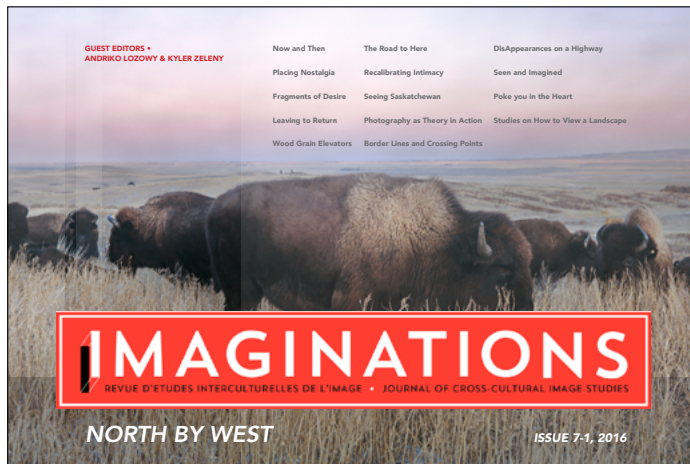


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JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

North By West

Editorial Team: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Daniel Laforest, Andriko Lozowy,
Tara Milbrandt, Carrie Smith-Prei, Sheena Wilson

November 23, 2016

To cite this article:

Elkaim, Aaron, et al. "Poke You In The Heart: What Can A Photo Say, What Should It Say, And How Is That Affected By The Perspective Of The Photographer And The Audience?" *Imaginations* 7:1 (2016): Web (date accessed) 176-187. DOI: 10.17742/IM-AGE.NBW.7-1.14

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.NBW.7-1.14>



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POKE YOU IN THE HEART:

WHAT CAN A PHOTO SAY, WHAT SHOULD IT SAY, AND HOW IS THAT AFFECTED BY THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE AUDIENCE?

AARON ELKAIM, NADIA BOUCHIER, AND JENNY GERBRANDT



Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur utilise les photos de deux photographes (Nadia Bouchier et Aaron Vincent Elkaim) afin d'explorer l'expérience des membres de Fort McKay en Alberta, ainsi que le dialogue visuel Ouest canadien. Trois perspectives importantes sont unis dans cette pièce : Nadia, le photographe qui a vécu dans la communauté de Fort McKay pour la plupart de sa vie ; Aaron, l'artiste et photographe qui a passé plusieurs mois dans la collectivité de Fort McKay; et l'auteur en tant qu'anthropologue tenter de rendre justice au travail de deux photographes afin de fournir une analyse sur les grandes questions de droits indigènes, les questions environnementales, et discours visuel de l'Ouest Canadien. Le but de cet article est d'explorer les réponses aux questions qui sont posées dans le titre : que peut dire une photo, que devrait-elle dire, et comment est cela affecté par la perspective du photographe et le consommateur le l'art ? Explorer la nature et le sens de l'art politique est important pour la discipline de la photographie, à l'étude de la représentation visuelle, ainsi que la façon dont les membres de la communauté et les étrangers conçoivent de l'Ouest canadien, les sables bitumineux, et la communauté de Fort McKay.

Abstract

In this article, the author uses the photographs of two artists (Nadia Bouchier and Aaron Vincent Elkaim) in order to explore the experience of the members of Fort McKay, Alberta as well as western-Canadian visual discourse. Three important perspectives come together in this piece: Nadia, the photographer who has lived in the community of Fort McKay for most of her life; Aaron, the artist and photographer who spent several months in the community of Fort McKay; and the author as an anthropologist attempting to do justice to both photographers' work and provide some analysis regarding the larger issues of Indigenous rights, environmental issues, and western-Canadian visual discourse. The purpose of this article is to explore answers to the questions that are posed in its title: what can a photo say, what should it say, and how is these imagistic utterances shaped by both the perspective of the photographer and the audience? Exploring the political nature and meaning of art is important to the discipline of photography, to the study of visual representation, and to the way that community members and outsiders conceive of the Canadian West, the oil sands, and the community of Fort McKay, Alberta.

Marita Sturken characterises the camera image as a significant “technology of memory,” an object “through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning” (9, 11). When a friend and colleague asked me to participate in the unique opportunity to explore western Canadian visual discourse by bringing together photographers and scholars, I was excited to explore the medium, the discourse, and Aaron Vincent Elkaim’s photographs of Fort McKay Alberta.¹ Loopmans et al. explore the ways that “photographs incite public debate about place and community” (699). Camera images (as well as the conversations and stories that give them meaning) are an important part of the political and personal ways we see and understand the world. I interviewed a Fort McKay First Nation community member, Nadia Bouchier,² about these photos, and our conversation forms the basis for this article. Nadia herself is a photographer and a friend of Aaron’s from his time in the community in 2011 and

2012. She has contributed 15 of her own photos for this article. My goal in writing this article as a conversation between two photographers’ photos is to explore what a photo can say; what it should say; how photos connect to place; and the inherent contradictions and politics present in producing and viewing photography.

In the following summary and analysis of our discussion, three important perspectives come together: Nadia, the photographer who has lived in the community for most of her life; Aaron, the artist and photographer who spent several months in the community; and my own as an anthropologist hoping to do justice to both photographers’ work and provide some useful analysis regarding larger issues of Indigenous rights, environmental issues, place, and western Canadian visual discourse. The discursive format that I have chosen serves these two photographers, their photos, the community of Fort McKay, as well as the larger issues that the editors of this issue have asked contributors to explore.

Interview and Discussion Context

As soon as I arrived in Fort McKay and the home of Nadia’s Aunt Rose, I was struck by the natural beauty that could be seen from the windows and balcony of Rose’s home. During our first meeting and our subsequent interview, I took my own photos of the sun shining over the snow-covered Athabasca River through the forest (the same river that is featured in Aaron’s photos). As we sat at Rose’s kitchen table talking, eating her homemade rice pudding and drinking tea, I commented on the beauty of this scene to Nadia. Her response is instructive regarding the issues this community faces and the complex meaning and understanding of all forms of visual discourse. She used this river to speak about all of her photos and her photographic goals. She commented that this water (the Athabasca River) is not the river of her childhood or of her ancestors, but has been changed by the oil industry. She and her fellow community members can no longer drink, fish, swim, or bathe in the water. She explained, “I can’t do anything with it, and so there is a loss of connection as a person you know, how am I supposed to care for this river if it’s going to hurt me?” This is just one example of the complex nature of using photos to understand a community, a place, an issue, or a regional identity. Even as I look at my photos, I realise that without talking to a community member I could not have understood many of the meanings and emotions tied to this river for those who have lived around it for generations.

Community Context

Many people identify Fort McMurray, Alberta with the Athabasca oil sands. However, 50 kilometres north of Fort McMurray along the Athabasca River is the small community of Fort McKay, which sits at the heart of the oil sands activity in the region. There are approximately 450 members of the Fort McKay First Nation and 800 people live in the community. Oil development and extraction has brought both economic opportunity (e.g. the Fort McKay Group of companies) as well as environmental damage and health issues to the members of this community (Elkaim & Bouchier; Fort McKay First Nation). This community has faced ignorance, hatred, and disregard for their history and wellbeing as they navigate an economic, political, and environmental context that has created dependence on the very industry that threatens their land, rights, and traditions. While facing the effects of the globalized oil industry, the members of this community also continue to engage proudly in their traditional hunting, trapping, gathering, and other practices.

Photographic Goals and Audience

Nadia and Aaron have similar understandings of the purpose of their photos. “Sleeping with the Devil,” the title of Aaron’s larger work excerpted here, reflects his artistic goals. Aaron argues that everyone, whether near or far from the oil sands, is responsible for the larger system that thrives on the extraction of oil:

For the Fort McKay First Nation the situation is much more personal and immediate, but we are all part of this system that creates wealth through the destruction of our lands and ecosystems. We all participate in global warming, in species extinction, in water and air pollution, no matter how much we try not to.

The title of Nadia’s unpublished collection of photos, “Lost with Time,” also reflects her views about the land, places, knowledge, and traditions that could be lost in the future if we continue exploiting the environment. Her purpose in showing her photos is the same whether in Victoria where she studies photography or in her home of Fort McKay. She explains:

I wanted to bring a piece of my history to people. I wanted them to understand that there are still things out there that are left to be seen and experienced. You can still go back to your traditional ways and connect in some ways to the land. I wanted also to show what could be lost if you we continue on doing what you we are doing.

In terms of audience, both Aaron and Nadia are aware of the need to attempt to inform but not judge and the need to allow questions but not to force opinions. They have obviously made their own judgements about the oil industry and its influence on the community of Fort McKay. However, the goal of these photos is not only to be honest about these opinions, but also to encourage honest reflection in viewers of the photos. Aaron is not trying to convince people or to change their minds, as that would be unfair. He explains:

Audience is a question that I have always found difficult to answer. It supposes that I know how people think, and that I should wish to change their perspective, or that I may know what is right and wrong and am trying to convince someone. While my work is based on environmental issues, I don’t have the answers. My job is to focus my lens on places where these issues exist ... I want people to confront the realities of our life on this planet.

Nadia explained that the audience for her photos includes her community, the wider world, and even herself:

My goal would be the same [no matter the audience]. The whole idea is, this is what you are going through and this is what I'm going through ... My work speaks from me, from my heart and growing up and living here and having been effected by it [oil] for so many years ... There is no right or wrong way [to connect to a photo] ... Who am I to impose that on someone and say, well you are supposed to be looking at it this way?

The ways that both Nadia and Aaron struggle to answer questions about audience are instructive in terms of their conceptions of their own identities, bodies of work, and responsibilities to the land and to their local, national, and global communities. How they see their photos and the places and issues they represent are informative about how they view themselves and their roles in their photographic, artistic, and Aboriginal communities.

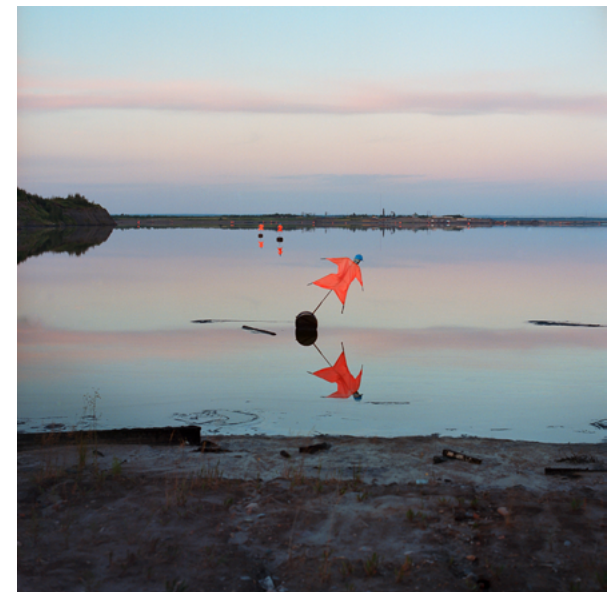
A Thematic Discussion of Nadia and Aaron's Photos

Two photos bring up themes of change, loss, inevitability, and the huge timescale of nature: Aaron's photo of the orange scarecrows on a tailings pond (Figure 5) and Nadia's photo of an ink cap plant among brightly colored leaves, twigs, and berries (Figure 1). Nadia interprets how Aaron's photo could (and perhaps should) make viewers feel guilty and embarrassed at what has been done, contrasting to the plant photo that represents "something I would like to see more of." She sees Aaron's scarecrow photo as an example of what has been lost and can never be regained, while her plant photo represents to her what still remains natural but could easily be lost. We discussed whether reclamation of extraction areas was actually possible and if so, what that would entail. Nadia used both of these photos to explain why reclamation (or returning land to its pre-industrial state) is impossible for many reasons, including a misunderstanding of the timescales involved. In reference to what used to exist where the tailings pond sits now, she says, "You can't replace a muskeg, you can't actually make a muskeg (that took thousands of years to form)! Reclamation is a word they [oil companies] use to make themselves feel better." These photos do not immediately pair together in my mind, but they do for Nadia. Discussing them together is important to understanding her view of the issues facing her community and the place that she loves. It is important to Nadia and Aaron to depict



Fig. 1. Nadia Bouchier 2013

Fig. 5. Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2013



both the physical and emotional aspects of what has been lost, what is being lost, and what could be lost in the future. It is also imperative not to allow the perceived (and actual) power of the oil industry to prescribe a future that involves an irrevocably changed or damaged landscape.



Fig. 2. Nadia Bouchier 2014

Fig. 6. Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2012



Nadia connected two photos in particular to the concepts of home and connection: the photo of her Aunt Rose cooking (Figure 2) and Aaron's aerial photo of the Athabasca River (Figure 6). For Nadia, both images represent values and practices that are traditionally important but also increasingly rare. Nadia explained the motivation for photographing her Aunt in her home by talking about the love that her Aunt continues to put into her hard work as a caterer in the community. Her aunt is a highly sought-after cook who prepares traditional foods in traditional ways, which is popular with Elders and other community members. This photo pulls Nadia towards her physical and emotional home as it represents what is special about her Aunt and her community but also what is sadly changing:

It's really rare to find someone that wants to put their whole heart and soul into helping the community the way she does. It's rare to find that in this community, someone to put out their life like that and to feed up to 1500 people ... You watch her in her kitchen and get that love, because really that's what she puts into her food, is all of her love ... It makes people feel like home.



Fig. 3. Nadia Bouchier 2013

Nadia explained that Aaron's aerial photo of the Athabasca river (Figure 6) also speaks to her about community and home in the same way. For Nadia, this beautiful photo evokes peacefulness, mindfulness, and connection to the place she calls home. She commented that "the river when you are in a boat, it's just peaceful and puts you in a trance almost as you are meandering around these points and trying to get yourself through the river." Nadia says

that this photo evokes a sense of connection and home that is being lost because of oil development. Nadia described an instance when she tried to travel by boat from Fort McKay to Fort McMurray but was forced to turn back because she had difficulty breathing amongst the fumes caused by the nearby oil extraction and processing sites along the river. Because of the oil development, she and her fellow community members no longer trust the health and safety of the river. Nadia

calls the environmental effects "a total and complete loss, a loss of connection to your heart and what the river represents." She argued that the river represented in the photo is an example of beauty, freedom, as well as the obvious disconnect from the river and the land among multi-national oil companies, many local oil company employees, and even some members of her own community. One cannot irrevocably change or destroy something if they understand and respect it.

Nadia's photo of the shore at Moose Lake (Figure 3) reflects her strong emotional response to the environmental changes in her community. This place has long been vital to the lives of the Fort McKay community, and its importance grows as development moves closer. Every time Nadia leaves Moose Lake, she says, "I always shed a tear ... It's like I'm leaving a piece of my heart behind and I'm leaving the land and the forest and then flying over this [oil mines] and coming back to reality." Moose Lake is a place that represents what is still present, what has been lost, and what could be lost in the future. It is a chance to slow down and reconnect with nature and history. Foere she belongs, the struggle to live a life connected to the land while surrounded by seemingly unstoppable oil development, as well as the responsibility to defend this place and way of life. Like many of her and Aaron's photos, Nadia sees this one as representing hope, struggle, and duty. She explains:

My children are from here, they are Treaty and going to have to contend with the oil industry when they grow up ... If I could leave a lasting legacy that would be this is what I'm leaving behind for you, it's up to you to take care of it. I'm not thinking for me, I'm thinking for them, when they have babies, because there are only 800 of us.

Nadia feels a personal responsibility to fight for her community and to protect Moose Lake not only for herself, but also for her children and future generations. She also feels that this responsibility extends beyond her, her family, and her community. It is all of our responsibility to keep these places unspoiled and available for future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. For Nadia, this photo signifies the place where her heart belongs and also the duty to defend the rights of Aboriginal people and the land for future generations, even when it is easier and even safer to stay quiet.

The themes of simplicity, respect, healing, and tradition are important to the way that Nadia speaks about her and Aaron's photos. Three photos sparked the most conversation about these themes: Aaron's photo of the trailer guestbook (Figure 7), Aaron's photo of the partially butchered deer (Figure 8), and Nadia's photo of freshly cleaned fish on a table (Figure 4). Nadia described the meaning of the guestbook as well as the importance of its location, Poplar Point. The water in this place is still useable and "it's a place to heal yourself, to reconnect with the Athabasca, and to discover yourself again, after being away for so long." The book is a repository for the history, connection, healing, and interacting with nature in the trailer at Poplar Point that community members (and even Aaron himself) share. Nadia connected Aaron's guestbook photo to the one of fish being cleaned on a wooden table (Figure 4), which also represents tradition and purity: "that is good fish that is pure fish. It's free from contaminants, fresh out of

the lake and ready to eat." This photo brings forward strong sensory memories for Nadia. When she looks at the photo, she can "still feel that fish in my hands, and scaling it, I can still feel and taste it. When it comes fresh off the fire like that, oh my gosh!" This fresh, clean fish sitting in the sunshine stands in stark contrast to the fish that she and others have encountered that have been contaminated by the oil industry. The ability to collect and consume traditional foods from the land and water is a sign that the environment and the people are healthy. In this case, the fish is significant because it is an example of the power that this place still has to provide and to heal, but also the fact that because of oil development, places that can still be called healthy are becoming few and far between.

Finally, we discussed the photo of fish-cleaning (Figure 4) in comparison to Aaron's photo of a partially butchered deer with red blood dripping on white snow (Figure 8). For Nadia, the deer-butchered photo represents an inability to heal and a departure from what she sees as tradition and purity. It also represents the necessity of being open to both differing ways of butchering meat and interpreting photos. She remarked, "I take offence to that photo because it's dirty hunting to me ... It should be cleaned, put away, and ready to go right away." Nadia also made clear that, although she thinks of this photo as an example of moving away from tradition and respect for nature, hers is not the only interpretation of this photo or this practice. In reference to this photo in particular, Nadia commented that it is important to "keep an open mind. That is the best way to be." There is nothing wrong

Fig. 4. Nada Bouchier 2013



Fig. 7. Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2012



Fig. 8. Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2011



with practicing one's traditions as one can within the context of rapid change and environmental damage. There is also nothing wrong with this photo being used as a comment on the way that oil development encroaches on traditional lands and uses of that land. Nadia voiced her opinion on this photo to Aaron, who used this photo in his own collection to comment on the fact that the oil industry is restricting Fort McKay community members' use of trap lines and access to animals.³ The perspectives that both Nadia and Aaron bring to this photo in particular, and in relation to their other photos, are evidence of the complex and urgent nature of the issues affecting this community and its traditions.

Discussion and Conclusion

My goal in writing this article as a conversation between two photographers' photos is to provide some answers to the questions I pose in this title: what can a photo say, what should it say, and how is that affected by the perspective of the photographer and the audience? The first phrase in this title, "poke you in the heart," comes from my conversations with Nadia, and speaks to my goal of exploring how and why photos effect and inspire those who take them and those who view them. The perspective of those who take photos and those who view photos are often different, but that is the point: everyone has their own interpretation of photos and none are more or less valid than others as long as questions are asked. The act of taking, describing, and displaying a photo, is inherently political (like any other act), and one fraught with contradiction. The point is to present ideas but not force the viewer of a photo in a certain direction; the photographers' act of taking certain pictures and not others and displaying or explaining them in a certain way leads but does not shove the viewer in a certain direction or to certain questions. The question of the political valence of art is important to the discipline of photography and the study of visual representation and place, as well as the way that both community members and outsiders conceive of the Canadian West, the oil sands, and the community of Fort McKay.

The questions that have most influenced my writing this article revolve around the way that we categorize photos, photographers, viewers, and the unique perspectives and experiences of place that influence them. Before I spoke with these two photographers, I categorized Aaron as an artist who had spent several months getting to know the land and people of Fort McKay in late 2011 and early 2012. I categorized Nadia as a community member of Fort McKay and an insider. I characterized both of their photos and the place in which they were taken from my own perspective as an academic outsider. As I corresponded with Aaron and spoke with Nadia it became clear that this simplistic categorization was inaccurate and belittles the significance of their photos and the important work that both of them have done within and outside this community. Though Aaron is an outsider, he is an ally of the community and he has a clear respect for the land and people of the Fort McKay First Nation, which Nadia herself acknowledged. Nadia has lived, travelled, and studied in many places, such as Victoria and Edmonton, but Fort McKay is the place she comes from and calls home. Obviously these two photographers have differing perspectives, goals, audiences, and understandings of the places and issues they photograph. Both of these photographic explorations of Fort McKay are important to understanding the community and the issues it faces and convey the urgency of attention to the people, the environment, and the place we call Fort McKay. In his 1996 book, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso states

that "places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become" (55). We cannot and should not be forcing places, photographers, or their photos into particular categories or boxes. Doing so is yet another extension of the colonial influence on the discussion of places, Indigenous issues, and visual representation, which both of these photographers are trying to combat.

Another question that arises from this project involves who has the right to judge the correct way to interpret or connect to a photo or the place it represents. Furthermore, who has the right to judge how the Canadian West is portrayed or understood, and how best should we include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives? We all assign legitimacy by our explicit and implicit understandings of photos and other representations of the Canadian West. As the preceding discussion displays, these photos do not have a single authoritative meaning, even if they seem to be coming from an "activist" or "Aboriginal" point of view. As Loopmans et al. point out, "photographic projects are complex processes which tend to create unpredictable effects in relation to the perspectives and motivations of the curator" (714). We should be questioning how we understand and ascribe legitimacy to multiple points of view. The way we assign or deny legitimacy to certain perspectives says as much about the conscious, sometimes unconscious, and always

political ways that we judge Indigenous communities, the oil industry, and the environment, as it does about the photos, the photographers, their place, or their message. The community of Fort McKay is not simply an idyllic natural space or a wasteland beyond saving. This article is an attempt to challenge these judgements and viewpoints and consider why some photos, issues, and conceptions of the Canadian West receive much more attention and legitimacy than others. Doing so is imperative to understanding photography, place, and the community of Fort McKay.

Another question that must be asked by photographers, audiences, and academics involves what a photo or any form of visual representation can and should be expected to do. As I visited with Nadia and corresponded with Aaron, I realized how much of my understanding of these photos is informed by personal interactions and my own perspective as anthropologist, academic, and outsider. I was struck by their photos as soon as I viewed them, but their meaning deepened as I was able to pair them with a face, a story, and a history. Nadia explains that “you have to really look into the story and ask questions ... There is a give and take, knowledge is learned and you have to try.” The photographer has a duty to display and explain their photos in a way that leaves openings for questions to be asked and for thoughts and emotions to be elicited. Photos create paradoxes in the minds of photographers and audiences because it is often difficult to cultivate passionate viewers of photos while

not forcing them into certain opinions. Again, the act of taking, explaining, and displaying photos, as well as interacting with them as an audience is an inherently political act. As Wendy Ewald points out, the meaning of a photo or collection of photos can change with time and with world events, despite the work of an artist or photographer to make clear their goals and perspective (Ashford et al.). Soon after the attacks on the U.S. on September 11th, an exhibit Ewald’s photos of veiled Saudi Arabian women opened at the Addison Gallery in New York; the meaning that her audience ascribed to this collection was markedly affected by fear and grief (Ashford et al. 80). The important and powerful ability of photos to say a great deal, but also to leave so much to the imagination, points to the possibility for variable interpretations.

As Wendy Ewald notes, “It is aesthetically interesting to see an image made by someone who lives in a certain situation ... where she [or he] stands in the world and literally where she stands to make the picture add other layers of meaning to the image” (Ashford et al. 73). Of course, the eight photos I have included in this article do not represent the complete picture of these two photographer’s collections, the community of Fort McKay, or the cultural, environmental, economic, and political issues it faces. I chose to present Nadia’s, Aaron’s, and my perspectives on these eight photos because they encapsulate my goal of exploring the visual representation of the Canadian West. Nadia’s and Aaron’s choosing, explaining, and describing their

photos is critical to my and others’ understanding of their photos and the issues they represent. Their and my own choices in writing this article are inherently political and inherently contradict our shared goal of not forcing the audience of these photos or this article. Many may see Nadia’s and Aaron’s photos and this article as a form of activism. However, during our conversations, Nadia told me that she does not like the term “activism.” She said that her photos are “about realization not activism, to show my life and my people and how we are coping, and to ask questions about how we will grow and be self-sustaining in the future.”

Aaron’s goal in his photography is to create awareness of and inspire interest in and questions about a community and a place he deeply respects. Nadia’s goal is one of healing and protecting her own community, as well as telling a story about what remains, what has already been lost, and what could be lost if the destructive changes continue. No photo or collection of photos can convey the complete meaning of an event, place, community, or tradition. The goal and perspective of every person who views any photographs will be unique to that person and the particular moment in time that they are viewing it. Both groups of images honour the community of Fort McKay and neither fit into discrete categories such as photography, activism, or art. It is impossible to predict how an audience will react to or connect to a photo or the concept of western discourse or how that could change over time. Neither photographer is trying to “change or force the minds

of others,” but rather they are trying to use pictures to spark stories, emotions, questions, and memories in order to inspire much needed reflection about the meaning of the lands they photograph and the ways they are changing. Nadia declares “that you cannot force a person to experience a photo a certain way, or the same way each time they view it,” but also that “you cannot un-see what you have seen [with your heart].”

Special thanks to Nadia Bouchier and Aaron Vincent Elkaim for sharing their photos and stories. Thank you to Rose Bouchier for welcoming me into her home and for sharing her stories and her wonderful cooking. Thank you to Andriko Lozowy and Peter Fortna for your assistance, ideas, and perspectives which helped in the research and writing of this article.

Notes

¹ Aaron Vincent Elkaim is a Toronto-based documentary photographer and photojournalist who spent several months living in and learning about the Fort McKay community in late 2011 and early 2012. For information on his work, please see his website: <http://www.aaronvincentelkaim.com/>

² Nadia Bouchier is a member of the Fort McKay First Nation who currently studies photography in Victoria, BC. She has lived the majority of her life in Fort McKay and considers home this community and the larger traditional lands of the Fort McKay First Nation.

³ Please see the project description and full display of Aaron’s photos taken at Fort McKay at <http://www.aaronvincentelkaim.com/sleeping-with-the-devil>.

Image Notes

Figure 1 *Ink cap plant* Nadia Bouchier 2013

Figure 2 *Aunt Rose Cooking* Nadia Bouchier 2014

Figure 3 *Moose Lake* Nadia Bouchier 2013

Figure 4 *Freshly cleaned fish on a table* Nadia Bouchier 2013

Figure 5 *Scarecrows on a tailings pond* Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2013

Figure 6 *Athabasca River* Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2012

Figure 7 *Trailer Guestbook* Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2012

Figure 8 *Partially butchered deer* Aaron Vincent Elkaim 2011

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