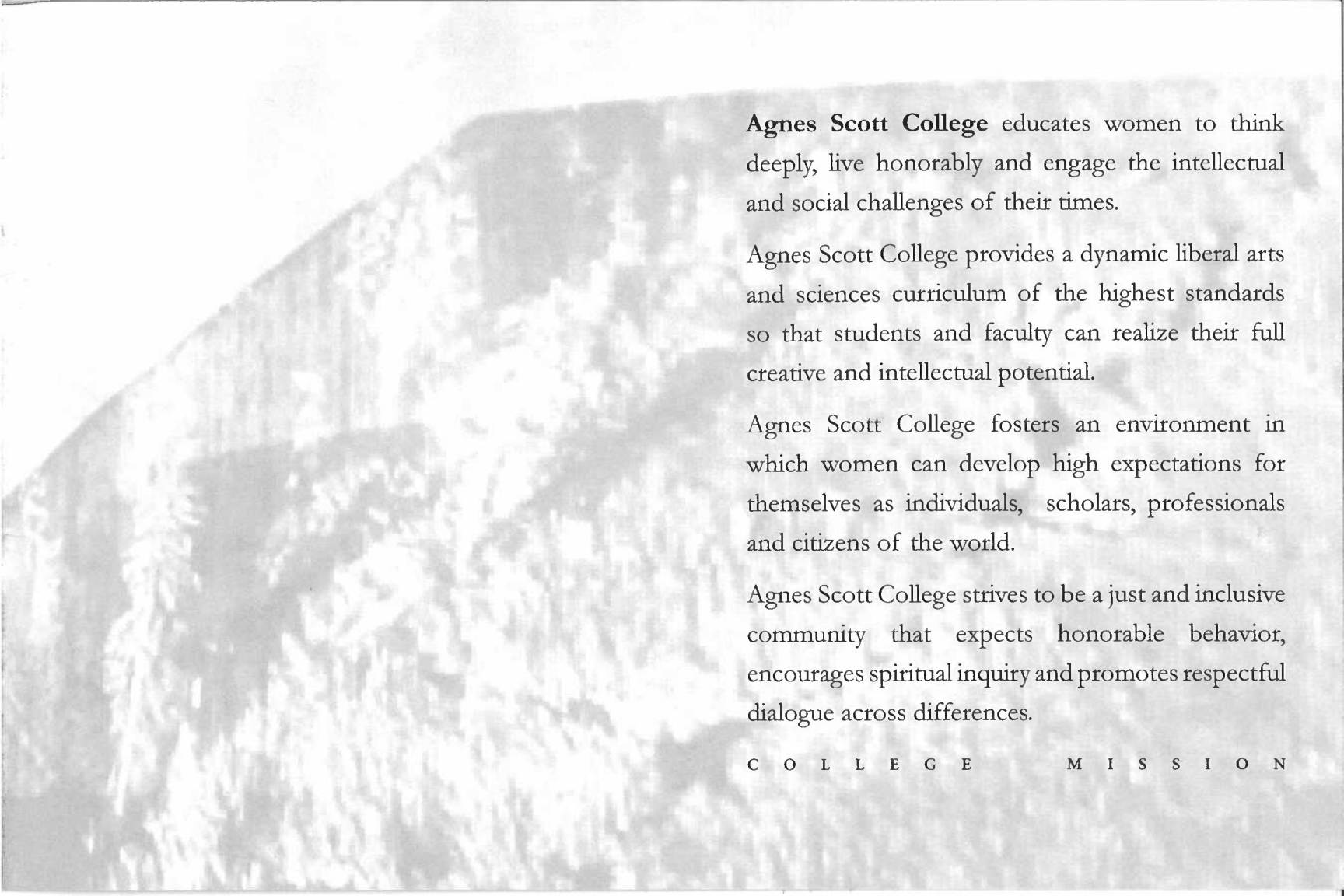
Catalog design: Anna Carnes '19

Curator: Amanda H. Hellman

For more information on Shannon Collis visit
shannoncollis.ca

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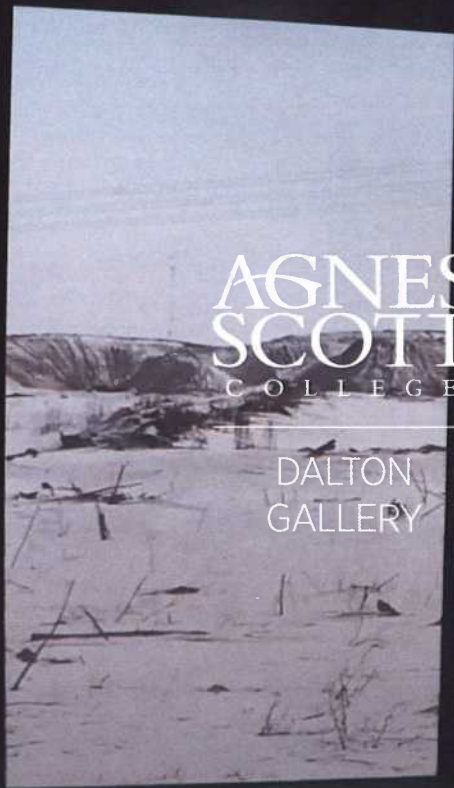
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