



Cause + Effect

"Coal + Ice" is a memorable exhibition that visually connects the cause of climate change — the pursuit and expenditure of fuel — with its effects

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by [Iona Whittaker](#)



By George Mallory.



By Clifford Ross.



"Coal + Ice" occupied Three Shadows in a National Geographic manner, presenting epic landscapes and lives in epic high-definition, and with an environmental tenor. And no wonder: the exhibition was initiated by the Asia Society's Centre for US-China Relations on the subject of climate change. At its core were documentary photographs by contemporary photographer David Breashears which, when compared with those taken by the British mountaineer George Mallory almost 90 years ago, show that the Himalayan glaciers are now much smaller. In juxtaposing these with the lives and labor environment of China's miners and, for balance, vintage shots of the mining industry elsewhere in the world (for example in Wales as captured by Bruce Davidson in 1965), the purpose of the exhibition was to connect a cause of climate change — the pursuit and expenditure of fuel — with one of its major effects in the form of vanishing peaks; highlighted in turn is the effect of melting glaciers on global weather and the lives of millions dependent on rivers fed by Himalayan ice. Curated by Susan Meiselas and Jeroen de Vries, "Coal + Ice" featured in the New York Times and was extended by a month until December 28th.

What first struck the visitor to this momentous show was its installation. Never before has Three Shadows' solemn grey frame been so inventively filled. In the first space, Breashears' panoramic views of the Himalayas were suspended from the ceiling. The imagery of vertiginous, snowy peaks bathed in



By Niu Guozheng.



By Lewis Hine.



By Robert Capa.

overlapping on the walls. These were taken in Long Island in storm season (the photographer was tethered to his assistant for safety), and testify to the increasing aggression of the world's weather as a result of environmental harm.

undented light was experienced here like a series of visual sermons suspended overhead. There was something uncanny in the juxtaposition of the depth and magnitude contained within these shots and the flatness of the prints; unlike when hung on a wall, here the planate paper was seen in profile as one passed beneath each image, anticipating the next; it was close to being a metaphor of the fragility of the ice. Continuing up the stairs, one looked back to see a series of early twentieth-century images of miners on the back of the peak panoramas — a juxtaposition of mountain and miner, landscape and labor, above and below, displayed as affective flip-sides.

Next, more recent pictures of miners were juxtaposed with a few of the kinds of mammoth machinery used to plow the earth's core. Videos showing on small, floor-level TV screens — the only uncomfortable aspect of viewing the exhibition — took one on a mesmeric, alien journey past massive drills and conveyor belts speeding deep underground. The photographs of people here were striking, too. Song Chao famously shows a miner set against white negative space; Niu Guozheng's carefully composed scenes are also of particular note. We saw also naked miners — saving their clothes — prostrated and dragging heavy boulders with slings; one man sits with his family, another is glimpsed amid rescue in a dark place, surrounded by helpers and inhaling through a mask; others are pictured washing and at rest.

In the penultimate section, a set of projector screens arranged in a ring served to place one almost within the world of each photograph that played through them simultaneously; each screen showed a different part of the image, mimicking a line of sight passing over and through its content, noticing the details of objects and expressions. Following this absorbing, life-sized human imagery was a giant 10 by 45 foot horizontal screen staging a morphing video of the Himalayan plateau as photographed recently by Breashears. Leaving this awesome view behind, one descended the stairs into an assembly of photographs in amazingly high definition by Clifford Ross,



By Song Chao.



By Geng Yunsheng.



By Yang Junpo.



By Yu Haibo.

In the center of the room, photographs by Chinese and Western photographers showing China's landscape damaged by the changing climate, were angled upwards from the floor like large scales — or waves — which one had to walk between.

"Coal + Ice" was an unusual exhibition for Beijing. Rare is the opportunity to see contemporary documentary/journalistic photographs of this caliber on display. The installation certainly set a new precedent for shows of photography in Three Shadows and beyond: the astute use of projection, hanging methods, volume and contour in the space ignited the experience of the content. The exhibition's effect occurs on different levels. The first concerns the ambivalence of aesthetic vs. issue. These photographs, particularly Breashears' headline images of mountains and glaciers, are extremely beautiful — highly detailed, extraordinary panoramas shot on the brow of the earth. They soar the conscience in the same way all commanding views do, tapping into a sense most primal of man perceiving landscape. This kind of sensation of the aesthetic and natural played productively into the environmental issue underpinning the show. At once and at odds with the sense of awe and beauty occurs, by the end of the exhibition, a feeling of discomfort and even horror, made stronger by the visual power of the looming landscapes; in this light, they take on a new, lurid appearance.

There is ambivalence, too, in terms of the human imagery that made up a large portion of the show. What "Coal + Ice" in fact depicted, in the most part, is coal miners + ice. Whilst this doesn't veer from the topic in question, it arguably sets the knock-on narrative of fuel-damage-effect slightly off course. The photographs of miners — poor people who toil for long hours in dark, dangerous and cramped conditions, are often portraits with emotive quality stretching beyond documentary and the mass-concern of climate change. Against the massive, depleting mountainscapes, this human geography and these faces which, worn and engrained with dirt, are like landscapes in themselves, would justify a separate show. In short, these pictures of individual lives amid the mining industry collectively articulated their own appeal, of which the narrative is unresolved. As fantastic photographs, they certainly add interest, but their final effect was not of contributing to the thematic thread; better suited to this would have been

an emphasis on documenting the demand and scale of the mining industry — as seen in Alfredo D'Amato's brilliant image of conveyors showering coal into huge pyramids, for example — not the people working for it through the years. As it is, focused human concern surfaced against the global environmental backdrop, but perhaps not in the way the exhibition intended.

"Coal + Ice" was a deservedly popular show, setting a high standard in quality and direction. Whether the photographs of individual miners too strongly personified the industry against the universal issue of climate change is a moot point, depending on the individual viewer. Regardless, this was a memorable exhibition on a subject which we might expect more often, in times to come, to have a foot in both the documentary and artistic fields.

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