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Beijing Gallery Puts a Focus on Global Warming



Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

"Coal + Ice," at Three Shadows gallery in Beijing, uses photos of large Long Island waves by Clifford Ross, top, to show climate change; also in the exhibition are scenes of the Chinese landscape.

By **EDWARD WONG**

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BEIJING — When George Mallory made a reconnaissance trip to the gargantuan glaciers at the foot of Mount Everest in Tibet before his ill-fated attempt to climb the mountain, he took photographs and noted the splendor: "Here is a pure beauty of form, a kind of ultimate harmony," he wrote. "

Nearly 90 years later another mountaineer and photographer, [David Breashears](#), traveled to the same remote Himalayan landscape and found something that might have made Mallory think again: more than 330 vertical feet of the Rongbuk Glacier had melted in the intervening decades, leaving stubs of ice where grand pinnacles had once been. The photographs that Mr. Breashears

brought back as evidence of climate change are at the heart of a multimedia exhibition that opened here last weekend at a prestigious photography gallery in China, [Three Shadows](#).

In the same room as Mr. Breashears's glacier photos from eight recent expeditions, which are projected on a wall in a sweeping 10-foot-by-45-foot panoramic video, are smaller projections of images by Chinese photographers that document what many scientists say is a leading cause of climate change. These were taken in coal mines thousands of miles east of the glaciers and they show miners covered in soot and toiling away in the bowels of the earth.

The show, titled "[Coal + Ice](#)" and produced by the Asia Society in New York, is an ambitious attempt to call attention to the long-range impact of humanity's unrelenting thirst for energy. The melting of glaciers on the Tibetan plateau, at the headwaters of Asia's great rivers, threatens the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people downstream. Scientists say climate change is also responsible for the increasing unpredictability and strength of storms around the globe, and that impact is shown here in photographs by the American artist Clifford Ross of towering waves off the coast of Long Island during hurricane season.

"I like this idea of putting ice and fire together," said one of the photographers, Yu Haibo, 49, of Shenzhen Economic Daily, whose recent work documents the lives of coal miners. "We all know that coal-burning causes global warming," he said, adding that the approach of showing both cause and effect "makes the works so much more convincing and delivers the message so much more effectively."

The show is the first in recent memory to take up the entire space of Three Shadows, which was designed by the outspoken artist Ai Weiwei and opened in 2007 by Rong Rong and Inri, two stalwarts of the Beijing art scene. Viewers first enter a section with prints documenting coal mining, mostly in China. Then come video projections of some of those prints and the huge projection of Mr. Breashears's glacier photographs, which he took across the Himalaya and Karakoram ranges from the exact vantage points that mountaineers and surveyors had shot from decades earlier. Finally there is a room with Mr. Ross's Long Island wave photos and images of Chinese landscapes ravaged by climate change that were shot by other photographers, including Ian Teh and Jonas Bendiksen.

Moving through the gallery, with its 161 works by more than 30 photographers, the viewer goes on a journey from the roots of climate change to its impact.

"Susan and I tried to weave together a narrative in which the photographs speak for themselves," said Jeroen de Vries, co-curator of the show with Susan Meiselas, a Magnum photographer. "We did not want to use them as illustrations of a story."

China and the United States are the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases, and both nations have been struggling to formulate policies to slow or limit the use of carbon-based energy. Though many of the images in the show depict China's dependence on coal, the curators were careful to include vintage photographs from the West, taken by Robert Capa, Lewis W. Hine and others, that show the historic prevalence of coal mining in the United States and Europe. In classic photos by Hine, boys with blackened faces gaze at the camera while standing

outside mines in West Virginia. There are also photos by Bruce Davidson of Welsh miners in 1965, and industrial photos of present-day mining in Italy and Greece.

“We did not want the show to be an underhanded way of blaming China,” said Orville Schell, the author and journalist who oversaw the show at the Asia Society, “but simply to have it help call attention to the fact that China, and all of Asia, was going to be profoundly affected over the next century by the effects of climate change on the Tibetan plateau.”

Three Shadows is an independent gallery, and the show was not submitted to Chinese officials for review or approval. The central government has talked openly in recent years about climate change and the dangers of carbon-dioxide emissions, so the subject is not taboo.

"Chinese officials, too, have started to become very concerned that China is being affected by forces beyond them," Mr. Schell said.

Many of the photographs of Chinese miners taken in the 1970s are in classic propaganda style. One shows a group of miners inside a tunnel posing around a large portrait of Mao and holding up copies of Mao's Little Red Book. The overall message is that miners, like other elements of the proletariat, are building a new China.

"It's not that different than the heroic ways in which miners are portrayed in the West," Ms. Meiselas said. "Think of all the attention paid to mining accidents."

Such documentation in China was mostly left to photojournalists at state news organizations. Even in the early 2000s few independent photographers had turned their attention to coal mining, despite its central role in China's economic boom. A notable exception was Song Chao, whose striking portraits of miners set against stark white backdrops, similar in style to Richard Avedon's work, were promoted by Western curators.

Now there are several Chinese artists who seek to capture the conditions of the mines and the way of life of those working in them.

"I first came into contact with the lives of miners in 1995, when I stumbled upon the homes of miners in a rural village in Henan Province," said another photographer in the show, Geng Yunsheng, 57. "They lived in such poverty that regular people couldn't even imagine it. I thought to myself: 'No one should ever live like this. No one.' "

This collection of coal photographs had an earlier incarnation. Ms. Meiselas organized a show for the Asia Society, called Mined in China, that opened in Houston in 2008. At that time Mr. Breashears, who was a director of the 1998 Imax film "Everest," had begun his project of documenting the melting of glaciers and in the process had unearthed some early photos by explorers that had never been widely seen. Mr. Schell helped pull the two projects together into one show. Along the way, he said, the curators added Mr. Ross's wave photos "so our story would end up ultimately where all water ends up, namely, the ocean."

Appropriately enough for a show about a global phenomenon, the organizers hope to bring the exhibition to Berlin, Brazil and New York, among other places. Rong Rong, of Three Shadows, has proposed having it travel it around China.

Last Sunday morning the organizers and several of the photographers walked through the show to reflect quietly on their work a day after the opening, which drew 200 people. Mr. Breashears explained his work to a prominent Chinese journalist, Hu Shuli, in front of the projection of his photographs. The group then moved on to the final room.

There, Mr. Ross gazed at his own black-and-white images of waves crashing down on a beach, and asked, “What have we done to nature that could have increased its fury?”

(*Original Article is [here](#)*)