

A Story of Coal Lost and Found

By Teresa Silva

At the end of the year 2000, I was living in Berlin where winter was bleak in terms of color, light, and temperature – more so than the winters in my hometown of Chicago. At the time, I was an undergraduate student living in a shabby, shared apartment in the former East with a photography student and her young daughter. The apartment had not been renovated much since World War II, and one striking example that made this point was the coal oven used to heat my bedroom. For the first time, I thought about coal and its utility and materiality. I would obsessively think about getting it, handling it, lighting it, and stoking it in order to stay warm through the night. The labor for this process was divided up between us. By choice, my roommate would handle the task of going to the cellar with her wagon to fill it with coal and carry the load to our second floor walk-up. Coal is heavy and my upper body strength is weak. I knew I wasn't fit to do this. I had the task, instead, of starting and sustaining the fire. The learning curve was big, and I would stress about doing it right. But, my roommate is a patient person and she showed me the process step-by-step.

First, I would collect old newspapers and crumble them up into wads. I would stack heaps of them in the middle of the oven and surround the paper with pieces of coal in conical form, careful to allow cracks for air circulation to let the flame breathe. Second, I would strike a match and light the newspaper. Third, I would close the oven door, but keeping it ajar and watching the flame grow, igniting the coal around. My roommate said it was important for me to observe and stoke the fire for a full thirty minutes, otherwise it would go out and I'd have to start the process over. Stoking involved adding more newspaper, coal or a combination of both in small, measured amounts. Too much, and the fire would cease immediately. Usually I was unsuccessful, growing exasperated after an hour, and I would go to bed tired and cold with my hands covered in newspaper ink and soot. I repeated this process from October until May, when spring arrived in Berlin. My semester ended in July, and I returned to Chicago later that summer, forgetting about coal for a while. My story of coal is intense but brief, in contrast to a story about coal for a boy who grew up in a mining town in England.

A history of coal begins here for the artist, Philip Hartigan. Hartigan hails from a coal mining town in North East England, where, like many mining regions, coal was the primary commodity for a community. It was a source of life and total environment at once. Yet, instead of looking at

coal through a sociological lens, Hartigan applies a personal lens, taking a sharp, individual focus on it in his solo exhibition, *A History of Coal* at Corner Art Gallery in Chicago.

Every object has a story, but, depending on its storyteller and characters, the story about a thing can be told in multiple ways. As John Berger once stated, “If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories.” Hartigan focuses the narrative in his projected animation on the real-life event of a miner, his grandfather, who suffered from a coal mining disaster. Watching the animation, we witness him performing solitary work, extracting minerals from the earth below. Vibrations are sensed and he looks above, only to have the roof above him collapse and seal him into darkness. The darkness, or the unconscious, draws us into a strange psychological space. The projection zooms in on the miner’s face confronting us with a strong psychic charge and altered state. Imagery of an aircraft disaster, cats boxing, St. Barbara hovering, and a kidnapping both attract and menace the miner’s perception. It’s not clear if he’s experiencing pleasure or pain, and perhaps that is the point or end of the story: an altered state, whether it’s sleep or unconsciousness is prelude not to death, but rather to something else.

The intensity of this story and its unknown ending are enhanced by the multiple media that Hartigan employs to recount his tale of coal. Just like there are other words to describe coal – culm, scoria, anthracite – there are other forms in which to tell a tale. Hartigan gives away the secret of his animation with the simple but effective diorama presented in the exhibition and used in staging the moving images. Hartigan’s choice to place the diorama in his exhibition, in direct opposition to the animation, begs to tell us another side of the story through textures, shapes, and scale. Adjacent prints, both as artist books and framed pieces, uncover more layers to a history of coal, pointing back to other characters and an imagined community who share the lived experiences of the coal miner, as protagonist, and the artist, as storyteller.