

April 2015

Industrial Song Lines

*“Tramline iron ore
Curtain of liquid steel
Red and gold
On the train today
Passing through that secret country
Of my grandfather’s veins ...”*

Chris Stewart bounced up on stage carrying his grandfather’s huge black overcoat in his arms and carefully wrapped it around his shoulders. Fluffing his lines twice, he recovered then delivered an impassioned soliloquy about the trail known as the Black Path, a once busy thoroughfare crowded with workers on their way to a lifetime of steel and shipbuilding on Teesside. This was just the start of a colourful evening of performance poetry I had chosen to begin research on a project to document one of Britain’s great industrial heartlands. Next up came a young Muslim poet recently returned from London, reciting an original ode to his home in Redcar off his iPhone.



The local library bristled with old photographs and maps of the Tees Estuary. I chatted with kids on their BMX bikes in North Gare and winkle picker, Donny Webley in South Gare, long since retired from the nearby resurgent steelworks. I listened to the rattle of cranks and wheels of the transporter bridge echo through the morning mist but those lines of poetry in a Middlesbrough social club last winter had fired me up to return to the now somewhat dishevelled Black Path. Not simply to record neglect and decay because around it new industry has grown up and you can’t help feel renewed spirit of place or the sense of belonging from those who have lived here for generations.



I have always wanted to ask photographers who have become openly obsessed with imagery of industrial decline and decay; do they feel a little guilty or just a tad voyeuristic dissecting the rubble of people's ruined livelihoods brilliantly achieved by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre in their depiction of Detroit in ruins ? Can we call it iconic, make highly detailed billboard sized prints of peeling paint and rusted iron for the gallery and call it art ? Or do we still call it art and go in completely the other direction, make it all disappear in a whirlwind of manipulation leaving a bland landscape of green and grey ? Such was "Rhein II", the world's most expensive photograph to date, masterfully created by German visual artist, Andreas Gursky.

Strangely, I didn't have any such crisis of conscience bumping through the deserts of Northern Chile to see what remained of the Saltpeter refineries, once one of the great industrial success stories of South America. Saltpeter, or sodium nitrate, was an ingredient in the manufacture of explosives and, later, of fertilisers that transformed agriculture in the Americas and Europe. Humberstone is one of only a handful of refineries which the desert has yet to consume. A whole town grew up around the industry and at its height in the 1940's, it housed some 3,700 people eager to reap some of the rewards of this 'white gold'.

By 1959 its decline was complete. The mines closed and workers and their families retreated to coastal settlements. The spirit of this community glowed briefly in 2002 when some of those people returned to help raise its profile filling the faded theatre, streets, balconies and plants with a two day fiesta. My spanish wasn't sufficient to delve deep enough but the atmosphere was revelatory. Three years later, Humberstone and its outliers received World Heritage protection.



Heritage of any kind is big business these days, but traditional industry and its surrounding landscapes gone to seed seem to get particular attention from preservation societies, photographers and writers alike. Movie makers fall over themselves to utilise these dark & dusty spaces to bring realism to their sci-fi and horror film sets or painstakingly recreate them in the studio. Industry has provided the background for some of the most iconic and heroic imagery - a celebration of production, wealth and energy. Look no further than Margaret Bourke-White's, 'Women of Steel' from 1943, Bernd and Hilla Becher's grand architectural portraiture from 1970's and Brian Griffin's surreal Broadgate builders portraits from 1980's. Those were heady days, and the notion that one day many of these sites would be grassed over or left to rot simply wasn't considered.



Every so often there are chinks of light in the remnants of industry long gone or full of ghosts. It might be some time before Detroit can rescue itself from its industrial ashes but other great American cities like Baltimore, Portland and San Francisco have managed considerable transformations where their industrial past shines through.

Photographing the old mine shafts and chimney stacks of Botallack near Lands End last year with bluebells pushing through traces of engine room walls and a keen wind blowing off the Atlantic, it was easy to conjure up the lives of Cornish miners. Heritage aside, there appears to be life still left in these mines as new technologies seek to extract recently discovered tin ores at a time when worldwide supplies are dwindling rapidly. Megan, a local farmer I stopped to have a chat with on my way back to my tent after a satisfying dawn shoot wasn't so sure anything will come of this, 'but you keep taking pictures', she demanded enthusiastically as she led her donkey down the stoney track.