

An aerial photograph of a river delta, likely the Mississippi River delta, showing a complex network of waterways and sediment deposits. The water is a mix of blue and brown, with the brown indicating sediment. The land is a mix of grey and brown, with some green patches. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

**BRAXTON
GARNEAU
PAY DIRT**

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Art Gallery of Alberta
February 17 - May 26, 2024

For the exhibition *Pay Dirt*, Braxton Garneau has created an immersive landscape with what appear to be small shiny inky black pools or ponds. A path cuts through the centre of the installation. On one side there is an interpretation of La Brea Pitch Lake, an asphalt deposit in Trinidad, and on the other is a reference to an Albertan tailings pond. The Pitch Lake portion reflects the natural forms of its counterpart in Trinidad and is surrounded by plants made by the artist that dominate in that area: water rose, water lily and bird of paradise. The tailings pond reflects its industrial and human-made realities and its surroundings resemble the jagged berms that contain tailings ponds. These edges are reminiscent of the scars that strip mining leaves on the land. Peeking through this rough earth in this portion of the installation are English sundew (a carnivorous plant), Raup's fringed gentian (a plant with small purple/blue flowers) and several types of native grasses. Are these hopeful signs of regrowth? Or have they been crushed under machinery? Are the carnivorous plants a metaphor for consumption? Or a resourceful, adaptive protector? Are these two landscapes in opposition to one another? Or do they signify a connection?

Garneau does not give clear answers in his work; rather, he intends for viewers to sit within its dichotomies and multiplicities. These multiplicities are found at all levels of his work, even in the materials with which he creates. Garneau's materials range from found animal and plant parts to commercial art supplies, and his most common media is asphalt. Asphalt can have the density of charcoal and make similar markings. It can also be thick and viscous and used to build up layers like clay or encaustic. Powdered asphalt can be mixed with oil or acrylic mediums and used as paint. Outside of the studio, asphalt can also take on many forms. Asphalt is a bitumen petroleum product that, within the context of this exhibition, conceptually points to international oil and gas production and specifically implicates the oil industries of both Trinidad and Alberta.

Asphalt, also referred to as pitch, bitumen, tar or oil, is as mutable as these many names suggest and it easily shifts between a viscous liquid and an impenetrable solid. Garneau plays with this material inconsistency, using it as a metaphor for many things, including the diasporic, immigrant and expatriate experiences of his family, the story of Alberta, and the relationship between people and place. Garneau is interested in the absence and presence of many things at once.



Nelson family (the artist's grandmother's family) visiting La Brea Pitch Lake, Trinidad, early 2000s.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Pay Dirt is both and neither Alberta nor Trinidad. Visitors within *Pay Dirt* act to further bridge the divide between these locations, with one foot metaphorically in Trinidad and the other in Alberta. This is an invitation to consider the economic drivers that transplant and transport people all over the world.

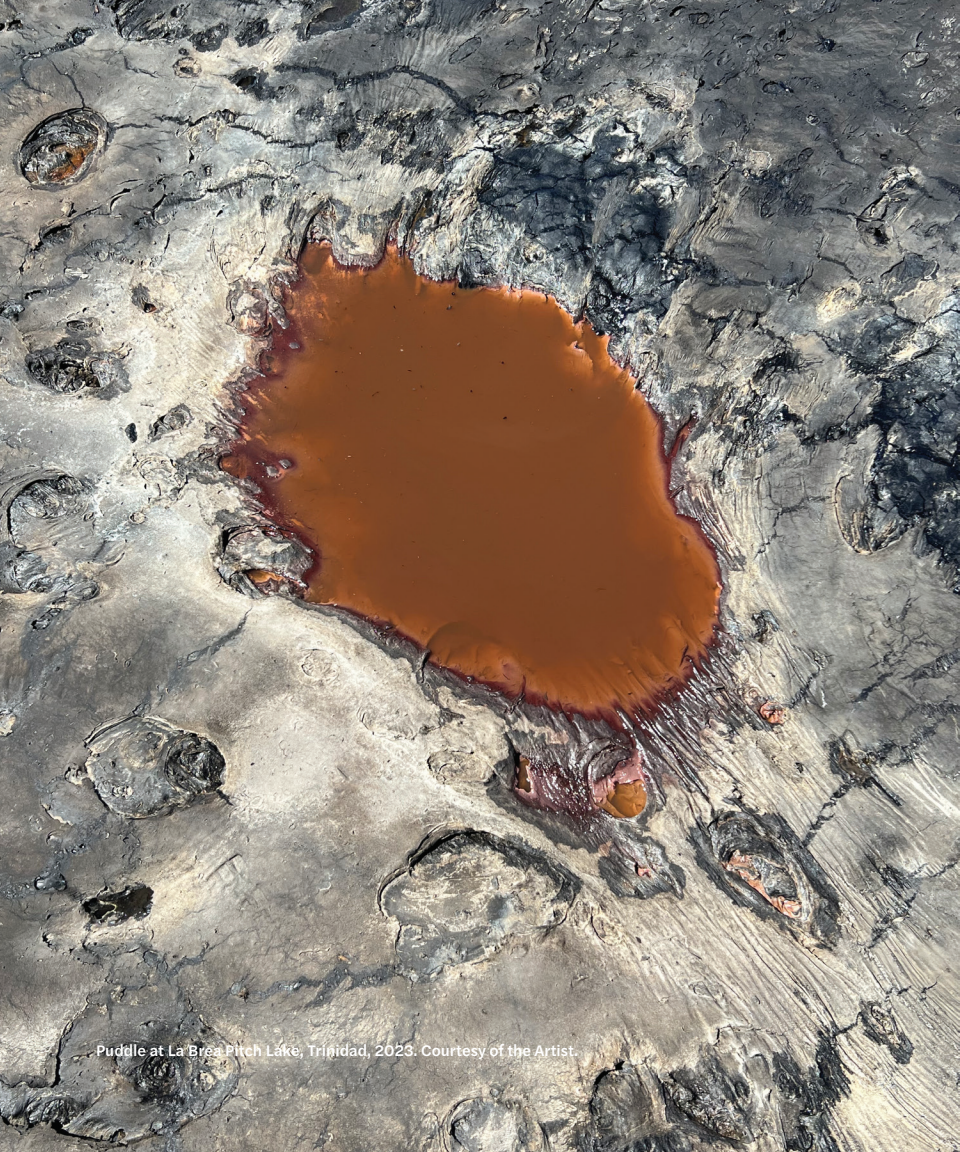
Alberta and Trinidad are economically and culturally linked by petroleum mining industries. Garneau's paternal grandfather was a welder and tradesperson in Trinidad. It was this expertise relevant to extractive industries that brought their family, along with many other Caribbean families, to Alberta. This same industry supported Garneau's mother's family as well; his maternal grandfather worked hauling fuel for most of his career. For Garneau, Pitch Lake—just one of Trinidad's many on and off-shore mining operations—and the tailings ponds of Alberta's oil fields offer dichotomous entry points for considering where the social and industrial cultures of Trinidad and Alberta converge and oppose. *Pay Dirt* folds together space and time to bring these two geographically distant locations together. Within the world that Garneau has created, perhaps it is possible to step into Pitch Lake and emerge in Alberta, and vice versa.

To most, a bitumen lake visited by holidaymakers sounds like either something out of dystopian science fiction or the most outlandish dreams for oil industry remediation. This is, however, the reality in Trinidad. To an outsider, Pitch Lake is hard to wrap one's head around. It is not a lake but the largest natural deposit of asphalt in the world. This surface deposit covers about 40 hectares, and the asphalt is solid enough to be walked on comfortably in most places. The surface of the asphalt is not smooth but, because the pitch is continuously—although imperceptibly—churning, it is covered in craters and cracks that fill with surface water. These water pools and streams are high in sulphur and are popular bathing spots. Often referred to locally as fountains of youth, the waters are thought to have healing properties that can help with joint pain and skin conditions.¹

These small pools support a great amount of life, from microorganisms to small fish and plants. The entire area is filled with patches of grass and surrounded by cashew trees. Mango and breadfruit trees are also found in abundance. The area around Pitch Lake attracts many species of birds, including sandpipers,



The artist's grandfather (Frank Santiago Sr.) driving a new car in Fort McMurray in the mid-1970s.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Puddle at La Brea Pitch Lake, Trinidad, 2023. Courtesy of the Artist.

kingfishers, ospreys and hummingbirds.² According to local oral histories, hummingbirds are humans' ancestors, and they play a part in the origin story of Pitch Lake. It is said that amidst a celebration, the Chima tribe prepared a feast of hummingbirds. As punishment for eating their ancestors, the earth opened and their entire village was swallowed up by pitch.³

It is interesting to think of Pitch Lake as both a lucky blessing and a curse or punishment for hubris. The asphalt at Pitch Lake is mined and distributed all over the world providing wealth and jobs for residents. Unlike many other limited deposits, at the current rate of extraction the bitumen at Pitch Lake should provide asphalt for at least 400 more years.⁴ Although the physical extraction of asphalt from Pitch Lake leaves relatively little environmental impact, it is part of a much larger network of oil and gas mining and processing operations around the island. In Alberta, the wealth of the Athabasca oil sands have benefited and upheld the powerful in the province, but are tailings the punishment for our hubris? The curse of tailings ponds might come overnight as in Trinidad, swallowing up entire communities or cultures if the dams containing them fail and waste unfurls into either the freshwater lakes that border some of the ponds or into the Athabasca River that runs adjacent to others. Or, this curse will continue to act out slowly as tailings leak and leach into surrounding environments, rivers and their tributaries for many generations to come.

Like Pitch Lake, “tailings pond” is also a misleading or confusing term. Tailings is an obfuscated term for mining waste. Ponds where mining waste is kept are not small as the term “ponds” might suggest. As of March 2023, the tailings ponds in Alberta contained 1.4 trillion cubic metres of fluid,⁵ covering an area 2.6 times the size of Vancouver.⁶ These “ponds” are also surrounded by “beaches,” another industry term for the berms and slopes around tailings ponds that are meant to contain the wastewater and determine their storage capacity. The title of the exhibition, “pay dirt,” is also taken from mining terminology and means earth that contains a sufficient quantity of something to make mining profitable—an ever-moving target as resources are depleted and values shift.

Pay Dirt continues a long history in Alberta of landscape painting or bringing the land into the gallery. But, *Pay Dirt* turns the gallery inside out and creates a porosity between outside and inside and between topographical survey and



Process shot from the studio (detailed asphalt study), 2024. Courtesy of the Artist.

fictional landscape. This indoor earthwork readily shifts between a natural history diorama and a scene from a sci-fi movie. It is at once a tranquil spot for introspection and a site of environmental critique. The story of Alberta includes Trinidad. And likewise, the story of Trinidad includes Alberta. Garneau's *Pay Dirt* illustrates these dual histories by dipping a toe into two disparate "ponds" and gives us a place to consider how economic drivers might swallow you up in one place and shoot you out in unexpected and foreign lands.

Endnotes

- 1 "Trinidad Pitch Lake," Caribbean Affairs, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.caribbeanaffairs.info/pitch-lake>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 "The Colibrie (Humming) Bird Legend," Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Limited, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://trinidadlakeasphalt.com/history/the-colibrie-humming-bird-legend/>.
- 4 "The Geology of La Brea Pitch Lake," Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Limited, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://trinidadlakeasphalt.com/history/the-geology-of-la-brea-pitch-lake/>.
- 5 Alberta Energy Regulator, "State of Fluid Tailings Management for Mineable Oil Sands, 2022," October 2023: 26. <https://static.aer.ca/prd/documents/reports/State-Fluid-Tailings-Management-Mineable-OilSands.pdf>.
- 6 Environmental Defence, "Tar sands tailings "ponds": five decades of toxic legacy," March 2023, <https://environmentaldefence.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Tailings-ponds-facts.pdf>.

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Braxton Garneau

Braxton Garneau is a visual artist based in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Canada). He holds a BFA from the University of Alberta and has had solo exhibitions at GAVLAK, Los Angeles (2023), Stride Gallery, Calgary (2021) and Parallel Space, Edmonton (2019). His work was featured in the retrospective exhibition *Black Every Day* at the Art Gallery of Alberta (2021) and *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900 - 1970 and Now* at Mitchell Art Gallery, Edmonton (2020).

Working in painting, sculpture, printmaking and installation, Garneau's practice is rooted in costuming, transformation, and material honesty. Combining visual influences from classical European portraiture and Afro-Caribbean culture with harvested and hand-processed materials, he creates portraits, shrines, and corporeal forms that explore the sociocultural history of his Caribbean heritage.

WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY

Lindsey Sharman

Lindsey V. Sharman is Curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. She has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich.

Process shot from the studio (fabricated sundew), 2024. Courtesy of the Artist.





Rosé nymph water lily from La Brea Pitch Lake, Trinidad, 2019. Courtesy of the Artist.

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