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"Ask the Sea": Marine Poetics and Industrial Forces in Peter Iain Campbell's North Sea Photography

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Résumés

English Français
This paper draws on an Energy Humanities approach and seeks to analyse the depiction and the aestheticisation of Scottish petrocultures, more precisely through the offshore oil and gas industry in the North Sea and how they participate in shaping perceptions and imaginaries of the sea in a changing energy landscape. Peter Iain Campbell is a Scottish photographer whose work focuses on post-industrial landscapes and oil rigs in the North Sea. His survey of landscapes in the process of being decommissioned tends to convey a "petromelancholic aesthetics" (LeMenager), tainted by the "technological sublime" (Nye), and serves as an archive of this isolated and liminal space, tied to its end. This paper examines the tensions and interplays between industrial and marine forces at work in Campbell's photographs, oscillating between movement and stasis, the graphic and the organic, texture and abstraction. The photographs enable an ecocritical reading of Campbell's work where the marine element becomes central and "is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence" (Buell), as the photographic series' title *Ask the Sea* suggests. Instead, the resistance of the sea arises and turns into an elemental, marine poetics. The sea is given agency and becomes a participant in the creative process of the photographs.

Cet article se situe dans le champ théorique des Humanités énergétiques et propose d'analyser la représentation et l'esthétisation des pétrocultures écossaises, en se concentrant plus précisément sur l'industrie pétrolière et gazière offshore en mer du Nord et sur la manière dont elle contribue à façonner les perceptions et les imaginaires marins dans un paysage énergétique en mutation. Le photographe écossais Peter Iain Campbell s'intéresse aux paysages post-industriels, plus particulièrement aux plateformes d'extraction fossile en mer du Nord. Son œuvre se concentre notamment sur les sites en

cours de démantèlement, véhiculant une « esthétique pétromélancolique » (LeMenager), teintée du « sublime technologique » (Nye), le tout suivant une démarche documentaire de capture et d'archivage de cet espace en pleine mer, isolé, liminal et tendant vers sa fin. Cet article examine la manière dont les photographies de Peter Iain Campbell figurent une mise en tension et une confrontation entre forces industrielles et forces marines oscillant selon différents procédés (irruption du graphique dans l'organique, jeux de textures et abstraction, rapports entre mouvement et stase). Il s'agira de proposer une lecture écocritique des photographies tout en déterminant les modalités de la poétique marine à l'œuvre dans le travail de Peter Iain Campbell où l'élément marin devient central et « se constitue comme une véritable présence et non comme un cadre ou décor » (Buell), comme en témoigne notamment le titre de la série photographique *Ask the Sea*. Au-delà de l'idée d'une présence et d'une voix données à la mer, celle-ci exerce une forme de résistance. La mer se change alors en un véritable sujet qui exerce une agentivité dans ces paysages, jusqu'à devenir agent créateur et participer au processus photographique de certaines images.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Humanités énergétiques, photographie, Mer du Nord, pétrole et gaz, offshore, esthétique, poétique marine
Keywords: Energy Humanities, photography, North Sea, oil and gas, offshore, aesthetics, marine poetics

Texte intégral

Introduction

1 Humans and the more-than-human world collide in oceanic space, particularly in the context of the intensifying industrialisation of the aquatic milieu nowadays increasingly characterised by deep-sea mining activities, adding to the intensive exploitation dynamics encapsulated by the oil and gas apparatus. In the context of environmental emergency, oceanic space simultaneously becomes a site of resource extraction and of global ecological importance, as the recent blue turn of Humanities demonstrates. Industrial activities previously associated with the land are displaced and become estranged at sea. In the introduction to *The Urbanisation of the Sea* (2020), Nancy Couling and Carola Hein contend that "[t]he sea itself has been so transformed that it has become an enigmatic urbanised space, charged with the task of increased economic production both from traditional and new maritime sectors while at the same time it has been emptied of imaginative narratives and cultural significance" (6). The development of the oil and gas industry in the North Sea since the 1970s is considered to have helped implement an imaginary of the sea as *res nullius* or *aqua nullius*, namely as a reservoir of resources to be exploited, or as a blank space to be imparted with meaning. In the context of industry, the North Sea and, more generally, the offshore extraction regime are perceived as the last frontier to conquer. Though geographically remote from the shoreline and hard to access, offshore areas are nonetheless crucial to understanding our relationship to oil and energy. As Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson insist in the introduction to *Cold Water Oil*, "what happens offshore matters" (2). What unfolds away from sight should not be ignored nor overlooked, and, in fact, crystallises a unique facet of our relationship with oil and fossil fuels as a petro-society.

2 The offshore world is particular in that it connects the local and the global, being part of what Carola Hein calls the "global palimpsestic petroleumscape," which she defines as "a layered physical and social landscape that reinforces itself over time through human action and connects urban and rural spaces, culture and nature, materials and intangible practices" (3). The North Sea drilling industry tends to reshape local sea imaginaries. Distance and discrepancy between land and offshore experiences create a form of deterritorialisation, in the sense of a rupture and a separation from the terrestrial realm. Perception of the offshore world is thus tainted with unfamiliarity, abnormality, a sense of danger and unknowability. As a result, the rigs are perceived as mysterious, strange objects, erect and facing the waves and wind.

3 This paper draws on an Energy Humanities approach and aims to analyse the depiction and the aestheticisation of the offshore oil and gas industry in the North Sea. It seeks to study

representations of Scottish petrocultures and how they participate in shaping perceptions and imaginaries of the sea in a changing energy landscape. The Energy Humanities is an emerging field spawning from Environmental Humanities, contending that energy has been set aside for too long, whereas it is an essential component to understand modernity, capitalism and climate change. Energy Humanities scholars aim to understand how energy shapes societies, habits, beliefs, and cultural productions by investigating "our deep, unquestioned, and still underexplored relationship to energy" (Diamanti and Szeman 1). They highlight the need to consider energy as shaping our aesthetic and affective experiences to try and depart from the current "energy impasse" (After Oil Collective).

4 In order to study the aesthetics of Scottish offshore petrocultures, and drawing from Energy Humanities concerns, this paper focuses on the photographic work of Peter Iain Campbell. The award-winning Scottish photographer is primarily interested in post-industrial landscapes and seascapes, thus inherently tying together blue and energy concerns. Campbell is specialised in offshore oil and gas drilling rig photography, and he also documents the decommissioning process of such structures. He particularly focuses on the northern fields located between the Shetland Islands and Norway, among which the Ninian and Brent fields.[1] Both fields peaked in the eighties before their production gradually decreased until they became part of decommissioning processes from 2017 to 2024. Photographing the North Sea offshore oil and gas installation requires undergoing specific processes. In order to access such remote locations and to enter these secretive and sensitive sites, Campbell trained and passed the mandatory security training to work offshore, which included "being strapped to a seat inside a metal cylinder and then submerged in a large, deep pool of tepid water, to perform helicopter safety and escape drills" to get acquainted with the unfamiliar offshore hazards and conditions (Campbell "Starlings on Fire").

5 Campbell then spent over two years working shifts offshore from 2014 to 2016 in order to photograph the industry from the inside for his *Starlings on Fire* project. He started to shoot after a period of five months of rotations, initially photographing at night, after his shifts, from the machines to the workers, shooting either from the rigs or from the supplying vessels. Through his "North Sea" work, Campbell seeks to capture and archive an industrial landscape in the process of being decommissioned and dismantled in a remote, liminal space in the open sea. Campbell merges documentary practice and artistic expression, simultaneously bearing witness and producing aesthetic artefacts.

6 Campbell's photographic projects discussing the representation of Scottish petrocultures can be considered in relation to the work of women artists Fay Godwin (1931-2005) and Jane Sue Taylor (1960–). Fay Godwin photographed the offshore complex in the 1970s in the context of the oil boom, depicting the area around Aberdeen's industrial harbour and the newly built offshore platforms. Her black-and-white documentary photographs were published in the book *The Oil Rush* (1976) along with critical texts by Mervyn Jones on the early developments of the rapidly growing oil and gas industry and its impacts on the landscapes and local communities. Peter Iain Campbell extends this lineage, photographing from another crucial phase in the history of the North Sea oil and gas industry, namely a period of industrial decline, decommissioning and transition. In that sense, his work also resonates with that of multimedia artist Sue Jane Taylor whose elaborate and vibrant drawings and composite images capture both fossil-fuel and renewable offshore infrastructures. Taylor has shown particular interest in documenting the social history of the lives of workers unfolding offshore. In her exhibition entitled *Age of Oil* (National Museum of Scotland, 2017), Taylor brought together large-scale drawings, fragments of her diaries from residencies on offshore platforms, as well as oral testimonies and material artefacts from daily offshore experience. Her broad explorations also echo Campbell's endeavour to incorporate portraits of workers within his series, paying attention to the social dimension of his photographs, while interweaving the genres of landscape, seascape, portrait, typology and night photography.

7 This paper aims to draw on Couling and Hein's argument according to which "[n]ovel approaches that combine culture, imaginaries, and non-industrial narratives are needed to fully understand the North Sea and other oceans" (12). Similarly, in her article "Extractive Poetics: Marine Energies in Scottish Literature," Alexandra Campbell

> urges the adoption of an oceanic perspective of Scottish energy cultures, one that registers how the extractivist policies of oil production in Scotland not only presents major challenges for terrestrially-bound environment and communities, but holds

> specific ramifications for the ways in which we currently imagine and interact with oceanic space. (2)

8 This article seeks to expand upon Alexandra Campbell's endeavours and to attempt a marine, ecopoetic reading of Peter Iain Campbell's photographs. In order to do so, an ecocritical perspective will be applied to photography, using Laurence Buell's framework to envisage the sea as more than a background upon which the rigs are placed.

9 This article focuses on a selection of Peter Iain Campbell's seascape photographs extracted from his different "North Sea" series spanning from 2014 to the present: *North Sea*; *Seascapes*; *Starlings on Fire*; *Ask the Sea* and *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing*[2]. The article examines the ways in which Peter Iain Campbell's photography enables an aesthetic dialogue between man-made, industrial forces and natural, marine forces. It also considers the emergence of a marine poetics. The term 'poetics' is applied to photography, seeking to study the forms, processes and visual strategies through which meaning and affect are produced. Here, the emergence of a marine poetics is notably characterised by the sea becoming a creative agent influencing the composition of the photographs.

1. Offshore Petro-Temporality

10 Peter Iain Campbell's work enables an encounter between the temporalities of oil, of the sea, and of photography, which converge and collide within photographic space. The temporality of oil is specific, stretching back to geologic deep time and expanding into an uncertain and unstable future characterised by the depletion of resources to extract and by the accumulation of plastic and carbon dioxide pollution. In the afterword to *Fueling Culture*, Imre Szeman reminds us that "[l]ooming in the background of any discussion of oil and energy are *finitude* and *the future*" (Szeman *et al.* 392, Szeman's emphasis). These questions are embedded in the trajectory of oil in several ways, encompassing the horizon of Peak Oil, the perspective of the end of conventional oil reserves, leading to the development of unconventional modes of extraction, such as tar sands and hydraulic fracking, for example. The temporality of oil also encompasses the idea of finitude in the broader context of the Anthropocene and of mass extinction, of death associated with global change and the failure of western, industrial, and capitalist civilisations.

11 The question of finitude is central to Campbell's approach. His photographic exploration seeks to document the end of the oil and gas offshore industry by creating an archive, or in his words, a "time capsule" (Campbell "Starlings on Fire"). Campbell captures a specific and ambivalent stage of the offshore oil and gas installation, namely a moment of transition, that of its announced and planned decommissioning.[3] In order to create and enhance this sense of a time capsule—which could be perceived as being inherently specific to photography[4]—and to compose his archive of the offshore Scottish industry, Campbell uses a thorough method similar to Bernd and Hilla Becher's typology. By referencing their work, Campbell situates his photographic practice in the lineage of industrial photography and in dialogue with the tradition established by the seminal exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape* curated by Williams Jenkins in 1975 at the George Eastman House in Rochester, where the Bechers' work was featured. Their typologies awakened an artistic interest in industrial architecture, challenging traditional conceptions of landscape photography, turning attention to man-made and industrial structures that were deemed unaesthetic, which they depicted through an objective, detached style. With a repeated framing and angle, almost like a template, centring the object, capturing it from different sides, Campbell produces a mechanical portraiture and a meticulous inventory of the oil rigs, particularly in his project *Ask the Sea* (Images 1 and 2).

Image 1: Peter Iain Campbell, "Beryl Bravo Platform, Block 9/13a, Beryl Field, North Sea {16.07.19}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

Image 2: Peter Iain Campbell, "Gannet A Platform, Block 21/25, Gannet Field, central North Sea {08.19}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

12 As a series, the photographs from *Ask the Sea* produce an ensemble of repetitions and variations. While roaming through the images, the viewer gradually observes the platforms' structures—through a process of recurrence and accumulation—growing increasingly uncanny: they seem to become familiar to our gaze,, yet they remain foreign and alien.[5] This impression is reinforced by the lack of spatial landmarks in the photographs. The standard image of the oil rig slightly changes and seems altered from one photograph to the next, producing an ensemble of interconnected, echoing infrastructures. In addition, the recurring square format enhances the representation of the industry as a system, a series of metallic structures and an entangled network of pipes and broken lines.

13 Campbell's images are also tainted with petromelancholia. Petromelancholia is a concept coined by Stephanie LeMenager, referring to "an unresolved grieving of conventional fossil fuel reserves" (16). The muted and faded colours of the rusty structure in some of the shots tend to create a visual petromelancholic atmosphere and metaphorically depict a vanishing industry. Petromelancholia as an aesthetic principle also emerges from the very paradox contained within the oil rig as a place. Campbell's different photographic series allow for an encounter between the ghostly, misty platforms (Images 3 and 4) and portraits of oil rig workers scattered with fragments of daily life scenes on the platforms; both aspects collide within the scope and range of the series, providing complementary perspectives from inside and from outside the platforms. These opposite visual representations allow for contrasting, even contradictory representations of the drilling platforms. The depiction of oil rigs therefore oscillates between strange, unfamiliar places and homelike places that sustain life, devices that are unsustainable and that nonetheless shape and sustain our current modes of living and comfort. Petromelancholia also stems from the very photographic endeavours and intentions presented by Campbell. His photographs of the disappearing industry, including the depiction of the communities of oil workers aboard, interrogate what moving away from fossil might entail for them. Ultimately, this petromelancholic dimension invites us to face the necessity to address practices and cultural habits related to oil.

2. On the Technological Sublime, Ruins, and the Spectrality of Oil

14 The tension between the familiar and the strange induced here through the uncanny and petromelancholia also mirrors that contained within the aesthetic category of the technological sublime, another prism through which to examine Campbell's photographs.[6] Whereas the sublime—an aesthetic experience and emotion discussed by Burke and Kant, characterised by awe, by simultaneous feelings of fascination and terror—originally stems from facing and experiencing the forces of nature, particularly natural catastrophes, as well as high mountain ranges, or the great vastness and force of the ocean, Campbell's photographs lean into another category, that of the technological sublime. With the technological sublime, the experience of overwhelming power and irresistible fascination stemming from grandeur in nature shifts to awe inspired by technology, by man's ability to overcome and master nature. Often explored in an American context, the technological sublime conveys values associated with the notions of conquest, frontier and expansion (Nye 39). The oil rig structure, erected in the middle of the ocean's surface, is standing against the elements. With the slightly low-angle shot, the towering platform almost pertains to brutalist aesthetics, especially on some of the black and white shots. The oil rig has become the sublime element central to the images, undermining the traditionally sublime presence of the ocean. The shift from the conventional sublime to the technological sublime of oil rigs might be linked to the discrepancy between sailors' and rig workers' relationship with the sea. These differ when it comes to life on drilling platforms as opposed to seafaring activities. Oil and gas workers tend to develop less direct contact with and knowledge of the sea:

> [R]ig and platform-based activity focuses primarily on extracting what lies beneath the sea floor; a pursuit that requires quite different skills to fish harvesting. […] Indeed, [rig workers'] work stations are literally meters above the surface of the sea. While sailors on modern cargo vessels, cruise ships and other gargantuan contemporary craft may also rarely need to get wet, they still have a more vested interest in ocean and weather conditions as they attempt to navigate from one location to another. (Polack and

15 The platforms are very different from a vessel and do not display any palpable relationship to the sea, which is seen as an obstacle. The interest lies in the suboceanic, the ocean floor's cavities containing oil and gas. Oil rigs' activities do not call for or require an understanding of the movements and cycles of the ocean and rather correspond to another conception of and approach to the sea. The issue is how to go through it following a vertical rather than horizontal impulsion and movement. It is thus possible to view this discrepancy as mirroring the shift from the sublime to the technological sublime. The sublime does not solely stem from the ocean anymore: the technological structures are erected *as* sublime monuments, and the inherent depleted character of the fossil reserves makes them ruins to be from the moment they are constructed.

16 An aesthetics of ruins is also visible as Campbell both references and distances himself from the traditional depiction of ruins, playing with common tropes. The platforms turning into ruins result mostly from an unnatural process, not from the actions of time and nature per se but from human intervention—although the notion of finitude remains embedded in the very nature of fossil fuels. While ruins are often framed as an encounter or an alliance between nature and culture (Simmel 50-51), here, the vegetal realm does not overcome the mineral. Instead, the metallic, even as rust, dominates. Besides, the reference to Bernd and Hilla Becher's typology further inscribes the images in an aesthetics of abandoned industrial places, which consists in a more recent inflection of the theoretical framing of ruins, one that is not only concerned with notable monuments or architecture but rather encompasses a wider range of places, such as derelict factories, or deserted warehouses now so popular among urbex enthusiasts. The rigs shot by Campbell thus resonate with Robert Smithson's concept of "ruins in reverse", which he coined while observing places such as construction sites, wastelands, and industrial areas. He defines these anti-ruins as "[…] the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other 'out of date' things" (Smithson 72, Smithson's own emphasis).

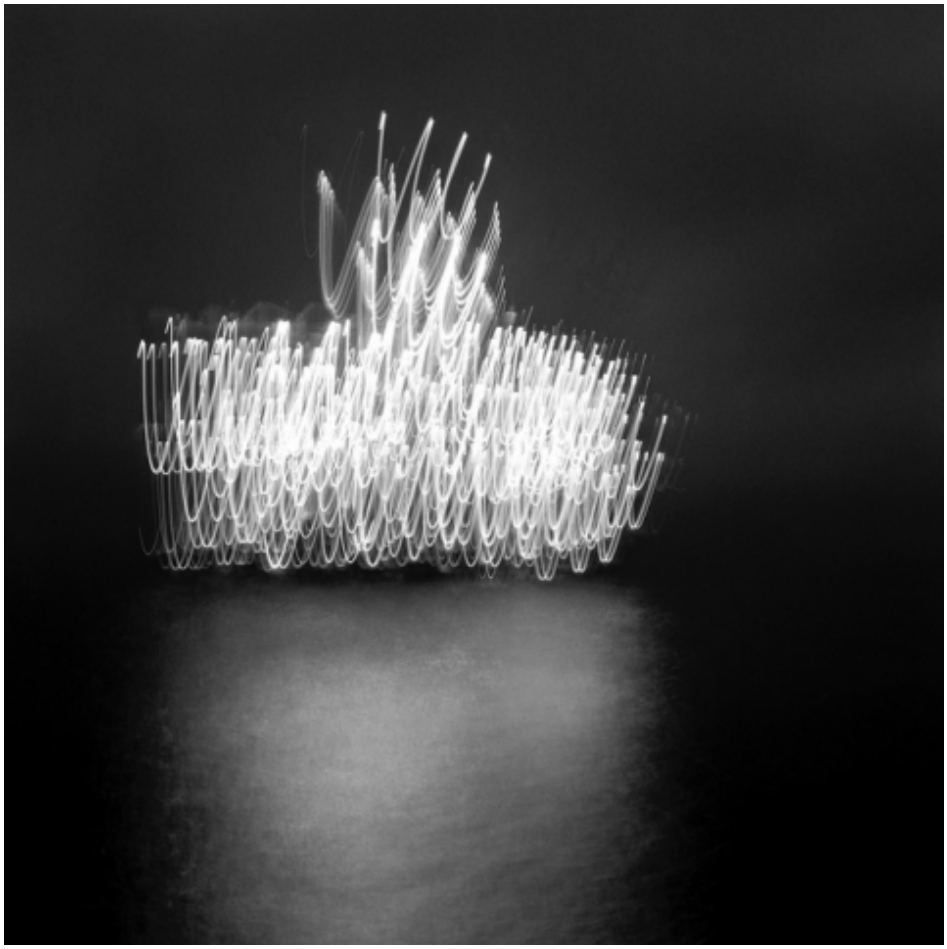
17 The decommissioning processes tend to extend and complicate the motif of the ruin further, as the rigs are ultimately meant to be dismembered. The concept of ruin itself thus becomes tied to a form of finitude and accelerated disintegration (Image 10). Still, it is precisely the photographic medium which enables the oil rigs' carcasses to be captured *as ruins*, following the different steps of the dismantling process, particularly in the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing*. The platforms' ruins, once extracted and estranged from their usual, functional environment, are brought back to the shore and laid there for them to turn into obsolete structures. The transitory process of decomposition gives rise to a permanent ruin through the use of photography, participating in the construction of a form of memory of the oil rigs.[7]

18 Some of the photographs complicate the depiction and the metaphor of the end of the industry. At times the rigs and platforms are presented as being gradually erased from the landscape, disappearing through the mist, turning into evanescent figures. Yet, in most photographs, the oil rigs become an ominous presence, looming on the horizon (Image 3). Spectrality is thus double-sided: oscillating between disappearance and haunting, perhaps hinting at the damage caused by the oil industry and the ensuing long-term pollution upon ecosystems. In Image 4, the luminous presence of the rig is visible, ominously floating in mid-air above the surface of the sea, in the manner of a phantom vessel. It makes for an almost unintelligible image, disorienting and unsettling our perception and comprehension of the seascape.

Image 3: Peter Iain Campbell, "RG-V Drilling Rig Franklin Platform, Franklin Field, central North Sea {04.18}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

Image 4: Peter Iain Campbell, "Brent Alpha Platform, Brent Field, northern North Sea {18.07.18}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)



Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

19 By archiving the rigs, Campbell envisions them as something past, as obsolete, ready-made ruins, announcing a form of failure of this industry. Although Peter Iain Campbell spent time offshore and shot the rigs during a period of gradual and increasing decommissioning, documenting an industry then thought to be disappearing, the decommissioned platforms do not signify the end of the oil industry. As Jason Haslam remarks in his contribution to *Cold Water Oil*, "[i]t's not enough to decommission just individual rigs, or pipelines, or what-have-you: petroculture is a rhizomatic, fractal entity that will continually resurrect" (Polack and Farquharson 103). Indeed, successive British governments have tended to go back and forth on North Sea extraction matters. Under Sunak, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) sought to issue numerous permits for exploration and drilling, but that policy was reversed after Starmer came to power. The fate of the oil and gas drilling industry thus remains uncertain and could very much vary, from decommissioning platforms on depleted fields to the possibility of prospecting and operating new offshore fields.[8]

20 Overall, it seems that Peak Oil and the perspective of the end of the industry as a whole are no longer on the horizon, especially with the extensive development of new techniques, such as hydraulic fracking, particularly in the United States.[9] Processes of decommissioning and dismantling are still occurring at a local scale and raise the matter of recycling and waste treatment—yet another conception of the end. In Scotland, it is particularly the case in the decommissioning sites of Shetland and Dales Voe, where what is left of the offshore industry becomes a point of contact between sea and land, along the shoreline. Once brought in to land, out of place, or rather, brought back into place, re-connected to familiar environments, these gigantic structures become even more uncanny.[10]

21 The series *North Sea II {Slate coloured storm, passing}* enables an alternative and metaphorical reading of offshore landscapes (Image 5). The use of black and white photography unsettles perception and comprehension: the sea is given a mineral texture and thus enters the formal and aesthetic realm of the geological. Although the subtitle hints at the ephemeral with the mention of a storm and the use of the progressive form "passing," this emphasis on the minerality of water enables a comment on the sea's own age and temporality, which extends towards deep time and bypasses human and petroleum time scales. These images provide us with a suggestive visual depiction and metaphor of this double geological depth, that of oil and that of water, thus turning into a meditative, metaphysical dimension. Photographing in black and white produces another form of temporal phenomenon. The images from this series not only create a time capsule but they also turn to a form of atemporality, which extracts them from any identifiable timeframe and rather locates them within a suspended, mythic, and lithic time.

Image 5: Peter Iain Campbell, "West Franklin Platform, from the Havila Commander PSV {Platform Supply Vessel}, Franklin Field, central North Sea {11.04.18}," from the series *North Sea II {Slate coloured storm, passing}*

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/north-sea-ii

22 Besides, the paradoxical figuration of the mineral through liquidity also evokes the

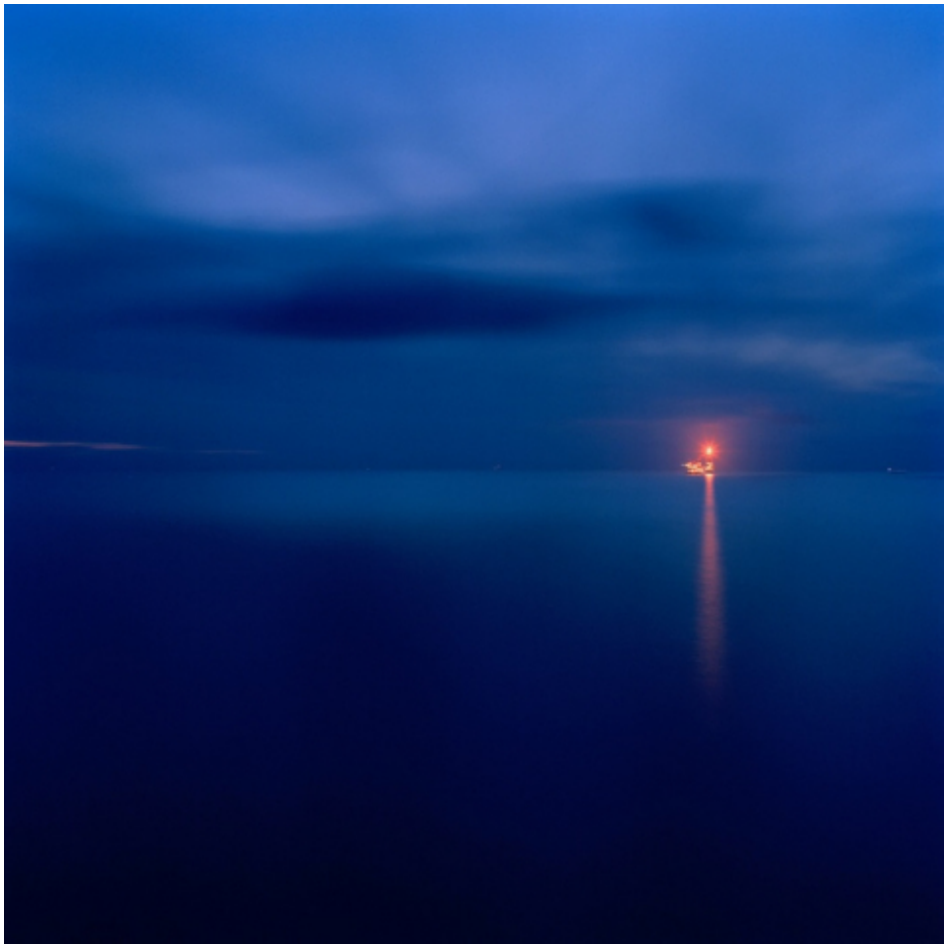
presence of oil as substance. The dark hues of the sea recall the blackness of oil and help connect the liquidity of the sea to the viscosity of oil; what was invisible is revealed. The suboceanic, latent and unsaid presence of oil (and gas) is central to the images. Although oil as such is absent from the photographs, it remains very much present in a metonymic manner through the infrastructure and as the very reason for industrial exploration and exploitation. As Alexandra Campbell remarks: "Since the 1970s the North Sea can be regarded as a place largely synonymous with oil" (7). The seascapes of the North Sea can be considered primarily as a landscape of oil, which brings together natural and industrial elements, for oil itself is linked to both; it exists both through nature and through the industry, and is often made more palpable through industrial captation, transformation and consumption.

3. From a "Collision Between Industry and Nature" to a Marine Resistance

23 Peter Iain Campbell often mentions the tensions between industrial and marine forces which emerge within his work. He is "intrigued by the incongruous existence of the offshore Oil and Gas Installation", which he names "a collision between industry and nature" and he talks about his explorative approach as a "search for the antithesis" (Campbell "Starlings on Fire"). In his different photographic series, the contacts between industrial and marine elements are often expressed through a paradigm of contrasts and oppositions. In this remote location, the open sea is nonetheless strewn with man-made structures, which appear as incongruous intrusions, rising out of the North Sea's surface.

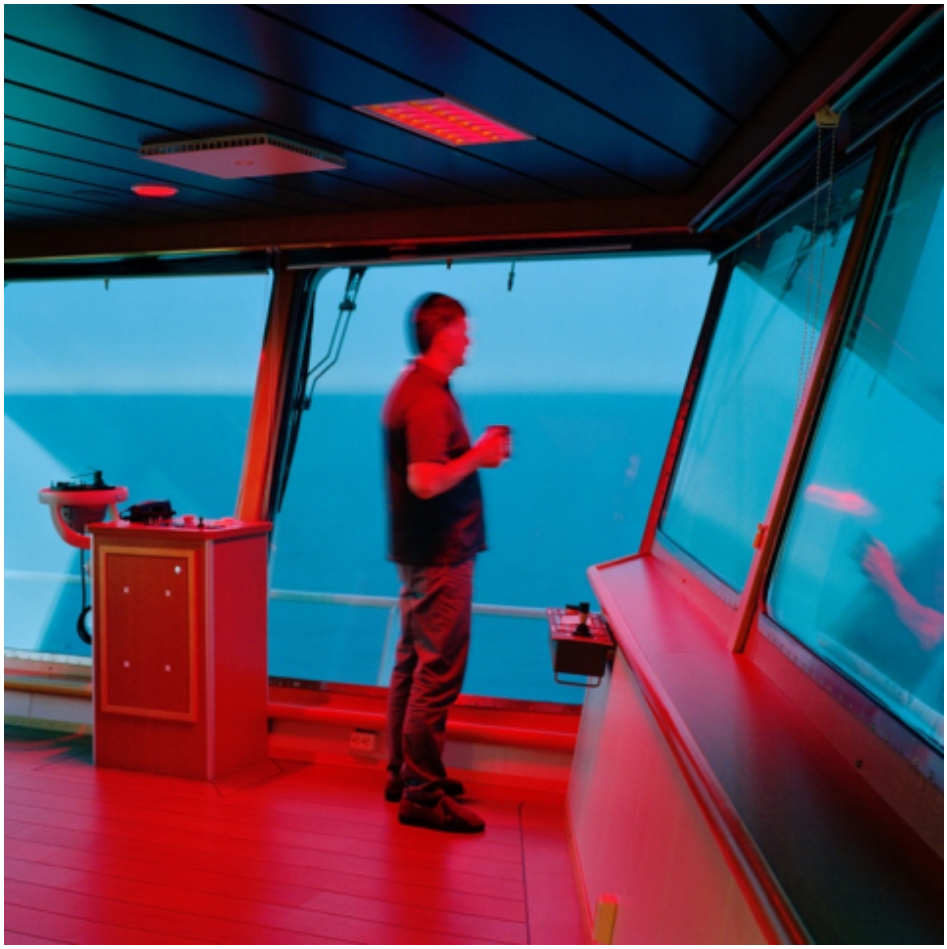
24 This sense of intrusion is materialised in the frame of the photographs thanks to the exploration of a wide range of visual principles and techniques, gradually creating a paradigm of contrasts. Colour contrasts between warm and cool tones, saturated and faded out colours, or contrasts between primary colours are combined with contrasts of proportions. The overwhelming deep and bright blue colour, sometimes a deep electric blue, is disrupted by the sudden eruption of the red lights of the rigs in the distance (Image 6). The recurring systems of oppositions between natural and artificial light reinforce further the sense of two opposite forces colliding (Image 7).

Image 6: Peter Iain Campbell, "Seascape #63. Shearwater Platform from the Prospector 1 Drilling Rig, Franklin Field, central North Sea {10.06.15 @ 3:50am}," from the series *Seascapes {58°02'N 001°08'E} {57°10'N 2°00'E}* (2015-2017)



Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/seascapes-2015-2017

Image 7: Peter Iain Campbell, "Colin, Captain - Havila Commander PSV, Alwyn Field, northern North Sea {07.18}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)



Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

25 The art of photography inherently tends to make objects appear static since it captures, extracts, and freezes in space and time. Yet Campbell's photographs represent an interplay between movement and stasis, oscillating between the stillness of the oil rig structures, rooted some 90 metres underneath, as an immovable force, and the profound kinetic energy of the sea, ever moving, at times crashing against the platforms.

26 The encounter between movement and stasis is frequently figured in terms of shapes and textures, dynamics and lines with an irruption of the graphic onto the organic. This visual rupture is characterised by the sharp discrepancy between the organic dimension of the North Sea as an inscrutable, opaque, and massive entity clashing with enmeshed, interlaced networks, themselves unreadable and unintelligible (Image 8). Here, the contrast between smooth space and striated space functions both in a visual, aesthetic dimension and on a more theoretical, metaphorical level referring to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. The striated space of the oil rigs—contained, mapped, compartmentalised, territorialised—is opposed to the smooth space of the North Sea, one that cannot be seized in its entirety (Image 9).

Image 8: Peter Iain Campbell, "Cantilever, Prospector 1 Drilling Rig Franklin Platform {05.16}," from the series *Starlings on Fire* (2014-2016)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/starlings-on-fire

Image 9: Peter Iain Campbell, "Seascape #135. Shearwater Platform from the Prospector 1 Drilling Rig, Franklin Field, central North Sea {13.07.15 @ 4:22am}," from the series *Seascapes {58°02'N 001°08'E} {57°10'N 2°00'E}* (2015-2017)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/seascapes-2015-2017

27 These series of visual devices and principles converge to express a range of relationships between two very distinct realms brought together in the offshore petrocultural landscape of the North Sea: at times an encounter, at times a friction, oscillating between intrusion and resistance. Some of Campbell's more recent shots documenting the processes of onshore dismantling depict the pillars of the oil platforms and the scraps of metal which have been corroded and oxidised through time, worn away by repeated contact and immersion within salt water (Image 10). Photographs from the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* also portray clusters of mussels that developed along the gigantic, immersed pillars. Some images from the same series also reveal seagulls nesting on the drilling platforms across the North Sea, which thus become environments where wildlife adapts and develops, materialising a marine resistance. This raises the question of whether to leave or remove these pillars, given the potential consequences on marine biodiversity.

Image 10: Peter Iain Campbell, "Ferrous Metal Brent Bravo, Able Yard UK, Teesside, England {09.07.20}," from the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* (2020-present)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/their-helicopters-no-longer-sing

28 Throughout the different series, numerous photographs focus on the overpowering, overwhelming presence of the materiality of the sea. Some of ecocritic Lawrence Buell's criteria, originally applied to literature, may provide a theoretical basis for analysing Peter Iain Campbell's images. Drawing on the following principles, we can posit a framework for conceptualising environmental photography: "The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence"; "The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest"; "Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text" (Buell 6-8).

29 Centring on the sea and making it the subject of representation help to perceive it not merely as what Alexandra Campbell has termed a "vast, infinite, and resilient storehouse" (8) or as *aqua nullius*. The sea in these photographs operates as a form of resistance, becoming at times an engulfing, belittling, and disorienting force, so much so that it influences the very creative process of the images.

4. Emergence of an Elemental, Marine Poetics

30 One of Peter Iain Campbell's series is entitled *Ask the Sea*, which he references as being extracted from Basil Bunting's poem "Coda":

> Night, float us.
> Offshore wind, shout,
> Ask the sea
> What's lost, what's left [...].

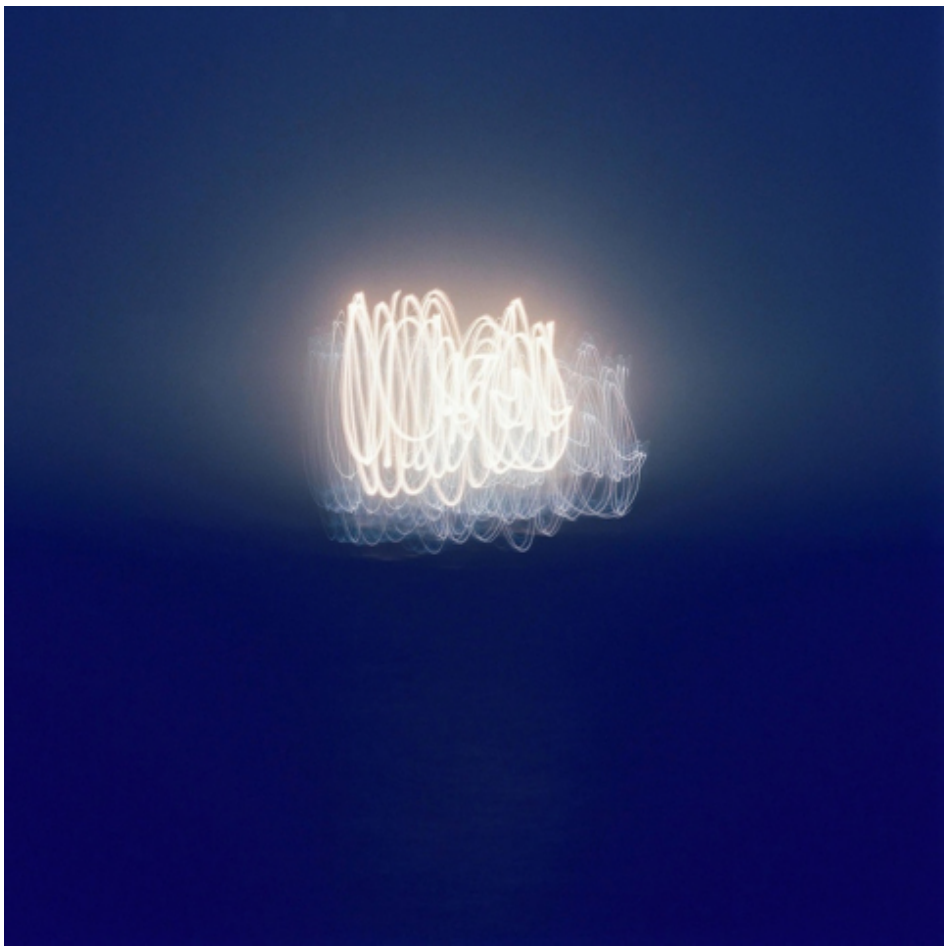
31 Through the process of personification, along with other natural elements mentioned—night and wind—the sea is presented as a figure of knowledge, testifying to changes and time passing. The sea is depicted as an active presence. His allusion to this poem may bear witness to Peter Iain Campbell's desire to envisage the sea as a living entity with agency. It also suggests that one way of exploring and analysing his photographs is through an elemental,

marine prism, using theories of vital materialism.

32 Jane Bennett's principle of vital materialism can help view the sea in a different light. In her seminal publication *Vibrant Matter*, she defines vitality thus: "[b]y 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Bennett develops the concept of "vibrancy" both to theorise "a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance" (xiii). The sea's vibrancy is enhanced through the visual features displayed in the shots, particularly with the recurring presence of the saturated, deep, all-encompassing blue encountered earlier (Images 6, 7, 11). The term "vibrancy" also evokes the idea of brightness and of pulsation and is close to the conceptualisation of energy as a substance pulsating with life.

33 In Campbell's images, the sea is not only imparted with vitality and vibrancy, it also becomes an actual agent participating in the creation of the photographs. In some images, Peter Iain Campbell plays with shutter speed and exposure time and records the movements of the sea, materialised by the rigs' and vessels' lights (Image 11). The blue shade is reminiscent of the early marine life calotypes by Anna Atkins. This image can be read as offering a metaphotographic commentary reminiscent of the first conceptualisations of the photographic medium as "the pencil of nature" as William Henry Fox Talbot stated. Here, the source of light, the luminous pencil is that of the rig; yet the force drawing the image is the North Sea. Symbolically, a marine poetics also emerges from the very agency of nature, inscribing its own movement onto the photosensitive surface following the sway of the sea. The camera as a technological, human device is met with a form of agency stemming from nonhuman forces. Here the sea becomes an agential force distinct from that of the photographer and participates in the creative process of the image. The photographs are transformed into more than the capture of a single moment in time; they become the transcription of the sea's oscillation and force. Several layers of movement are superimposed, according to a cyclical rhythm which delineates the fuzzy shapes of the rigs as blurry, strange objects. The images produced through this process are minimalist, composed of colour fields reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism and striated by graphic lines of light.

Image 11: Peter Iain Campbell, "Night time oscillation - Forties Alpha Platform, Forties Field, central North Sea {05.04.19 @ 8:32pm}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present)



Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea

Image 12: Peter Iain Campbell, "Safety Standby Vessel {SSBV}, Britannia Field, central North Sea {25.09.17}," **from the series *Seascapes {58°02'N 001°08'E} {57°10'N 2°00'E}* (2015-2017)**

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/seascapes-2015-2017

34 I will now turn to a specific side of Campbell's photography which emerges through the accumulation of the serial format, as well as through the repeated use of the square format, and which is in line with an ecopoetic reading of his images. Browsing through Campbell's photographs, a series of shifts from figuration towards abstraction becomes perceptible, to such an extent that colour and pure abstraction sometimes become all there is in a photograph (Image 12). Abstraction turns some of the photographs into unintelligible images. The usual relation of continuity and referentiality with the real, which is normally associated with photography, is complicated. While photography never allows for a perfectly objective one-to-one correspondence with its physical referent, the discrepancy between reality and its reproduction is deepened. The photograph becomes intelligible once the title and the context are made evident. Particularly, the abstract photographs shot using a long exposure time challenge the ontological, indexical nature of photography: they do not replicate what the eye can see; instead they reveal the shape and force that are invisible to the naked eye. Through abstraction, the sea becomes omnipresent, all-encompassing in a more symbolic way, turning into an opaque surface, simultaneously awful and wonderful. Abstraction reinforces the presence of alterity, of something other, nonhuman, partaking in the making of the image. The square format repeatedly used by Campbell intensifies the abstract quality of some of the photographs. It places the photographs beyond boundaries and landmarks. The seascapes are neither inscribed in verticality nor in horizontality and seem to bear witness to a refusal to use traditional landscape or portrait format. The refusal of horizontality is particularly significant in the unsettling of spatial landmarks since it is usually used to depict the sea and to enhance the presence of the horizon line.

35 Delineating the main traits of a marine poetics emerging from Peter Iain Campbell's work would include 1) the use of unfamiliar, unconventional format to depict seascapes; 2) the use of abstraction as a means to create space for alterity and for nonhuman vibrancy to emerge; 3) experimenting with environmental agency within the creative process. In this context, a marine poetics would also be characterised by the overall attitude of making space for serendipity and accepting what cannot be controlled as fully belonging in the creative process.

Conclusion

36 Photography is a mechanical capture, a technological mode of recording. It replicates the mechanism of the human eye and is thus always centred upon a human perspective. In other words, photography always brings us back to an anthropocentric perspective. Perhaps the idea of an entanglement, of an assemblage—contained in the very conception of landscape as being composed of the smooth and the striated, of the marine and the industrial—becomes particularly prominent through art, where a form of dialogue, in the manner of a collaboration, creates more of an intimacy between the photographer and the sea, between the human and the nonhuman. To a certain extent, photography is elemental in essence in that it exists thanks to light, which is itself affected by the weather, by the matter onto which the light falls, and so on. In the context of Campbell's creations, there is also a kinetic force that participates in the aesthetic composition of the photograph which comes from the sea's very movement of ebb and flow.

37 This elemental, marine force that emerges as an active agent in the photographs could take on another meaning in the context of the energy transition in Scotland. Peter Iain Campbell brings to the fore, perhaps in a more implicit way, the energetic possibilities of the ocean by capturing the trace of its kinetic potential. Some images lean towards an exploration of the very forces of the sea instead of what lays underneath the seabed, namely oil and gas. Campbell's work enables a discussion on the Scottish energy landscape by metaphorically illustrating the potential of future energy systems, with tidal technologies being developed in Orkney at the European Marine Energy Centre. Some of Campbell's images also more broadly connect to the depiction of the energy transition with images of the Brent Alpha platform being dismantled while wind turbine pillars are erected in the background (Image 13). Campbell's photographs could prove particularly stimulating in order to explore a more implicit connection to energy transition in marine environments.

Image 13: Peter Iain Campbell, "Decommissioned Brent Alpha Platform, Able Yard UK, Teesside,

England {18.01.22},” from the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* (2020-present)

Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/their-helicopters-no-longer-sing

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Image 6. Peter Iain Campbell, "Seascape #63. Shearwater Platform from the Prospector 1 Drilling Rig, Franklin Field, central North Sea {10.06.15 @ 3:50am}," from the series *Seascapes {58°02'N 001°08'E} {57°10'N 2°00'E}* (2015-2017). © Peter Iain Campbell

Image 7. Peter Iain Campbell, "Colin, Captain - Havila Commander PSV, Alwyn Field, northern North Sea {07.18}," from the series *Ask the Sea* (2018-present). © Peter Iain Campbell

Image 8. Peter Iain Campbell, "Cantilever, Prospector 1 Drilling Rig Franklin Platform {05.16}," from the series *Starlings on Fire* (2014-2016). © Peter Iain Campbell

Image 9. Peter Iain Campbell, "Seascape #135. Shearwater Platform from the Prospector 1 Drilling Rig, Franklin Field, central North Sea {13.07.15 @ 4:22am}," from the series *Seascapes {58°02'N 001°08'E} {57°10'N 2°00'E}* (2015-2017). © Peter Iain Campbell

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Image 13. Peter Iain Campbell, "Decommissioned Brent Alpha Platform, Able Yard UK, Teesside, England {18.01.22}," from the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* (2020-present). © Peter Iain Campbell

Notes

1 Campbell is the 2024-2026 artist-in-residence at the Centre for Energy Ethics from the University of Saint Andrews, one of the most active Energy Humanities research groups in Europe. During this residency, Campbell aims to pursue the documentation of oil structure decommissioning by getting access to onshore dismantling sites. He also plans to cover the offshore wind industry which he perceives as the natural progression of his work, trying to adapt to the mutations of the North Sea energy industry. In addition, Campbell intends to develop his investigations through filming.

2 The overall movement and evolution of Campbell's work can be summed up as follows: the earlier series *North Sea* and *Seascapes* tend to capture the rigs from a distance, often through nocturnal seascapes, while *Starlings on Fire* and *Ask the Sea* move closer to the rigs, as they offer insights into the daily life aboard the rigs and include portraits of workers. The more recent series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* focuses on the decommissioning and inland dismantling processes. The article does not consider Campbell's recent monograph *We Drift Like Worried Fire* (Another Place Press, released in March 2025).

3 North Sea decommissioning processes first started to be framed and regulated under the 1998 Petroleum Act.

4 Roland Barthes theorised on an ontological value of photography with his concept "that-has been" ("*ça-a-été*"), an effect through which photography testifies of and bears witness to what once *was*.

5 From the German *unheimliche*—which can be roughly translated by 'unhomely'—the uncanny was defined foremost by Sigmund Freud as "that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1). In *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Freud also quotes previous research from philosopher F. W. J. Schelling who defines the uncanny as "the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible." Freud, Sigmund. *The "Uncanny."* Translated

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6 In the specific context of the representation of petrocultural infrastructures and energy infrastructures, the aesthetics of petromelancholia and the sublime are not solely tied to a Scottish artistic tradition. Although they are particularly prominent within the scope of Campbell's work, they also recurrently emerge in an American context—for example through the photographic work of Mitch Epstein, David Maisel, Judy Patrick, or Edward Burtynsky, in a Canadian context. These sites tend to be depicted according to a scale of different aesthetic landscape traditions ranging from the sublime to the picturesque, and sometimes pertaining to *memento mori*.

7 The aesthetics of ruins are further explored by Peter Iain Campbell in the series *Their Helicopters No Longer Sing* and in the recently published monograph *We Drift Like Worried Fire*.

8 Although the 2016 Scotland Act devolved oil and gas licenses to Scotland, the rest of the legislative power—including energy policy, waste management, emission regulations, taxation, decommissioning and more—still remains under the control of the British government. The oil industry of the North Sea has repeatedly been used as an economic argument to support Scottish independence, most of the fields of the UK Continental Shelf being located in what would become Scottish maritime zones. The Scottish National Party (SNP) argues that Scottish sovereignty primarily depends on the control of their natural resources, building a sense of nationalism tied to oil ever since the 1970s with the campaign "It's Scotland's Oil." The matter was put to the fore in the context of the 2014 referendum and is still central to ongoing debates. While the potential for oil revenue to benefit the Scottish economy is certain, issues such as price fluctuation on the global market as well as taxation that would become harder for the Scottish population to absorb—compared to the UK as a whole—complicate the debate over independence. These concerns have been put to the fore by unionist parties such as the Scottish Conservatives who favour Westminster's control and insist on the security and protection provided by the union.

9 The case of Pennsylvania with the Marcellus Shale is a case in point. There, fracking has been supported by both Republicans and Democrats. Obama's administration played a paradoxical role by encouraging fracking while attempting to make it mandatory for companies to provide the public with the lists of chemicals components used within the process. Fracking is also central to Trump's aggressive strategy of "energy dominance," pressing for the development of any type of energy production and heavily supporting fossil fuel extraction.

10 Graeme Macdonald reflects on such effects produced by the stranding of Transocean's decommissioned rig on the Scottish coast in 2016 in his contribution to *Cold Water Oil*: "Dynamic Positioning: North Sea Petroculture's Backwash," p. 61-96.

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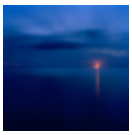	**Légende**	Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/seascapes-2015-2017
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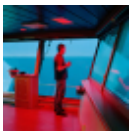	**Légende**	Source: © Peter Iain Campbell, https://www.peteriaincampbell.co.uk/ask-the-sea
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