

COAL + ICE



When Orville Schell, director of the Center on U.S.–China Relations at the Asia Society, found words inadequate to emphasize the consequences of carbon-dioxide emission, he decided to produce a multimedia documentary exhibition, *Coal + Ice*, with a focus on the rapidly melting Himalayan glaciers. Presented at Beijing’s Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, and featuring 161 images by more than thirty photographers from around the world, the show not only explores the causes and impact of climate change with unprecedented narrative ambition, but calls attention to its staging.

Jeroen de Vries, who co-curated the show with Susan Meiselas, also designed the installation. With the intention of creating dialogues among the photographs, and between the images and the architectural space, he opens the exhibition with huge prints of glaciers suspended high in the middle of the room, back to back with stark portraits and group shots of coal miners and their families. The juxtaposition sets a raw yet intimate tone of an indelible visual journey. And to be sure we understand the scale of the glaciers: what seem to be small ice stubs in David Breashears’s establishing shot are actually immense pinnacles or “penitentes”—up to a hundred feet tall—as we discover in a close-up by Jimmy Chin.

The following section features smaller prints and video works of coalmines and miners around the world. It is not easy to determine the ethnicity of the workers or the period of the mines in photographs ranging from W. Eugene Smith’s and Bruce Davidson’s in Wales (1950 and 1965 respectively) to Song Chao’s, Geng Yunshen’s, and Yung Junpo’s in China (2001–7) to Gleb Kosobukov’s in Ukraine (2009). Looking at the subjects’ ash-blackened faces, one feels that time has stood still—a sensation that is often associated with the supposedly ageless Himalayan

glaciers, which are present here in the form of a sweeping eleven-by-forty-six-foot panoramic video projection. This twenty-seven-minute centerpiece elucidates the shocking shrink of glaciers by comparing recent high-resolution imagery with archival photographs taken nearly nine decades ago. For example, it shows that Rongbuk Glacier has been reduced by 330 feet—as seen by looking at a 2007 photograph by Breashears beside one George Mallory made in 1921. Breashears, who has led more than forty expeditions to the Himalayan region, makes many of his photographs with gigapixel imagery: the level of detail in them is extraordinary.

The show’s final section focuses on major rivers that originate in the Great Himalayan region, downstream from which 1.3 billion people are now threatened by intensified

droughts and floods. These quiet and stunning river landscapes, by Nadav Kander, Ian Teh, and Jonas Bendiksen, are placed in the center of the floor, surrounded by a wall of black-and-white images by Clifford Ross, of ferocious hurricane waves, resembling a long, haphazard coastline. These images, which Ross was originally inspired to create because of his obsession with the nature and its wonders, here serve as witnesses to humankind’s rampant destruction of its own habitat.

One of nine Chinese photographers in the exhibition, Song Chao was a miner himself when he started to make photographs; his striking portraits of coal workers are reminiscent of the style of Richard Avedon. Niu Guozheng records the hellish smoking chimneys and cinder wasteland in his mining hometown. Geng Yunsheng and Yung Junpo’s photographs show the primitive conditions at small coalmines. These are in stark contrast with the modern mining techniques shown in Wang Mianli’s photographs, and with the highly civilized family portraits by Yu Haibo.

This exhibition coincides with the recurring yellow-brownish smog blanketing a great part of China. Though each of these treacherously beautiful photographs speaks for itself, hung together in this installation they tell a larger story. 🗨

—Camille Xin

Coal + Ice was presented at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing, September 24–December 28, 2011. The show is scheduled to travel in China, Europe, the United States, and Brazil this year.

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Installation view of *Coal + Ice*, featuring photographs by Gen Yunsheng and David Seymour. Installation photograph by Xu Lijing.

Courtesy Three Shadows Photography Art Centre