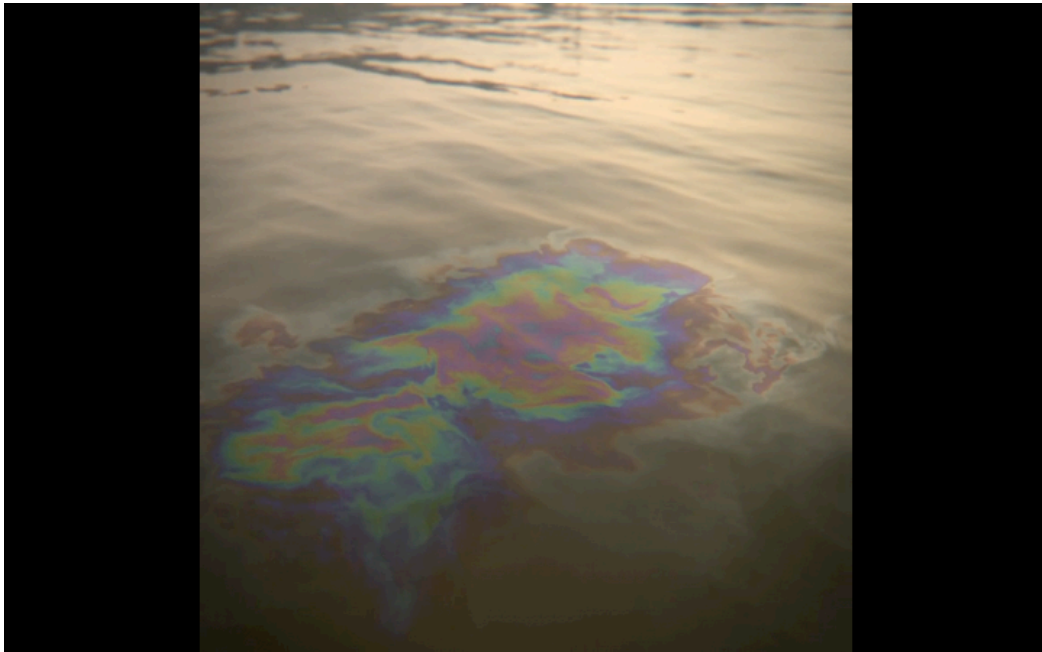


THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Valentine, Ben. 'Adrift in the Waters of Our Dark, Befouled Planet'. *Hyperallergic* Online. 14 July 2017

HYPERALLERGIC

Adrift in the Waters of Our Dark, Befouled Planet
In John Gerrard's new series, he digitally renders polluted bodies
of water from around the world.



Screenshot of John Gerrard's "Flag (Nile)" (2017)

A mysteriously hovering vantage point slowly rotates above muddy, languidly rippling waters. We grasp for context in these distorted reflections of land and sky, but little is offered. Our attention remains focused on a splash of gas centered in each frame. The conceptual link connecting these disparate bodies of waters (the Yangtze, Nile, Thames, etc. — each named in the piece's title) is not the water itself but the gas, the defilement. These digitally rendered waters make up John Gerrard's new series, *Flag* (2017), and their global soiledness is the subject.

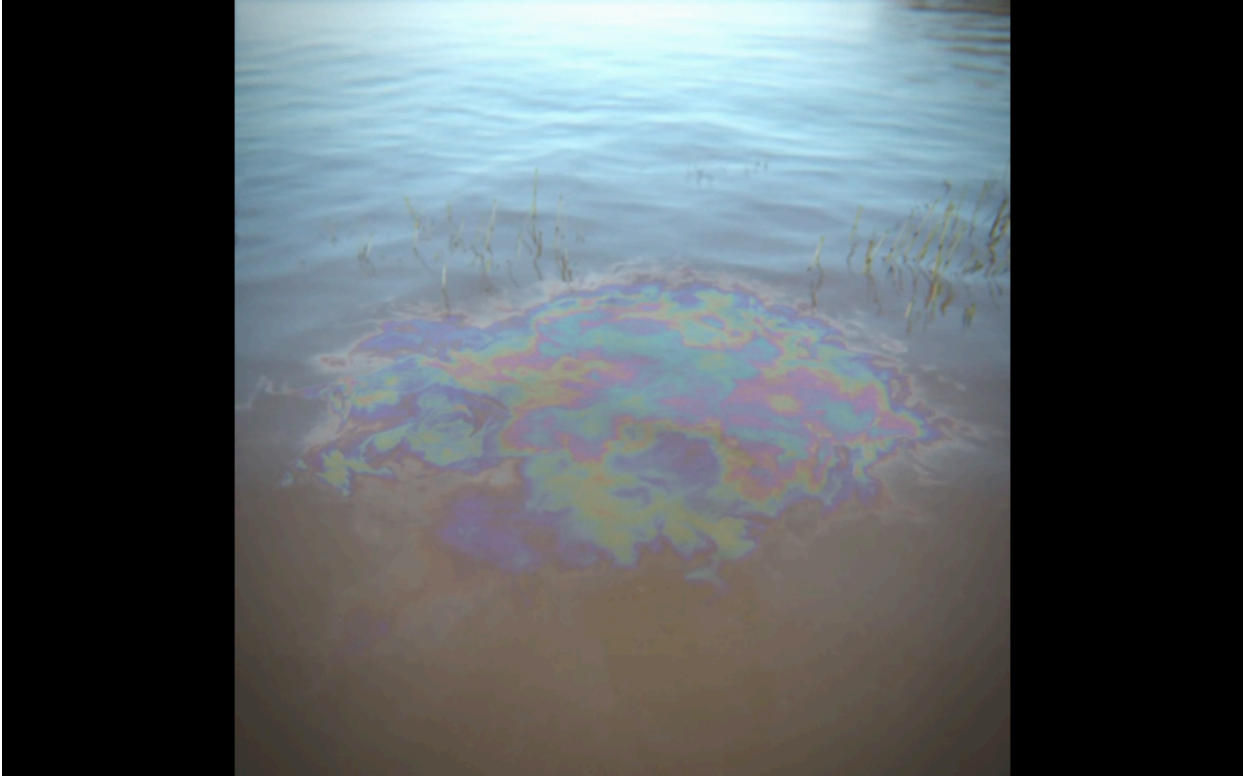
But who are these bleak flags for, exactly? I believe that, more than any country, they wave for the Capitalocene epoch writ large, spanning national and international borders. Proposals for new nations, causes, even the Anthropocene — which posits humans as the defining force of the planet — are not represented. These flags are digital renderings of water, not a painting or a video but a programmatic artwork with a year-long playing time. The software mimics reflections of various waters around the globe, in accordance with a solar cycle of night and day.

In an age when fresh water — an increasingly rare and precious gift — is constantly rerouted into industry's maw, Gerrard's pieces demonstrate capitalism's culmination. While the human impact here is obvious, a human presence is eerily absent. Instead, these flags are for a dark, befouled planet devoid of human life; we are only felt through the filth we've created. Diverse and distant ecologies are flattened into one vast interconnected landfill.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Screenshot of John Gerrard's "Flag (Yangtze)" (2017)

Despite spanning the globe, Gerrard's flags — like the Capitalocene itself — know no boundaries. We see reflected in their waters only murky localizations amid rampant environmental degradation. Business and trade, especially relating to raw materials and their extraction, have never adhered to national borders. But now these hyper-profit-driven fantasies are bearing fruit from California to the Niger Delta, regardless of where the businesses pay (or don't pay) their taxes.

The lack of geographic specificity in Gerrard's pieces causes us to reflect on the way big industry tends to simply export what the Western public refuses to tolerate. Many chemicals deemed too dangerous to use in the US are instead sent to other countries. Our outrage over the oil spills off our own coasts is absent for the ongoing environmental catastrophe in the Niger Delta region. Same companies, same problems, but dramatically different reactions.

Big industry assumes — usually rightly — that if their negative impact is felt far enough away from Western media and consumers, they will not pay a price for their horrible behavior. Gerard's flags represent that logic collapsing on its own hubris. Given enough time, the world's waters will return to us the toxic waste we've long ignored. While humans can barely act with the next generation in mind, and companies struggle to look past their next quarter, water never forgets.

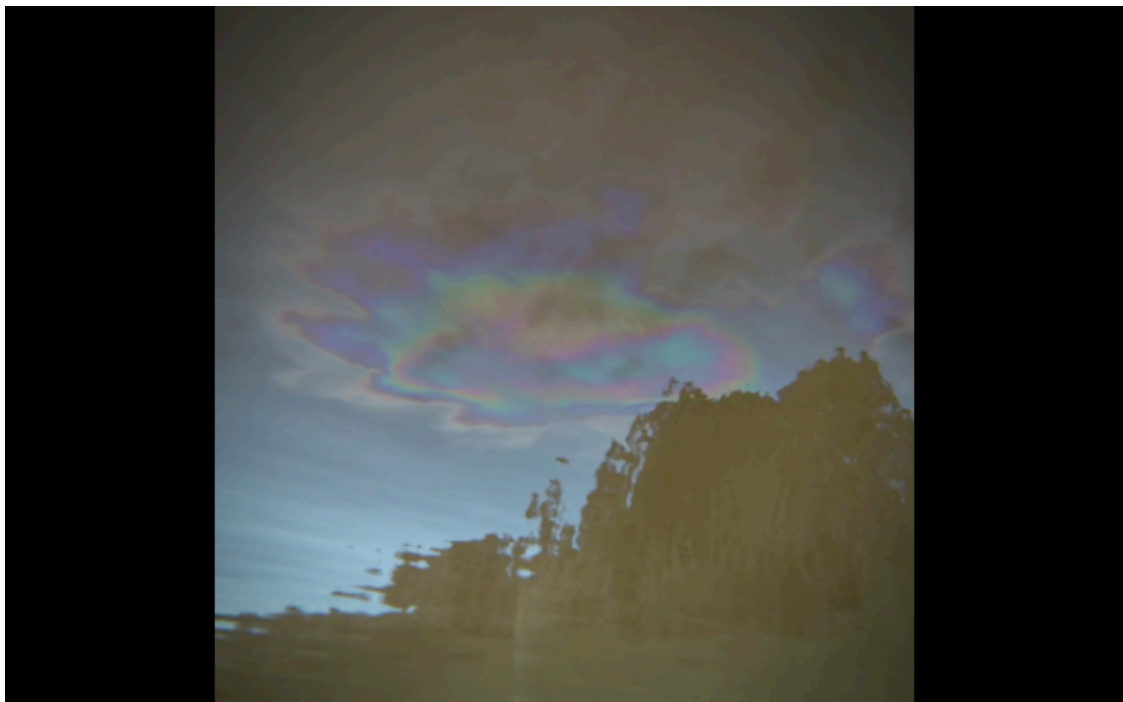
Far from employing flashy new media art as a façade of coolness, the crux of Gerrard's practice is not the way he uses new technologies, but how his work embodies, and forces us to consider, Deep Time — the timeframe of geology, of mountains, of oil, certainly not of daily life, even though what happens in our lives will affect geology for millennia to come. As a computational work that requires 30 years to unfold, "Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez / Richfield, Kansas)" (2008) was my introduction to Gerrard's practice. I've followed his career since.

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The artist continues this unnerving sense of Deep Time with his flags, which are more in tune with a solar cycle than gallery opening hours. As with “Oil Stick Work,” viewers are left wondering whether they are in fact the intended audience for this, or if it is meant instead for some as-yet-undefined future generation. The viewing experience is deeply unnerving, but if we truly want to confront the future of humankind, we need to cultivate a longer, multi-generational mindset — one which Gerrard’s practice readily occupies. Needless to say, our actions and the materials we use are harbingers of our future.

As racist remnants of the United States’ past begin to be removed from public view, we must admit that we are erecting new, planetary-scale monuments to our shortsighted greed, from obvious examples like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, all the way to the pervasive refractive sheen of oil on water captured in *Flag*. Gerrard forces us to confront this timeframe, a big-business mindset where all of nature is but a backdrop for human hubris.

Flag will be on view at the 2017 Galway International Arts Festival (110897 Black Box Theatre, Dyke Road, Galway, Ireland) from July 17 to 30, featuring an artist talk on July 17.



Screenshot of John Gerrard’s “Flag (Amazon)” (2017)

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Screenshot of John Gerrard's "Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez : Richfield, Kansas)" (2008)

<https://hyperallergic.com/387348/adrift-in-the-waters-of-our-dark-befouled-planet/>