EXHIBITION REVIEW

Miles Coolidge: Coal Seam redux
PETER BLUM GALLERY
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Huge, almost pitch-black squares are confronted with colorful miniature circular patterns—despite their contrasting appearance, both relate to the same substance. Photographic artist Miles Coolidge dedicated two cycles of work to coal and its implications for science and society, recently displayed at the Peter Blum Gallery in New York City.

"Coal was to Germany what rivers were to the United States," Coolidge commented with regard to the transformative power of natural phenomena and their significance for the industrial revolution.1 The nature of such phenomena is often ambivalent: While coal demanded many people slave away under gruesome conditions, it brought to others enormous wealth. It seems a curious coincidence that German colloquial language has attributed to the word "Kohle" (coal) a second meaning: money.

Five large-scale black-and-white photographs (57 x 50 inches each) greeted the visitors in the main gallery space. Dark as they are, these pictures do not reveal their secrets easily. Vaguely reminiscent of mysterious landscapes barely illuminated by some remote moon, they nevertheless deny the gaze any sense of scale. The pictures in this series, titled Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel, were taken in 2013, several hundred meters below the surface of the earth, in what is by now the last remaining active mine in the German Ruhr Valley. Coolidge was granted a time span of merely six hours—and although the ventilation system caused a constant breeze within the shafts, he remembers the trip as nauseating and exhausting. Due to fumes within the ducts, he could not use electronic equipment, resorting instead to his heavy 8 x 10 camera. "It was actually quite fitting," Coolidge smiles, "using nineteenth-century technology for documenting a nineteenth-century phenomenon." The only high-tech exception was a Schneider lens, designed for documenting paintings and other flat surfaces.

Each of the shots capturing the working surface in the shaft required between five and ten minutes of exposure—the soft glimmer that can be detected in the images originates from overhead lights in the mine. As Coolidge did not like the results of the test prints on photographic paper, he decided to use an ink-jet printer instead, which meant much darker results.

The second room featured strikingly different works. Miniature images invited the visitor to step up close, so that they could unfold to the gaze their strange prisms: circular, colorful patterns, not unlike slices of quartz. These Chemical Pictures (2016) are a tribute to the nineteenth-century German chemist Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge, who was the first to isolate and name substances from coal tar, did intensive research on artificial colors, and developed the archetype of what we know as paper chromatography: a special filter paper breaking down substances by means of solvents, thus sparking the "miraculous" appearance of colors.

In the 1830s, Runge was the first to isolate from coal tar the substance aniline—which was to become an important basic material for producing synthetic dyes. His discovery, explains Coolidge, "was the spark that led to his interest in color chemistry—and Germany's innovative history in this area." Coolidge carried out Runge's instructions for combining chemicals on paper, allowing each substance to dry before applying the next one. Inching their way outward from the center, they would disintegrate into their different components and interact with one another.

The rather lengthy titles of the pictures list the ingredients in the order of appearance, starting at the center. But although Coolidge stayed true to Runge's "recipes," the results could not be predicted in detail, thus constituting unique images. Furthermore, the substances continue to react to each other—albeit at a much slower rate than when wet—so the colors will continue to change slightly over the course of time.

Coolidge's work is known for playing with notions of scale. He often, though not exclusively, chooses photography as his means of expression. Coal Seam redux addressed coal both as an object of the camera's eye and as the material creating pictures, bringing forth a coincidence of subject and object. At the same time, it served as a two-fold reference to the significance of coal for Germany's industrialization—allowing its traces to inspire artistic processes. Coolidge is fascinated by the fact that the industrial revolution in Germany was based on chemistry, and he points out that coal in the beginning was used not for energy—but for gaining knowledge about the world.

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