

North Dakota Museum of Art

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PIPE DREAMS ILLUMINATED AT THE NORTH DAKOTA MUSEUM OF ART

A "Pipe Dream" is a fantastic hope that is generally regarded as being nearly impossible to achieve. The exhibition, *Pipe Dreams: A chronicle of lives along the pipeline*, is currently on display at the North Dakota Museum of Art.

Rena Effendi's black-and-white photographs shed light on the unrealized dreams of those living along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that flows from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. On May 10, 2005, the oil spigot was turned on but it wasn't until a year later on May 28 that oil reached the Mediterranean-Turkish port city of Ceyhan.

Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan, Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, and Ceyhan is a port on the southeastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey: Thus the pipeline got its name. The pipeline's international presence was established in 1999 with the James Bond film, *The World is Not Enough*. The character Elektra King was responsible for the construction of the pipeline.

Born in 1977 in Baku, Azerbaijan, Rena Effendi became a documentary photographer at a young age. In 2006, she was hired by British Petroleum to follow the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline segment in Azerbaijan. Her images resulted in a corporate calendar outlining the achievements of BP's social responsibility program. In the course of her assignment, however, Effendi was confronted with the reality that the majority of people had not benefitted from the oil wealth flowing under their feet. In an attempt to find out what was hidden behind the PR smiles of the calendar, Effendi undertook a photographic journey of her own, following the 1,099-mile oil pipeline through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. She collected untold stories along the way, stories that make their way into her first museum exhibition in the United States.

She tells about her own city, Baku. Among the pictures in the exhibition are residents of Mahalla, a historically poor neighborhood where people lived entire lives in small, flat-roofed houses. A hundred years ago oil workers populated this area. Today's residents are mullahs, poets, pigeon-keepers, and ex-convicts. They engage in small repairs, petty trade, and businesses run out of door stoops. Now Mahalla residents struggle daily with poverty, crime, and the collapse of social infrastructure.

As happens all over the world as areas experience a rapid inflow of money, Mahalla residents are being moved, their houses demolished, and licenses issued for construction and business. Soon the ancient courtyards will be sold off to make way for high-rise apartment buildings.

"We want our sea back," says Binyamin Goregen, a fisherman from Yumurtalik Bay who lost his catch due to the effects of pipeline-related tanker traffic.

"It was like an earthquake," Gunyas Ibishov said, referring to the pipeline construction that cracked his walls. "I am afraid to live right above a pipe full of gas. What if it blows up?"

"Yet the glory of Effendi's photographs," according to Museum Director Laurel Reuter, "is in their depiction of humanness, of the drive to live full lives even in the face of unsettlement, dishevelment, and poverty."

Reuter continues, "The exhibition also reminds us of our good fortune as Americans to live in a country where the rights of the individual and the community stand an equal chance against massive commercial development. We fight over environment and safety laws, over eminent domain rulings, which protect us from land appropriation, over the hiring of local workers. That we have a voice is the miracle of living in the United States."

Effendi's *Pipe Dreams* is now on exhibition at the North Dakota Museum of Art, the artist's first museum exhibition in the United States, and the subject of her 2009 book *Pipe Dreams: A chronicle of lives along the pipeline*.

This is the first exhibition in a Middle Eastern/Central Asian Series about the lives of women in today's world. The series is funded in part by a Curatorial Research Grant to Museum Director Laurel Reuter from the Andy Warhol Foundation.