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LETTER FROM CHINA

Dispatches by Evan Osnos.

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EXHIBIT: COAL + ICE

Posted by Evan Osnos



Photograph by Geng Yunsheng

For days, Beijing has been trapped under a blanket of yellow-brown murk that the U.S. Embassy air monitor classifies, in its hourly reading, as "hazardous." Living under Beijing skies, one has come to expect an incremental uptick in the number of officially declared "blue sky" days each year. Those reports of improvement—which are disputed—make the plunges over the past month all the more noticeable: on October 9th, for instance, the swirl of coal, dust, and auto emissions was so noxious that the embassy monitor threw up its digital hands and spat out the verdict "beyond index."

Nearly two years after the world failed to achieve a decisive climate-change deal in Copenhagen, we've become inured to much of what we read about the human effects of carbon emissions. Orville Schell, the author and journalist who heads the Center on U.S.-China Relations at the Asia Society, has written repeatedly about the need for global cooperation on climate change. "As a writer, I felt that what I wrote had limited effect," he told me recently, "so we decided to try a different approach: Let's do it in a visual way."

The results are on display now at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in Beijing, and, with luck, they will be near you soon. "Coal + Ice" is a documentary exhibition encompassing work by thirty photographers around the world. It seeks to do something unprecedented: to chart the horrific grandeur of our effects on the planet, from the coal mines beneath our feet to the dwindling glaciers on our highest mountains.

The images chosen by curators Jeroen de Vries and Susan Meiselas describe a spectrum that is vast in aesthetics and geography. It begins in the raw, intimate portraits of coal miners at work, by photographers including Geng Yunsheng and Yang Junpo of China, the American Lewis Hine, and the Russian Gleb Kosorukov.



Photograph by Nadav Kander

It extends through the effects on the land, as captured by Stuart Franklin's smokestacks protruding from Europe's changing landscape, and Nadav Kander's images from the Yangtze. It takes on a singular scale in the work of David Breashears, a mountaineer and photographer, who has been trooping back and forth to the Himalayas, to shoot images of glaciers from precisely the vantage points where his predecessors stood a century ago. He returns with portraits of deaths foretold—shrunken slivers of ice where mighty glaciers once stood. Viewed on a computer, his massively detailed digital images—some, a billion pixels each—make glaciers look as damp and close as a cocktail. "It's transformative in how you see the ice. It's actually very fragile," Breashears said, at the opening in Beijing in September, hobbling around on a leg he broke in the mountains. "The message you see in the glaciers is: Prepare for the inevitable."



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Photograph by Clifford Ross

It is fitting that these images were arduous to capture. Some of the photographers spent years in and out of coal mines. Breashears hunkered down in the Himalayas. (For one image, he waited nineteen days.) Some of the most dramatic images in the show depict what is becoming of those glaciers: water. The photographer Clifford Ross ventured into the waves of the Atlantic on Long Island during hurricane season. (Climate change, after all, is believed to be giving us stronger, less predictable storms.) He carried a specially built camera and he was tethered to an assistant. The result is a portrait of a sea so angry that you feel the urge to scramble after kids that toddle too close to the photos. "Coal + Ice" shows in Beijing through November 28th; organizers hope to bring it to Berlin, Brazil, New York, and elsewhere.

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