
THE BOX

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Lydia Moyer

Tar Creek (2013)



Image courtesy Lydia Moyer

Who will remember the great work of memory itself, that basic human task? Deciding to remember, and what to remember, is how we decide who we are.

Robert Pinsky, "Poetry and American Memory,"
The Atlantic Monthly, 1999

Tar Creek is the true story of a land ravaged by humans that, over time, has ravaged humans in turn. And although it's not a history at the forefront of our collective memory, perhaps it should be. Located in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma, in the two towns of Picher and Cardin, the area known as Tar Creek was once home to a vast mining operation, part of a network of mines that spread into neighboring Kansas and Missouri. The area was discovered as an abundant source for zinc and lead in the early 1890s and over the next 70 years became the world's largest producer of these metals, which are used primarily for ammunition and construction. The extensive underground demolition had massive repercussions on the surface and, in the 1970s, it was discovered that the remaining mining waste had been poisoning the water, land, air, and over time, the towns' residents. Today, empty mines, hills of unusable and poisonous waste (known as chat piles), orange-tinted water, and an occasional sinkhole are the only remains of the towns' former life. These features are also the source of the area's distinction as one of the most toxic in the United States.

Focusing on absence as much as presence, Moyer depicts the landscape of *Tar Creek* in all its abandoned ruination. The few visual details that are present—chat piles that resemble mountain ranges, abandoned houses and

businesses, overgrown parking lots—tell a story of profound physical and social transformation. There is no *horror vacui* in Moyer's portrayal of Tar Creek; in fact, she embraces the visual emptiness, using a combination of archival and contemporary images to map this nonplace. An impassive voice-over, in which very few specific narrative details are offered, further removes the story from place and time. Moyer's strategies create a kind of alternate memory of or memorial to a place and people that no longer exist. Mysterious glittering globes of light that hover over the landscape are the only signs of activity. Could they be omniscient witnesses? An ephemeral embodiment of what has been lost? The spirit of the land itself?

Tar Creek is one of five videos that comprise Moyer's *Paradise* series, which focuses on sites of American tragedy, loss, and disaster (both natural and man-made). Some of the histories that Moyer explores are infamous and have a kind of mythical presence in our culture, such as Jonestown and Hurricane Katrina. Other stories, like that of Tar Creek, have not received the same level of media attention and therefore are not woven into our national memory, but they are no less devastating for their obscurity. The works in *Paradise* focus not on narrative aspects but rather on landscapes as empty relics of lost culture, always devoid of humans. Moyer's empty places are simultaneously monuments to the past and warnings for future generations.

Lydia Moyer lives and works in Virginia where she is a professor in the Department of Art at the University of Virginia. She received her BFA from the New York State School of Art and Design at Alfred University and an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to graduate school, she worked at Appalshop, Inc., a nationally known media center in Appalachian Kentucky where she taught community documentary classes. Her work has been shown widely in festivals and galleries including The European Media Arts Festival, Osnabruck, Germany; The Impakt Festival, Utrecht; video_dumbo, Brooklyn; the PDX Film Festival, Portland; the Black Maria Film Festival, Jersey City; Printed Matter, New York; and the Center for Book and Paper at Columbia College, Chicago. *Tar Creek* was created with the support of the Wexner Center's Film/Video Studio Program.

Jennifer Lange
Curator, Film/Video Studio Program

Lydia Moyer
Tar Creek, 2013
9 mins., video

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