

# Oil from the Air

In his native Canada, Garth Lenz explores the world's largest forest—and the industry that threatens it **BY JACK CRAGER**



**A**s a former piano teacher and photographer who specializes in conservation issues, Garth Lenz brings a great sense of counterpoint to his visual reportage. In surveys that pair pristine nature with human industry, Lenz has studied the forests and clear-cut deforestation in Chile, burgeoning tourism on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and coal-mining sites in Alberta, Canada. "I love photographing wilderness areas and industrialized environments," he says from his home office in Victoria, British Columbia. "I'm fascinated by the contrast between the two."

Lenz found his most compelling location of all in the Alberta Tar Sands and Canada's surrounding Boreal Forest. "There's an amazing contrast between one of the largest energy projects set amidst the largest, most intact forest ecosystem remaining

**Above: "Tar Pit #3, Alberta Tar Sands," 2010, from *The True Cost of Oil*. Opposite, top: "Dry Tailings #2, Alberta Tar Sands," 2010. Technologies to dry-stack tailings—the materials left over after extracting an ore—may help limit vast ponds of mining waste in the Tar Sands region. Bottom right: "Boreal Forest and Wetland, Athabasca Delta, Alberta," 2010. Just 70 miles downstream from the Tar Sands, this is one of the world's largest freshwater delta and a critical stopover for migrating waterfowl.**

on Earth," he says of the area, also known as the Alberta's Oil Sands, which he began documenting in 2005. "Meanwhile, you have this extraordinarily relevant issue of introducing a vast, previously not very accessible oil resource into a planet that is already in the throes of climate change and global warming—a lot of interesting aspects to explore."

Explore he has. When he returned in 2010 to shoot the region extensively, he found an altered landscape. "It's rapidly changing—the rate of oil extraction keeps increasing," he says. "Right now there are five large mines, and there are plans in the process to approve up to 20 mines."

Compelled by the sociopolitical issues surrounding this expansion, he created an ongoing series, *The True Cost of Oil: Canada's Tar Sands and the Last Great Forest*, which has been exhibited in Ven-

ice, California's The G2 Gallery and Brooklyn, New York's PowerHouse Arena. Along with abstract paintings by Rebecca Allan and music by Laura Kaminsky, his images are part of the multimedia *Crossroads Project*. Debuted at Utah State University in Logan, talks are under way for 2013 exhibitions in Purchase, New York and other cities.

The large-scale prints (up to 40 by 60 inches) in *The True Cost of Oil* blend art with admonition. "The industrialized images are beautiful and perhaps abstract, so people are drawn in, and then they look at what the subject matter actually is and do a double take," Lenz says. "I don't want to just take pretty pictures. I want to take pictures that mean something and can hopefully foster some kind of positive change for the world."

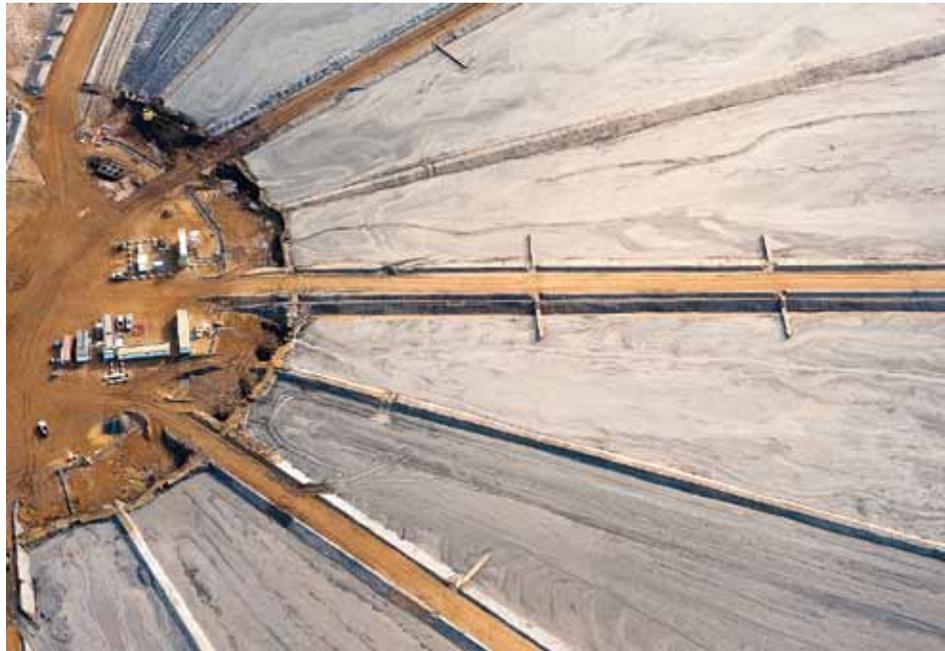
Still, in his photos and accompanying text, Lenz stresses facts over fanaticism. "Energy and conservation have become polarizing issues, and I'd like to get back from that and have people just look at the images. Hopefully this stimulates discussion and exploration of these subjects as people come to their own conclusions," he says. "There's no scapegoating. There's no 'us and them' in this issue of global warming and climate change. The people who work in [the oil] industry are providing a resource that we all demand, and they're trying to provide it the best way they can. The issue is more a societal one: Our energy consumption is, ultimately, not sustainable."

Most of Lenz's Tar Sands photos are aerials, for a few reasons: "The landscape is huge and very flat," he says, "and the industrialized scenes are all behind closed doors, with security guarded very aggressively. So there's no place to get a full view of these mines unless you're in some sort of aircraft." He shoots out of either helicopters or small, fixed-wing planes with the doors off or windows open. "It's usually just me and the pilot, sometimes someone else along for the ride," he says.

"Some of the images where there's snow on the ground were taken when it was 30 below without wind chill," he adds with a laugh. "You get about 30 seconds to shoot from the open window, and after that you start losing all feeling in your fingers. It doesn't make you super popular with pilots."

Lenz started this series on a Pentax 6x7 camera with roll film, but in recent years he has gone digital. "I use a Nikon D800E, and it makes life a lot more straightforward. And the technology is phenomenal in what it allows you to reproduce."

He finances his expeditions with magazine assignments, stock and print sales, support from conservation organizations and private fundrais-



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**Garth Lenz**

[garthlenz.com](http://garthlenz.com)

**Lives In** Victoria, BC, Canada

**Awards Include** 1st place, SocialDocumentary.net's "Ten Years After 9/11," 2011; 1st prize (nature/trees), International Photography Awards, 2008; 2nd and 3rd place (photo-journalism/environment), Prix de la Photographie Paris, 2008

**Publications** *The Cristian Science Monitor*; *The New York Times*, *Time*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Canadian Geographic*, *International Wildlife*, *Globe and Mail*

**In the Bag** Nikon D800E, D3 and D300; 14-24mm f/2.8G 70-200mm f/2.8G ED, 24-70 f/2.8G ED, IF-ED, 300mm f/4D IF-ED, 85mm f/1.8G Nikkor lenses; Gitzo tripod; Really Right Stuff mounting plates and quick-release clamps; B+W and Lee filters; Macbook Pro; SanDisk memory cards

ing. "It's about finding different creative ways to be able to continue doing this work," he says.

Lately, he's been photographing the site of the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Project in northern British Columbia. "If built, this pipeline would take crude from the Tar Sands out to the north coast of BC and in so doing would cross many remote landscapes and rivers," Lenz says. "There are two main concerns: One is a pipeline rupture, particularly over some of these very rich salmon rivers. And the other is [that] once the stuff gets to port, it would have to go through an extraordinarily difficult-to-navigate series of fjords. The fear is that an oil tanker could create a huge spill in this pristine natural area."

The work takes him away from his wife and two kids for weeks at a time. "That's tough, but it's the way of my life," he says. "And my work on these issues is about trying to do something that will allow my kids and other people's kids to have the same kind of environment and opportunities that we've had. If you're going to bring children into this world, then you've got a job to do to ensure that they inherit a world in the same condition that we got it. That's a tall order." **AP**