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## **Jessica Segall: *Human Energy***

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By *Hearne Pardee*



Jessica Segall, *Human Energy* (2023). Courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

## **Smack Mellon**

September 23–November 19, 2023

Brooklyn

Jessica Segall, a self-described “artist that needs discipline,” infuses the darkened space of Smack Mellon with sexual tension and suggestions of menace. With transgressive defiance, her multichannel video installation *Human Energy* confronts the spectacle of petroleum extraction, appropriating and subverting its masculine iconography. Juxtaposing intimate personal encounters to panoramic drone surveillance of the vast oil fields of Kern County, near Los Angeles, Segall envisions the oil field as an arena for sexual fantasy, linking penetration of the earth to deep bodily desires. On one side of the gallery, the camera circles the 22-mile grid of oil rigs, honing in on a single pumpjack, its anthropomorphic head plunging an extraction tube into the ground. Zooming back, it reveals Segall’s body from the rear, arms akimbo, framing the pumpjacks with leather-fringed sleeves. On the opposite side of the gallery we can watch her approach the rig and climb up to expose her leather-clad body atop the rocking metal machine like a rodeo performer.

The screens are linked sculpturally across the gallery by a rhythmically undulating section of metal piping of the sort used in oil expansion loops. Within a curtained-off viewing room at the far corner, separated by a chain and a posted warning of explicit content, Segall documents the nighttime world of the oil fields, which have become a site for gay cruising. In repetitively choreographed movements, leather-clad men, and occasionally women, walk away from us, out of darkness, toward a rocking pumpjack. Lights flare in the distance as the figures—turning occasionally to gaze into the camera—pair off, bathing them in intermittent pockets of illumination. Edited to a pulsing metallic soundtrack by DJ and Berghain resident Steffi, they enact in shadow a rhythmic dance of arousal and gratification. Women touch the earth as though to invoke the ecosexuality celebrated by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, which Segall cites as an influence, while the relentless pumping proposes the barren desert landscape as an object of love. A Caravaggesque deployment of fragmented light, playing over the merged bodies, recalls another of Segall’s influences, the night scenes of Kenneth Anger’s 1963 film *Scorpio Rising*, which infuse sexuality with religious ecstasy.



Jessica Segall, *Human Energy* (2023). Courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

Unlike Anger, however, Segall adopts the meditative tempo of “slow cinema,” and this ritualistic slowness extends into the installation’s central video. Set in an oil spa in Azerbaijan, where

contemporary tourists embrace the therapeutic powers associated with oil in centuries-old practices of healing, we view bathers from behind as their hands, immersed in thick, black petroleum heightened by extreme white highlights, caress and massage, spreading oil to create an orange-red surface on their flesh. One body becomes two, and the erotic embraces on the oil field are both figuratively and literally elevated. Oil dripping from hands and arms echoes the black leather fringe of Segall's sleeves. The video generates its own light in the shadowy space of the gallery, the screen periodically immersed in what could best be described as luminous, highly refined blackness, akin to the oil-soaked papers of Dorothea Rockburne and their minimalist celebration of materiality. Oil in relation to healing proposes immersion as a process of sublimation, a possibility of self-transformation, yet the setting of the scene in a high-end tourist destination, once a Soviet resort, brings us back to socio-political realities, and the ambiguities of art itself in relation to the climate crisis.



Jessica Segall, *Human Energy* (2023). Courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

This broader context emerges in a related group exhibition, *10 Billion Barrels*, in the adjacent gallery. The two exhibitions combined make up the most recent installment of “Close Reading,” a series of Smack Mellon projects using commissioned works by younger artists as a framework for expanded group shows. Here, curator Rachel Vera Steinberg riffs on *10 Billion Barrels of Crude Oil* (1986), the title of Nancy Holt’s map of the Alaska oil pipeline and organizes a multimedia investigation of the natural, industrial and cultural landscapes of oil. In it, Rebecca Shapass, fields harrington, and dean erdmann explore issues ranging from the abuse of methamphetamines to daredevil automotive degradation of the landscape, from the electrical power grid to the self-sustaining rise of cell technology in an increasingly unnatural environment. Additional context might be the concurrent exhibition of French-Swiss artist Julian Charrière in Los Angeles, who uses fireworks to animate his own drone recordings of the neighboring oil fields. Charrière also uses coal tar as a photographic emulsion, applied to aluminum plates and exposed to the sun, directly invoking its energy to document the landscape, emphasizing how the cycle of oil consumption permeates all aspects of our lives. Segall, for her part, embraces the wildness of human fantasy, and *Human Energy* points eloquently at deeper desires that drive our fascination with petroleum’s powers.

## **Contributor**

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