

★★ Making a scene

Bearing witness

ND native's photos of oil boom on exhibit in San Francisco gallery

By Ryan Johnson

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SAN FRANCISCO – Sarah Christianson isn't against western North Dakota's booming oil development, but the photographer who grew up on a family farm near



Christianson

and her belief that more oversight is needed to prevent permanent damage.

"I think it's too fast, too reckless, and we need to sit down and to have a better plan to have this activity be more sustainable and not leave the state in an economic depression after they pull out," the 32-year-old said.

Christianson graduated from Hillsboro High School in 2000, earning a bachelor of fine arts degree in 2005 from Minnesota State University Moorhead and a master of fine arts degree in 2009 from the University of Minnesota. She has since called San Francisco her home.

But her work has always drawn from her upbringing in North Dakota, she said, and once she started to hear about environmental consequences in the state, she had to document it.

Christianson embarked on a brief "scouting mission" in 2012, returning in 2013 to take photos that became the 35-picture exhibit "When the Landscape is Quiet Again: North Dakota's Oil Boom" now on display at SF Camerawork gallery in San Francisco.

Some of those

photographs also will be part of the large group show "The Bakken Boom: Artists Respond to the North Dakota Oil Rush" scheduled for Fargo's Plains Art Museum in early 2015.

What made you want to document what's going on in North Dakota?

My family has a small connection to that area – my great-grandparents on my mother's side homesteaded outside of Watford City. So, through them, even though the farm has been sold out of the family a long time ago, we retained the mineral rights. In the early 2000s, my mom and her brothers were approached by oil companies looking to lease the rights, and so that started their involvement.

I became interested starting in 2012 as media reports started to amp up more about what was going on. I decided that I needed to get out there and see for myself.

Why does your exhibit take its title from this well-known speech?

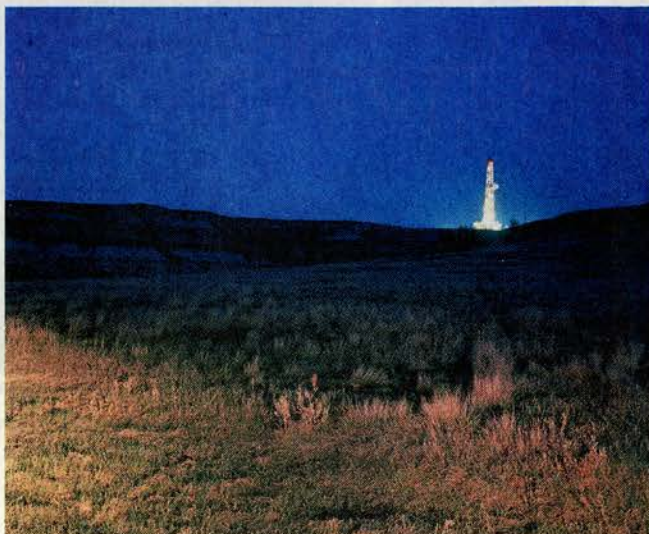
I knew there had been two prior boom-and-bust periods that left the region economically depressed, with a lot of abandoned houses and infrastructure. I saw this boom as history repeating itself, and thought what would happen in the future.

In my research, I came upon Gov. Art Link's famous speech, "When the Landscape is Quiet Again." It so resonated with me because here in the midst of prior energy development, we had a forward-thinking governor who knew that this industry was not the be-all, end-all of our state, that there would come a time when industry would pull out, and the state needed to



Photos by Sarah Christianson / Special to The Forum

A well site carved out of bluffs near the Badlands, pictured in August 2013.



A drilling rig near Little Missouri National Grasslands outside of Charbonneau, N.D., in May 2013.

be self-supporting and viable.

It really resonated with me because he was concerned about the future. It wasn't just, 'How can we make the most money right now? We need to preserve the land for future generations.' That seemed very fitting for my goal.

I'm hoping viewers will take away a heightened sense of responsibility and concern that, yes, even though this is giving people phenomenal opportunities in terms of economics and wages and

jobs, there are very deep environmental impacts happening to the land that are threatening it for future generations.

Why is North Dakota's oil development interesting for San Francisco residents?

Very few people in the Bay Area have a reason to visit North Dakota for themselves, but they are curious about what's going on because of the stories in the media. They are also becoming increasingly concerned about the volatility of the Bakken oil that's being shipped across



A natural gas flare in the White Earth River Valley, as photographed in September 2013.

the country to refineries around here. No one wants to see another explosion like what happened in Casselton (N.D.) or Quebec.

This exhibit gives people the chance to see the impacts for themselves, especially as California contemplates the use of fracking.

Why is photography the right art form to "bear witness"?

It goes back to the old adage, a picture's worth a thousand words.

For instance, with the Tioga (N.D.) oil spill last September, media reports

said 20,000 barrels of oil leaked, and they initially tried to burn off the surface oil.

I happened to be in that area at that time, and didn't know what I was photographing until the report hit the media two weeks later.

But I have an image of this giant, black, billowing cloud of smoke from them attempting to burn off the surface oil.

It's one thing to read about this, and then another to feel this visceral reaction to a photograph.

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