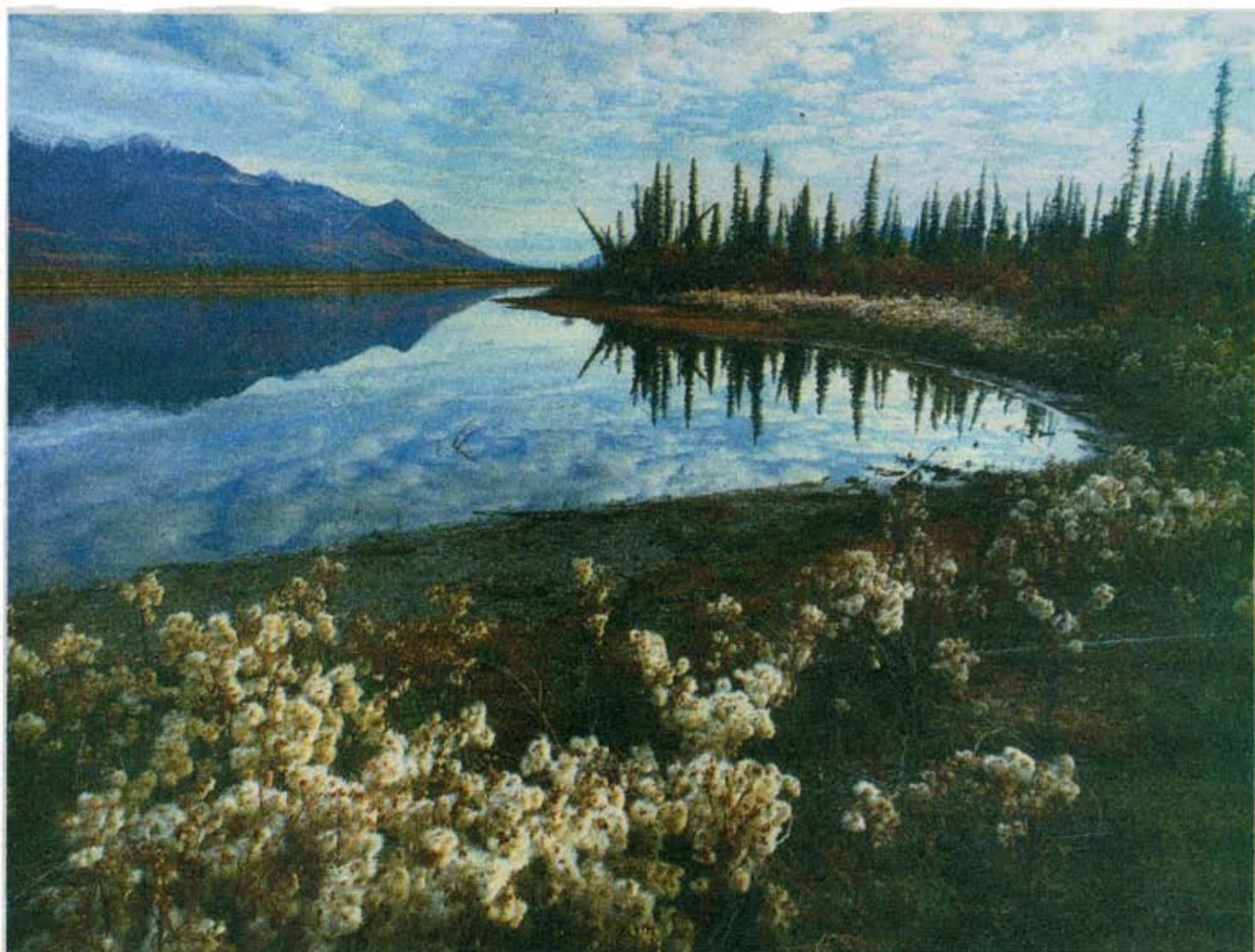


CRITICS



Subhankar Banerjee

"Subhankar Banerjee: The Last Wilderness, Photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," at the Gerald Peters Gallery.

LAST CHANCE

A Panorama of Alaska That Extends to the Senate

By ROBERTA SMITH

Last year a book of Subhankar Banerjee's large color photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northern Alaska was brandished on the floor of the Senate to help defeat a move to open the refuge to exploratory drilling for gas and oil. The debate brought immediate fame to the photographer, 37, who grew up in Calcutta and came to the United States in 1990 to train as a scientist before switching careers. Seen in his first New York exhibition, which

closes on Friday at the Gerald Peters Gallery (24 East 78th Street, Manhattan), Mr. Banerjee's large-format color images seem less controversial than stunningly beautiful. They are also so radiantly colored that it is hard to believe they're not manipulated, but they're not.

Alternating between sweeping vistas and exquisite details, sometimes in the same picture, the works show untouched nature in all its diverse grandeur. Pictures shot from an airplane rehabilitate the phrase "purple mountains' majesty" and reduce migrating caribou to strands of antlike marks on fields of ice.

A sun setting during an ice fog shrouds a herd of musk ox in a haze of orange and purple. A glass-smooth lake mirrors the surrounding landscape, giving the plant life an air of Magic Realist menace not unlike one of Gregory Crewdson's early photographs.

But such diversity is part of the point. Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California, presented Mr. Banerjee's images to rebut the pro-drilling argument of Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton, who had said that the refuge was "a flat white nothingness." These images suggest a vastly different reality.