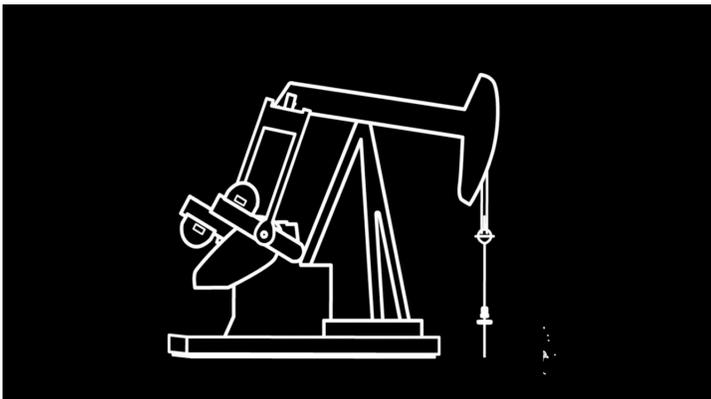
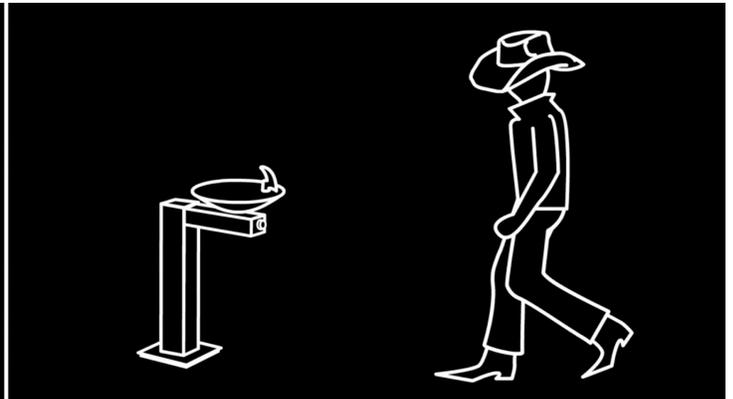
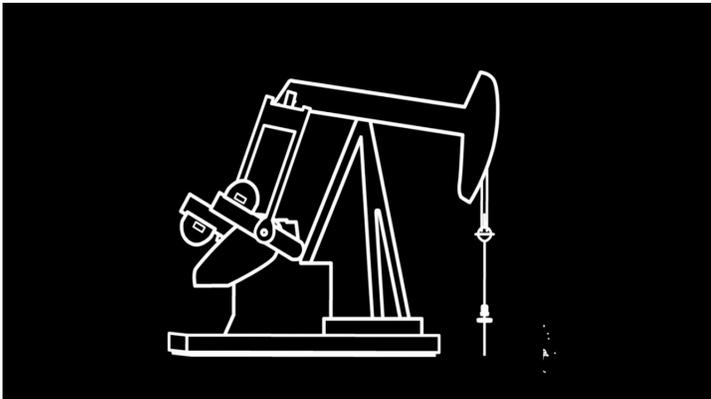


# Marina Zurkow

## The Thirsty Bird



Marina Zurkow, *The Thirsty Bird* (stills), 2012. Video animation (black and white, silent), 5:12 minutes. Animation assistance by Lindsay Nordell. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York.

CAM presents *The Thirsty Bird* (2012), a video animation by Marina Zurkow, as part of Street Views—projected on the museum’s facade from dusk to midnight. Zurkow focuses on the intersection of nature and culture, offering pointed critiques of this perilously dysfunctional relationship. In *The Thirsty Bird*, the artist explores issues around petroleum extraction and the ecological implications of our addiction to oil.

Nearly everyone who lives on the US power grid relies on petrochemicals for food, shelter, clothing, and mobility; yet few realize these oil-based products emerge in part from the expansive plateau known as “The Big Empty,” and are still processed in a massive refinery complex along the Texas Gulf Coast. In 2012, Zurkow spent two weeks in Texas’s Permian Basin,

researching oil production and meeting with geologists, naturalists, cattlemen, oilmen, and activists.

One of the outcomes of Zurkow’s research is *The Thirsty Bird*. On one side of a split screen image, viewers witness the seemingly eternal motion of an oil pump jack, known colloquially as a “thirsty bird.”



### Audio Tour

Visit [camstl.org/audio](http://camstl.org/audio) on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.

In the other frame a range of archetypal figures enter the scene to drink from a water fountain: a cowboy, a father and son, a sheriff, a girl and her dog. As the pump pulls oil upward, the fountain spurts water, in an infinite and interconnected dance. Zurkow's "thirsty" characters are pictograms based on ISOTYPE figures (International System of Typographic Picture Education), which were developed by a German socialist illustrator and a Viennese social scientist in 1930. They created these universal icons to better educate—or in their view, emancipate—the illiterate masses on the virtues of socialism. Zurkow appropriates anti-capitalist signs in a work based on the ubiquitous nature of the trillion-dollar oil industry—transforming the meaning of an early-20th-century visual language.

Through these symbols Zurkow visualizes our reliance on the interdependence of oil and water resources: the oil industry uses vast amounts of water to drill in a region where water is scarce, and there is an ever-present threat of contaminated drinking water from drilling. We participate in a dangerous cycle of consumption, with petroleum—fossil fuels—outlasting us all.

Throughout her practice, Zurkow investigates petroleum, the "magic medium," and its associations to human life cycles, rebirth, and even immortality. Petroleum can be turned into a multiplicity of particular plastics—polymers—which in turn become just about everything with which we interact. It is scalable and will outlive humans. And yet, it is made of microscopic, compressed marine creatures and plant life that died 250 million years ago. As the artist puts it, "the living may reside on the earth, but death fuels our pursuits." Like us, petroleum was once hydrocarbons—what we will become when we decompose. We are inextricably linked by our origins.

In her 2012 animation, *Hydrocarbons*, Zurkow also reveals notions of the eternal in a throw-away society. The work articulates the rapid proliferation of hydrocarbons and their endless potential for becoming plastics. Another recurring theme in her work is the use of metaphor as it enters into the visual language of icons and symbols. In 2018, Zurkow and the artist Viniyata Pany launched a set of mobile stickers about climate change, called *Climoji*. The icons—depicting melting sea ice, starving polar bears, and burning trees—convey non-linear, non-sentence based messages in an efficient and condensed manner. The hope is that these visual metaphors might amplify and naturalize the conversation around climate change. Zurkow speaks about an approach that defines much of her work: "I'm personally interested in creating new poetics—a multimedia language that makes climate change interesting, that sparks curiosity, and embraces the unstable or insecure aspects of living on earth."

**Marina Zurkow** (b. 1962, New York City) produces work that spans gallery installations and unconventional public participatory projects. Recent solo exhibitions of her work include bitforms gallery, New York; Chronus Art Center, Shanghai; and Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey. Her work has also been featured at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.; Borusan Collection, Istanbul; Brooklyn Academy of Music; Museum of the Moving Image, New York; Sundance Film Festival, Utah; Rotterdam Film Festival, Netherlands; and the Seoul Media City Biennial, Korea, among others. Zurkow is a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow. She has also been granted awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Creative Capital. She is a faculty member of the Bennington College Public Action MFA program and the ITP / Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and is represented by bitforms gallery, New York.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Whitaker Foundation.

*Marina Zurkow: The Thirsty Bird* is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York.



**Contemporary Art  
Museum St. Louis**  
3750 Washington Blvd  
St. Louis, MO 63108  
314.535.4660

#### **Connect with CAM**

**Visit** [camstl.org](http://camstl.org)  
**Facebook** [contemporaryartmuseumstl](https://www.facebook.com/contemporaryartmuseumstl)  
**Twitter** [contemporarystl](https://twitter.com/contemporarystl)  
**Instagram** [camstl](https://www.instagram.com/camstl)