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The devil in the detail

Darren Almond's images depict hellish toil and uneasy cultural change, but they never tell us how to feel. Adrian Searle admires his complex, brooding work

In pictures: Highlights from the shows

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Inside the volcano ... a still from the film Bearing about sulphur miners

A man labours in hell. He is harvesting sulphur from inside the crater of a volcano, breathing in the acid smoke swirling up from the ground. All he has to break up the sulphur is a metal rod. All he has to carry the chunks are two baskets slung from a pole balanced on one shoulder. His only protection is a bit of cloth, which he intermittently stuffs in his mouth to suck air through. His eyes are bloodshot, his teeth are eroded, his breathing is wheezy, and his knees are ruined from carrying his loads - maybe 100kg - over the crater rim and down to the weighing station.

Darren Almond walks with him, a camera on his shoulder. The Indonesian worker's journey, down the side of Kawah Ijen in Java, is filmed in an almost continuous take. Other human mules are making this same journey, in both directions. We hear rather than see them - a sudden yell, the sound of someone retching in the fog, stones dislodged as feet scabble for balance. For much of this grim descent, Almond focuses on the man's face. There are frequent pauses as the worker tries to catch his breath. He looks stunned by the work, the poisonous air, the rattle of his wrecked lungs. The man spits, grimaces and trudges on.

Bearing, Almond's 35-minute video, is not the first time this exploitative, appalling job has been exposed to a wider audience. Tourists have often been here, posting snapshots on the web. There are films on YouTube. But it is still overwhelming. Bearing is fascinating, shocking, uncomfortable. But what is our discomfort compared to the plight of the workers? What is Almond asking us to think about it? We might talk about how the video takes us from the collection of the sulphur to its weighing and unloading. Yet what is made clear is that this is simply a single turn of an endlessly repeated cycle. As soon as the camera stops recording, the man will turn round and walk up the volcano again, and pause with a new load on the way down, hawk and spit and stuff the cloth in his mouth and grimace, again and again.

This does not tell us what to think or feel. There is no Michael Palin here to offer a cheery encouragement

or to scratch his head at the gross injustice of the world. Filmed without comment, Bearing escapes voyeurism. It bears witness and is at its most painful in the periods when the camera waits with the man as he rests, labouring over his breath, the crippling weight, the inhuman conditions.

Bearing is Almond's newest work in Fire Under Snow, opening this week at London's Parasol Unit. The show's title echoes that of the autobiography of Tibetan dissident Palden Gyatso, who spent 33 years in Chinese prisons and work camps. In Almond's work, one thing always leads to another. The second film in the show is In the Between, a three-screen work shot in Tibet. For most of its 14 minutes, the central image shows Buddhist monks chanting, eating and meditating in the oldest monastery in Lhasa, capital of Tibet. On the screens to either side, we watch the new bullet train speeding across the arid plain of the world's highest plateau. Sometimes the camera is on board, looking out at the bare landscape, the intense blue sky, the distant Himalayas. The train speeds through empty stations and a blank green landscape, taking its tourists and businessmen to Lhasa, to a soundtrack of cymbals and chanting.

Some 1.5 million passengers came to Tibet by this train alone last year. China is opening up the country, swamping the Tibetans. "Almond is an artist, and artists are connoisseurs and articulators of the ambiguous, the ambivalent, the cognitively dissonant," writes the Buddhist philosopher and academic Robert Thurman in his pungent and often angry essay in Index, an accompanying new primer on Almond's work.

Thurman is angry about China's continuing presence in Tibet. He is also right about artists, and we do well to remember the importance of ambivalence and ambiguity in creative works. Art isn't meant just to press a happy button, pull the tragedy lever, turn the prettiness dial or ring the relevance bell. And it should do more than tick issues or be well-meaning. If it is any good, art deals with the complexity of being in the world. Artworks mean more than one thing, often more than the artist knows. There's more to it than a message, a slogan or a sentiment. Often, artists don't know what they mean, or only find out later. Sometimes they intend one thing and end up with another. They work in between meanings and reason.

Thurman sees the train as a phallic instrument in China's rape of Tibet. But it is hard not to fall for the train a little, the way it squeezes time and geography. Part of Almond also loves the train (he was a trainspotter growing up in Wigan). In the Between is the final part of a trilogy of films about train journeys. Mobility changes the world, and goes on changing it - that is one reason why In the Between is so exhilarating and awful.

One thing I have grown to like about Almond's work over the years is its complexity. It is about all sorts of things: time, places, journeys, the telling and retelling of lives, memory, nostalgia, private lives and public histories. Working with video, photography, installation and objects, Almond goes his own way, mostly avoiding the cliché of universal statements and the mawkishness of the overly personal. In the same show, there is a room of photographs of dead trees, their trunks like black drawings against the blank snow and the steely sky. It is almost impossible to imagine colour here, or even life itself. Yet the images have a final, calligraphic beauty. They are a sort of writing of the end of the world.

There were taken in Monchegorsk and Norilsk in northern Siberia, above the Arctic Circle, where, between 1935 and 1953, a third of a million prisoners toiled in the Soviet gulag, mining and processing some of the biggest deposits of nickel, platinum, cobalt and copper on the planet. It is one of the most polluted places on earth, a blunt fact that the whiteness of the snow cannot conceal. Almond's photographs are titled Night & Fog, in reference to Alain Resnais' 1955 film about Auschwitz, Night and Fog.

Resnais focused primarily on the abandoned buildings at the concentration camp. Almond himself has made several works about Auschwitz, using the old bus shelters from the road which runs past the camp, which is now a museum. Instead of showing us something overtly dramatic, he points to the quotidian, the echoes of the terrible resonating in the everyday. This is why, perhaps, he quotes the exiled Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, in two aluminium relief plates, the kind bolted to the sides of locomotives bearing commemorative names. "Only sound needs echo and dreads its lack," reads one. The other: "A glance is accustomed to no glance back."

There is no one looking back from Almond's photographs at Moons of the Iapetus Ocean, his concurrent show at White Cube in London's Hoxton Square. Though these colour images are full of historical echoes, they have a brooding, inexplicable silence about them. Shot at night, with long exposure times under the full moon, they show British beauty spots: Flatford Mill, where Constable painted; the Yorkshire limestone ravine Gordale Scar; Cader Idris; St Abb's Head. Because of the long exposures, waves have become a soft-focus mushy whiteness about the coast; a waterfall is a leaden blur; a river's surface molten and deathly by moonlight. There's not even a fox, just the yellow trace of the night mail train crossing a viaduct.

This isn't cinema's day-for-night so much as night-for-day. The effect is quite unlike human night vision, and closer to the way the world appears in old tinted postcards, in dreams and in memories of childhood. The world is slowed down, but this only serves to quicken the senses. Everything is impending.

• **Fire Under Snow** is at Parasol Unit, London, from Friday to March 30. **Moons of the Iapetus Ocean** is at White Cube Hoxton Square, London, from Friday to February 23.

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