

*Plume*, 2009-2010

*Plume* is a photographic exploration of Southeast Ohio and its unusually dense concentration of coal-fired power plants. The project serves as a follow-up to the work I made in 2007 in Appalachia, *Removing Mountains*, which focused on mountaintop removal, a particularly pervasive form of coal mining. *Plume* tracks this coal up river to Ohio, where it is being burned to generate electricity. Geographically rooted in two towns along the Ohio River, the project focuses on Racine and Cheshire, who sit in close proximity to 4 power plant stations, all within a 15-mile radius.

The landscape of these towns presents itself in distinct layers. The subdued palette of the river, with its plodding pace, carries not only coal, but a unique regional sentimentality. Off the banks of the river exist people and sparse economic growth, and above them sprawl small mountains and Appalachian biodiversity. The trees, reaching for the sky, are outpaced by their synthetic allies in upward ambition. These smoke stacks are as ubiquitous landscape accompaniment in contemporary life as any, and in this series they are presented in their social environment, separated from their industrial foundation. Their repetition in the landscape creates a stabilizing visual element throughout the series. I want the viewer to scan the horizon line, looking for the visual cue that connects subject to place, and ultimately, to narrative.

Southeast Ohio resonates a hidden fragility, not just in the industry's inevitable demise, but in the dejection of its citizens. Like many mono-industrial cultures the resources are being exhausted. Coal-fired power plants present myriad of environmental hazards. Burning coal releases carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides into the air, in addition to equally toxic solid by-products that erode from nearby landfills into local ecosystems. Hypothetically, state and federal regulatory bodies exist to monitor the process, but systematic and longstanding deficiencies within these organizations allow these coal-burning facilities to continue to threaten the environment and local communities.

Coal exists beyond industrial and historical development as a larger abstract presence that is woven into the cultural fiber of Ohio. Here, the air of restlessness predicts an overwhelming ambivalence towards the coal industry. The citizens and land of Ohio and West Virginia are the source point in a vast grid of energy distribution. This burden of heavy resource usage is a type of political and industrial play, mirrored in other industry-specific rural economies, and constitutes an act of complex resource siphoning. In other words, non-Appalachian citizens are benefactors of not only inexpensive energy access, but of distance from the destructive industry that makes this access possible. This sociopolitical paradigm, as old as industry itself, calls into question our confounding relationship to power.

*Removing Mountains, 2007*

In the summer of 2007 I began shooting a body of work examining the coal industry in Appalachia. What initially started as an interest in the modern coal mining process known as mountaintop removal eventually evolved into a study of the social and political institutions surrounding these practices. I wanted to survey the cultural implications of extracting coal from Appalachian mountains. Over the course of three months living in West Virginia, I discovered that mountaintop removal mining was one of the most destructive and pervasive forms of modern industry in the world.

Coal, the number one energy-based resource domestically, is often extracted through a process of mountaintop removal mining. Through this process, mountains are literally blown apart to efficiently access coal seams. The physical overburden is pushed into the valleys and streams below, leveling a once dynamic landscape. Through this violent process, coal is eventually extracted, processed, shipped, burned and then distributed through electric grids to much of the United States. Simply turning on the lights suggests a complex matrix of ecological, industrial, and human implications.

While working in this region, the human cost presented itself as the most compelling narrative element, rendering notions of “necessary evils” and “sacrifices” relatively useless political rhetoric. Appalachian culture is historically defined through coal practices and popularly defined by an unfair misconception about its people and the conditions in which they live. In reality, I found communities sustaining culturally rich legacies while maintaining a cautious distance to outsiders (like myself). These photographs represent not only the process of following an industry’s production start to finish, but also spending time with locals as they sometimes struggled to deal with the realities of living in coal country.

I approach *Removing Mountains* with the aim of making a social documentary narrative. In addition, I’m interested in evaluating the historical importance of landscape depiction and the image’s role in polarizing otherwise complex political realities.