

# Australian photographer captures brutality and beauty at Standing Rock protests

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It was September 3, 2016, and Angus Mordant was about to take a long flight to Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which straddles North and South Dakota, from his home in New York.

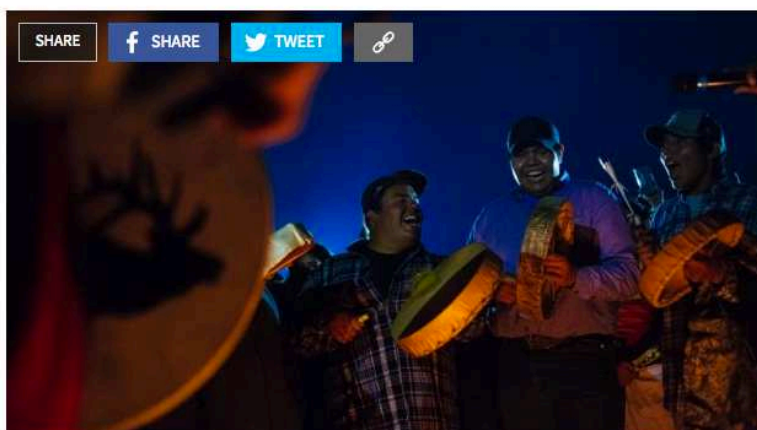
Standing Rock was the scene of large-scale protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, a 1886-kilometre-long pipeline that will take crude oil to Illinois. The pipeline is set to slice its way through contested Sioux territory, and Native Americans alongside environmental groups and concerned citizens had set up a sprawling campsite to block construction.



Faenette Black Bear, 63, Lakota, raises her fist in defiance as riot police push peaceful protesters away from the Morton County Court House. Photo: Angus Mordant

The Australian photographer was shocked by what he documented.

"On September 3, I watched reports of private security using attack dogs against peaceful protesters while construction workers allegedly desecrated sacred sites. Unsure of the exact situation on the ground and determined to learn more, I booked my first flight and arrived at the Oceti Sakowin Camp on September 6," he said. "The only way I can think to describe it is a militarised zone."



Protesters perform powwow songs around the sacred fire at the Oceti Sakowin camp, after a minor court victory. Photo: Angus Mordant

The protests swelled to thousands of people, and brought together the seven bands of the Sioux tribe – who together lit the Seven Council Sacred Fire for the first time since 1876, during the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Mordant described the pipeline as "environmental racism": "The protest movement in Standing Rock essentially encompassed centuries of abuses against Native Americans by the US government." Mordant said.

"The original route had the pipeline going north of Bismarck, the predominantly white capital of North Dakota, however, push back from residents and local governments saw it moved through the Missouri River only a few miles north of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation's only water intake."

"In my understanding, never in recorded history had this many tribes gathered in one place. The historic nature of the movement is what initially drew me to document Standing Rock. Originally, I had planned to go for a week and work on a portrait series," Mordant said.



A rock formation, believed to be a sacred cairn signifying a burial site, is seen in the foreground as Dakota Access Pipeline construction continues. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe claims that the 1886-kilometre underground crude oil pipeline will disturb sacred sites and has the potential to contaminate the Missouri River. . Photo: Angus Mordant

What started as a week-long project developed into six visits to the campsite. Mordant's work is now set to be the subject of his first solo exhibition, at Dominik Mersch Gallery in Sydney. The New York-based photographer said the experience had been intense.

"I photographed riot police who were using tear gas, sponge grenades and Tasers to clear hundreds of protesters from the path of the pipeline. It is a day I am glad to have documented and one I will never forget," Mordant said. "The burning smell of tear gas mixing with the crisp prairie air is a smell that will never leave me."



An unidentified man removes a Mohawk Warrior Society flag from his campsite at the Oceti Sakowin camp. The The Mohawk flag came to prominence during the 1990 Canadian Oka Crisis, when the military confronted indigenous people in a major armed conflict for the first time in modern history. . Photo: Angus Mordant

Authorities razed the main campsite at Standing Rock in late February.

**Mordant's Standing Rock will go on show at Dominik Mersch Gallery in Sydney from 30 March to 22 April.**