

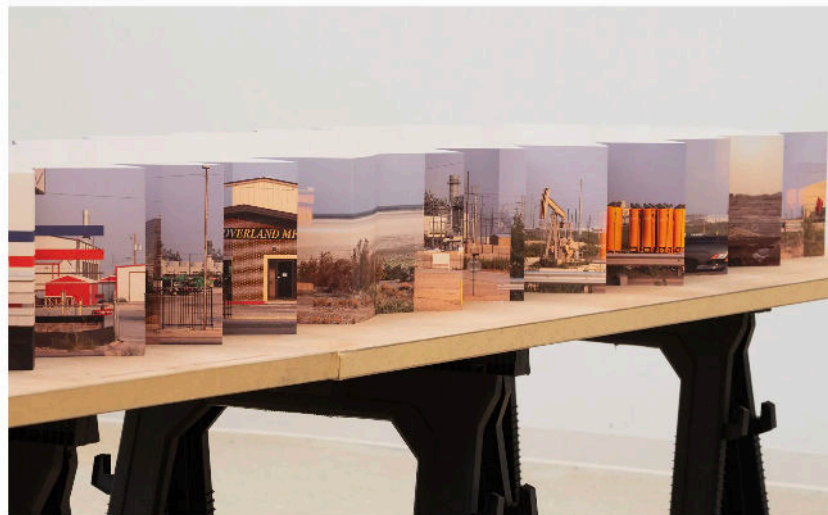
TexasMonthly

ART

Forget 'Friday Night Lights.' This Photo Book Captures the True Permian Basin.

Boom and Dust shows a different side of the oil industry—and looks pretty good on a coffee table.

By Michael Agresta



Fully unfolded, *Boom and Dust* expands to 58 feet.

Jason Reed and Barry Stone

As anyone who's driven the stretch of Interstate 20 from Midland to Odessa can attest, there's a lot of monotony in that landscape. Yet beneath that monotony, there's also a certain inhuman, sinister beauty, less seen than felt. And beneath the beauty? Oil, gas, and a whole lot of money to be made.

It's a tricky mission for any artistic endeavor to do justice to all three of those visual strata in the Permian Basin—to properly evoke the flat repetition of eyesore industrial infrastructure, to capture what makes the region visually poignant despite all of that, and, finally, to keep a keen eye trained on the economic forces at play. That's the challenge photographers Jason Reed and Barry Stone set for themselves with *Boom and Dust*, their recent 128-panel foldout photography book.

"Inspired by Ed Ruscha, we made hundreds of photographs from the a pickup truck of the unrelenting scroll of mancamps, pumpjacks, and outfitters collectively known as the 'Petroplex,'" the artists wrote of the project, adding that an accompanying audio track features "collaged of highways, toxic artificial lakes, and oil fields, all layered with lap ste guitar."

That statement of intent says plenty about where Reed and Stone are coming from. Both are faculty members at the Texas State University School of Art and Design, in San Marcos; this means they are drive-by outsiders when it comes to the oil and gas industry. At the same time, Reed and Stone's relationship to the region appears to be one of open-eyed curiosity, of interlopers working to build fluency in the local language. They're a useful conduit for this book's likely audience of photography enthusiasts as well as the oil-curious.

The parade of images in *Boom and Dust*—blended each one into the next to evoke the momentum of roadside scenery—is a visual catalog of machines and materials, from frac-sand silos and railway-tank trailers to row after row of backhoes, bulldozers, cranes, and boom lifts, like a Richard Scarry book set in a lunar mining colony. The vegetation is scrubby and resilient: At one point, we see a denuded tree next to another in full leaf, set against a field of pump jacks. There are few humans, though we do glimpse a few men fishing in a roadside creek.

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In West Texas, oil rigs dot the horizon.
Jason Reed and Barry Stone



The Permian landscape.
Jason Reed and Barry Stone

Boom and Dust came out last year, but it is still finding its audience. It deserves more attention than the typical self-published photography book. Reed and Stone are both serious artists—Reed has exhibited around the country as part of the [Borderland Collective](#) (a “participatory art and education project” he cofounded), and Stone has gallery representation in New York City, at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. Stone’s previous body of work *Lost Pines*, which cataloged a Bastrop forest’s destruction in a [2011 wildfire](#) and its slow recuperation in the years after, is in dialogue with *Boom and Dust’s* subtle critique of the climate-warming oil and gas industry.

This project feels particularly compelling in the present moment, as the U.S. embraces an unabashed bully identity on the global stage [tied to its control](#) of much of the world’s oil and gas reserves. What we see in the Permian is not only the elements of so many Texans’ everyday lives but also the front lines of a crucial, consequential global industry.

For influences, the artists name-check Ruscha, the pop art painter and photographer often hailed for finding beauty in the soulless architecture of the 1960s American highway—a Californian poet of what we in Texas call the frontage road. It’s easy enough to see how *Boom and Dust* is a continuation of that work. It’s also interesting to see the book as a response to Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky’s large-format photographs of industry’s impact on nature and landscapes. *Boom and Dust* is more modest in its aesthetic ambition, but it does expand, accordion-style, into something bigger (well, longer, at least) than any giant Burtynsky print.



A common sight in the Permian.
Jason Reed and Barry Stone



Reds, whites, and blues.
Jason Reed and Barry Stone

The instrumental soundscape accompanying the book is bound to call to mind another antecedent: the opening credits of the late-aughts television show *Friday Night Lights*. As *FNL*-heads will quickly attest, although the show purports to be set in the Permian, it was actually shot in and around Austin, and the landscape montage of the opening sequence is greener, more bucolic, and less disturbingly industrial than the real Permian. In that sense, *Boom and Dust* is a corrective, the genuine article, if not as flattering to sentimental notions of the heartland. *Boom and Dust* depicts a hard, infertile country, and Stone’s lonesome, wandering fingerpicking on the soundtrack eschews the warm emotional dynamics of *FNL*’s theme, by composer W.G. Snuffy Walden (in the style of Austin post-rock band [Explosions in the Sky](#)).



Dual telescopic boom lifts.
Jason Reed and Barry Stone



What are everyday sights to some are also representative of a booming global industry.

It’s this comfort with repetition and inscrutability, this drift through an inhospitable wilderness of excavation, that gives *Boom and Dust* its power. One could thumb through it a dozen times and still only begin to register its effect, let alone its meaning. Perhaps that’s how most of us relate to whatever man-made landscape we commute through to get to work, but the stakes in the Permian feel higher.

“There are no architectural or aesthetic aspirations along this utilitarian corridor,” writes geoscientist Marcia Bjornerud about the Permian in an essay included in *Boom and Dust*. “This is a forward-hurting world of hustle and profit, not history or poetry.”

Maybe; maybe not. From my experience with this book, the longer we gaze into the Permian, the more the history we’re making there rises up to confront us—and the poetry, too.