

# Art in America



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*Art & Politics*

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## NEW YORK

Subhankar Banerjee  
at Sundaram Tagore

Subhankar Banerjee's exhibition of large-scale color photographs documents the Alaskan Arctic as it has never been seen or imagined before. As the first photographer to shoot

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a complete record of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in all seasons, however, Banerjee, a former physicist and computer scientist from India, earned as much negative attention for his project as he did positive. Five years ago, he found himself and his photographs in the crossfire of a heated debate over whether to open up the sanctuary to oil exploration, an initiative spearheaded by the Bush administration and powerful Republicans in the Senate, who claimed that the contested area was merely a vast stretch of frozen wasteland. No doubt to their chagrin, Banerjee's visual evidence, which captures not only a variety of flourishing terrain, but also populations of migrating caribou, beluga whales, geese and other wildlife, proved quite the contrary.

Like the early landscapes of the American West taken by photographers of the 1860s and '70s, Banerjee's images—breathtaking at 68 by 86 inches—reveal a wilderness as immense as it is ecologically diverse. But unlike those historic images of an epic, untrammelled frontier, the photographs in this exhibition—all shot from the air with the help of Walt Audi, a famous bush pilot in the Arctic—are not intent on sweeping the viewer away with Romantic promise or transcendent emotion. Instead, Banerjee's muted greens, blues and grays, as well as his careful compositions of undulating coastlines and sea ice, display a subtle, painterly attention to line and form. The literal distance afforded by his aerial position skirts pitfalls of sentiment by endowing the images with a kind of topographical aloofness. The resulting esthetic is one that seems arrived at less by awe-struck discovery than through detached observation. In *Geese and Tracks* (2006), for instance, the animal subjects are merely dark specks clustered at the bottom center of the photograph, difficult to accurately discern. In *Caribou Migration I* (2002), the caribou crossing snow and ice appear as tiny as ants.

In several images, as in the aforementioned, Banerjee, who shot all of them with a medium-format camera, captures just the tracks left by the migrating caribou. *Caribou Tracks on Wetland III* (2006) depicts innumerable trails running like brittle strands of hair across a pale grayish-brown landscape. With no creatures in sight, the image essentially serves as a documentation of a



Subhankar Banerjee: *Caribou on Sand*, 2006, digital chromogenic print, 62 by 70 inches; at Sundaram Tagore.

documentation, or a living history. In *Known and Unknown Tracks* (2006), the more pronounced, straight lines left by jeeps frame the lighter, more haphazard tracks of caribou in an enormous rectangle, which is about as polemical as Banerjee gets—or, for that matter, needs to get—with these understatedly powerful pictures of a little-known and increasingly endangered world.

—Debora Kuan