

RESOURCE WARS

By Kelley E. Wilder

Aerial photography is the language of war. Generals have always sought out high places to survey their battlefields. The abundant panoramas and panopticons that exist are a testament to our desire for this elevated vantage point. It is also the language of science. We look down through microscopes at specimens and conduct geological surveys from the skies. Subhankar Banerjee wields this vocabulary in his portfolio *Resource Wars*, skillfully combining it with rich visual references to photographic and painterly traditions. There is more at work in these photographs of the Arctic than conflict alone, however. The images are also about oppositions, subtleties, and delicate balances. Using the vocabulary of the geological survey, Banerjee takes a measure of this nearly unknown American landscape, presenting it unbiased by dramatic lighting or deep perspectives. He seeks a measure in the same way that geologists seek coal or oil. In place of fossil-fuel deposits, he finds vastness and simplicity, as well as delicacy, balance, and beauty.

Banerjee is not the first photographer to attempt to awaken the American public to the wealth of this nation's natural beauty, and he won't be the last. But his argument takes on a particular urgency and topicality that has not been seen since the Great Western Railway survey photographs of the mid-nineteenth century. There, too, the general concept of the nebulous West, as seen from the comfortable armchairs of Eastern Seaboard cities, was one of harshness, emptiness, foreignness, and, above all wilderness. This last word, which is often applied to portrayals of the Arctic as well, is a minefield of assumption and misconception. Wilderness is always set in opposition to civilization. The wilderness is supposedly untrammelled, untouched by humans, and perhaps uninhabited. It is nature pure. It is also a myth. The American "wilderness" has always been home to somebody, and the Arctic is surely no exception.

In 2000, Subhankar Banerjee, a scientist born in India, left his job at the Boeing Company in Seattle to go in search of this mythic wilderness. He did as so many young men (Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac, Stephen Shore) have done in America: he went on a road trip—he went west. He also went north. South of Seattle was only more "civilized" land; the only real option was north. What he found there was a subtle ecology, balanced on a razor edge. Instead of a wilderness, he saw a landscape that was home not only to indigenous people like the Gwich'in and Inupiat tribes but to thousands of animals that passed through in the ebb and flow of migration. He realized that these migrations touched not only Arctic lands but every corner of the world. Birds

flew from India to nest here, beluga whales and caribou made their homes here. He saw that the Arctic, far from being an untouchable, unknowable land of isolated ice and snow, was a hub of activity, growth, movement, and living that belied its characterization as “wilderness.” So instead of the wilderness he had gone in search of, Banerjee photographed this living place—this complex ecology of land, water, ice, replete with life both human and animal. He claims that the Arctic taught him to photograph.

Although Banerjee was trained in the sciences, he has an extensive background in literature, philosophy, and art. He learned painting as a boy in India, but he returned to artwork in the form of photography with extensive backpacking trips in the Southwest and Northwest. Black and white was never an option—it was always to be color. When he first arrived to howling winds and temperatures of minus forty to minus fifty degrees, he had no notion of what photography in the Arctic might look like. He had no visions for a book. He had no idea that his camera would freeze, or that he would spend weeks on end just waiting to take a single photograph. He counts himself “lucky,” because just witnessing a caribou migration is a matter of chance. Of course, if you stick with it, as Banerjee has done—not just as a casual visitor but as a denizen of the Arctic—you tend to see more. And you slow down. The slowing process, the consideration of what this Arctic landscape is, and how it functions, is what informs *Resource Wars*. Banerjee has married a particularly spare style to extremely large-format prints, bringing to more temperate climates a glimpse of the magnitude of his experience.

In general, photographing the ideas that represent most sciences poses no special challenge. We are so familiar with X-rays, stroboscopy, photograms, false color, and the like that images using this iconography have become daily, or at least weekly, fare. The science in Subhankar Banerjee’s images, ecology, is much more elusive, because it is less about things and more about relationships. These relationships, balances of power, subtle disruptions, and below-the-surface tensions are nearly impossible subjects for photography, which is so good at depicting things and moments, and so poor at explaining the relationships between them. Banerjee’s photographs are layered, showing one thing at a distance, and more and more as you approach to look closely. The captions are critical to our understanding of the complexity of the images, and to Banerjee’s personal wish to educate us about the place. They are also the most controversial part of the work. It was the captions, for Banerjee’s first solo show in 2003, that the Smithsonian chose to cut, hoping that the subtlety of the images would lend them to readings of abstraction, nature photography—in other words, harmless stuff in the political fray.

Even standing alone, however, the photographs do a remarkable job of rising above their formal content. *Caribou Migration I Oil and the Caribou* (63) is more than simply a landscape photograph. It is also an exhortation to delve beneath the surface into the underlying balance at work in the Arctic. The migrating caribou are not to be seen as a mere counterpoint to the blue of the frozen river. There is hierarchy in migration, a social structure that, were it to break down, would lead to extinction. *Beluga Whales and Calves – Oil and The Whales* (28-29) portrays (quite accidentally, on the photographer's part) a complex social interaction between the gray calves and the white adults that biologists are now studying. Counting from the water disturbs this social interaction in a way that photographing from above apparently does not. The same is true of *Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks – Oil and The Geese* (41). Migration—the transient presence in the Arctic of animals from the world over—is a permanent presence here, visible sometimes only in tracks and traces. These faint tracks imply the Arctic's role in the world. Far from being untapped, as those who advocate “using” this landscape would have us believe, this largely forgotten area is already in service to world populations, both human and animal. It has been for centuries.

It would be tempting to portray this image of the Arctic in some very dramatic fashion, perhaps using the slanting golden light that is so there abundant. Banerjee has resisted this, electing instead to photograph in very flat light—a “cloudy-day aesthetic,” he calls it, and a visible sign of his admiration for Robert Adams's photography. He emphasizes this choice by selecting perspectives, like aerial, that contribute to the flatness. The dramatic perspectival tracks disappearing into the distance of *Known and Unknown Tracks – Oil and The Geese* (24) are like a shadow starkly cast over so much subtle uniformity. Because the Arctic is so vast, and often so inaccessible, Banerjee has tried to normalize it. He prefers the muted grays and greens of *Caribou Tracks on Coal Seam I – Coal and The Caribou* (49) to any dramatic side light or sunset. The intense blues happen of their own accord, and could be overwhelming, but here, too, they serve a purpose. *Hulabula-Okpilak Delta – Oil and The Caribou* (61) is the strikingly, almost otherworldly would-be site of oil rigs. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that these photographs are so moving. On first glance, they look like landscapes that we know and love. Banerjee almost never photographs ice, and when he does, as in *Sea Ice (in a warmer planet)*, there is always a background rhetoric. *Sea Ice* is an equivalent, Arctic style—the ice providing a link between the important relationship of sea and sky, and a commentary on global warming. Finding skeletons, a staple of art-historical iconography, is, in the Arctic, another sinister sign that all here is not well. *Exposed Coffin – Oil and The Caribou* (27) is evidence of the melting permafrost due to global warming, a memento mori for a landscape.

This brings us back to the overt argument in Banerjee's *Resource Wars*—the needs of the planet versus the political aims of one nation. The American Arctic, which consists of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands, the Utukok River uplands, and the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, is, for many Americans, an unknown quantity. It is no accident that, since the first exhibition of his work, Banerjee's photographs have been employed again and again to argue against the use of this landscape to obtain coal and oil. Americans were unaware of what was at stake in this debate. Knowledge of Banerjee's photographs runs the risk of the Arctic's becoming attached to the American psyche as a part of the national heritage. Energy interests do not want this to happen, as it sets up emotional opposition to drilling and mining plans.

In viewing Banerjee's photography, it is perhaps inevitable that parallels should be drawn to the work of Ansel Adams. Adams, a passionate defender of parks and wilderness areas, is notably associated with Yosemite, where so many of his most famous images were taken. He was an advocate of the writings of John Muir, and worked the battlefield of politics, too, discussing with several presidents the importance of protection and wilderness preservation. Or perhaps there is a greater likeness to Elliot Porter, who leaned more toward the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, and was equally engaged in the preservation of the American landscape. Banerjee, too, promises a political outcome, but not in the Yosemite mold. Preservation has often been misused to suppress indigenous dwellers, preventing them from using the landscape as they have always done, in the name of preserving a mythic, pristine (read: unpeopled) wilderness.

This is where the maturity of *Resource Wars* becomes evident. Banerjee photographs no landscape without a context. His landscapes have tracks and traces in them, unlike Adams's and Porter's. He is interested in the Arctic that he found in the twenty-first century, not in a museum piece. Far from turning back the clock, Banerjee is documenting the here-and-now reality of an Arctic that is a home to many people as well as animals. Again, it is a question of ecology—of how tourism and land use can be reconciled in a way that maintains the balance of a landscape at risk. There is no question that oil drilling and strip mining for coal will upset this balance, and perhaps destroy it forever. But what of subsistence hunting? What of tourism?

The photographs of *Resource Wars* are certainly a feast for the eyes. Here one sees a reference to Sugimoto, there a reference to Millet, another to Stieglitz. These are thoughtful and intelligent pictures, made to please the senses in an almost tactile way. But their *raison d'être*, their main purpose, is to compose a powerful argument and to feed the intellect. They leave us with more

questions than answers. How do we see America? How do we reconcile native land use with wilderness preservation? What is ecology, and how does it function? As Subhankar Banerjee ranges farther afield—to the Siberian, Greenlandic, Canadian, and Norwegian Arctic—documenting the ecology of these environments, perhaps we will figure some answers out for ourselves.

Kelley E. Wilder received her doctorate in art history from Oxford University. For the past three years she has been a scholar at the Max Planck Institute of the History of Science in Berlin. Her research interests include, the history of photography, the nature of photographic evidence, and the work of photographers William Henry Fox Talbot, and Roger Fenton. Her book *Photography and Science* will be published by Reaktion in 2008.

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