

Cage Call: Life and Death in the Hard Rock Mining Belt . LOUIE PALU and CHARLIE ANGUS. Portland, Oregon: Photolucida, 2007. 64 p. ISBN 978-1-934334-02-7.

Cage Call: Life and Death in the Hard Rock Mining Belt joins several other books covering the mining industry in Canada, including *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968: A Selection from the Negatives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton*¹ and *Minto Miners: A Tribute*,² as well as other books that focus on various mining tragedies, such as *That Bloody Cape Breton Coal*.³ Unlike most works on the subject, *Cage Call* is not a book grounded in text, with photographs used to support a central thesis, but rather a photographer's monograph, with the text included to provide a deeper layer of meaning and understanding about the images.

Cage Call was photographed from 1991 to 2003, and is the culmination of more than twelve years of work by photographer Louie Palu and writer Charlie Angus. This represents their third major collaboration. ⁴ The book

1 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax/Sydney, NS, 1983).

2 Lawrence Christmas, *Minto Miners: A Tribute* (Minto, NB, 1989).

3 Rennie Mackenzie, *That Bloody Cape Breton Coal: Stories of Mining Disasters in Everyday Life* (Wreck Cove, NS, 2004).

4 Charlie Angus and Louie Palu, *Industrial Cathedrals of the North* (Toronto, 1999); Charlie Angus and Louie Palu, *Mirror of Stone: Fragments from Porcupine Frontier* (Toronto, 2001).

covers the everyday life and struggles of miners and their families in communities such as the Louvicourt Mine in Val d'Or, Quebec, Macassa Gold Mine in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, and Kerr Mine in Virginiatown, Ontario. Palu, who resides in Washington, DC, is an internationally recognized photojournalist who trained with photographer Mary Ellen Mark in New York City, prior to coming to work as a staff photographer with the *Globe and Mail* in 2001. Charlie Angus, the son of gold miners, was raised in Timmins, Ontario and currently serves as the New Democratic Party (NDP) Member of Parliament for Timmins-James Bay. He returned to northern Ontario in 1990 to raise his young family in Cobalt, Ontario.

In 2005, I was fortunate enough to view a small selection of images from *Cage Call* when it was part of the *Vital Signs* exhibition at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, NY. The same year, Palu was awarded the Critical Mass book award by a group of two hundred jurors, comprised of some of the most important photography curators in the world. Part of the award, which was given to the top scoring finalists of the portfolio review, included a monograph published by Photolucidia (the other winners that year were Hiroshi Watanabe and Sage Sohier).

In her introduction to the catalogue for *Vital Signs*, curator Alison Nordström writes of Palu's photographs: "Photography transforms the mundane facts of labour ... What in actuality are loud, foul and chaotic places are made mythic and contemplative by the isolation and silence of the images."⁵ We see this in *Cage Call's* cover image entitled, "Shaft Miner at the 2500 Foot Level Station before Drilling, Louvicourt Mine, Val d'Or, Quebec," which has become the iconic image of the project. A worker, hands raised above his head, as if in praise, is bathed in the light emanating from a giant circular mine shaft above him. The photograph seems peaceful and indeed contemplative, but we know the environment to be hot, loud, and wet. We draw from our memory and knowledge to tell us what we think this place is really like, and are forced to correlate this with Palu's peaceful image. In doing so, it pushes us to examine what we consider to be documentary photography, and its broader context within the archive.

Aesthetically, Palu's images of miners belong, as well as owe a debt to, the photographic tradition of documenting the reality of working life and conditions, pioneered by photographers such as Lewis Hines, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers in the United States, and even some of National Film Board (NFB) Still Photography Division photographers here in Canada. It is possible to see several historical documentary influences in

⁵ Alison Nordström, *Vital Signs: George Eastman House, July 2–October 9, 2005* (Rochester, NY, 2005), p. 4.

Palu's work in *Cage Call*, such as the above mentioned Lewis Hine, in Palu's photographs of workers and industrial sites (such as "The late Lester Beattie smoking after drilling in a bypass drift, 1450 foot level Kerr Mine, Virginiatown" and "Lunch Break, 1450 foot level Kerr Mine, Virginiatown"), or even FSA photographer Walker Evans (in the somewhat out of place image "Larder Mens Wear, Larder Lake Ontario"). Bill Jefferies, Director of the Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, has related *Cage Call* images to those of Leslie Sheddon (from the previously mentioned book, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968*) as well as Russell Lee (West Virginia), Bill Brandt (Wales), and Sebastiao Salgado (South America).⁶

What we must keep in mind, however, is the context of the creation of these historic images. Hines, for instance, saw himself not as a photographer, but rather as a social reformer, who sought to chronicle and raise awareness of the atrocious working conditions of labourers (especially children). Similarly, the FSA photographers were hired to capture the plight of Americans, particularly rural farming communities, during the Depression and to help introduce America to its citizenry. Sheddon was commissioned by the mining companies to photograph the environs and their workers for company publications. I am still undecided as to Palu's agenda for his photography, but what is clear is that aesthetically, he is supported by a strong history and tradition of documenting the working class and their communities.

Inasmuch as Sheddon and Palu share the same subject matter, and both photographers captured Canadian mining communities, a closer examination of the two photographers is perhaps warranted. As Jefferies remarked, there are similarities between Palu and Sheddon's images in that they depict miners working underground in Canadian mines. While on the surface this may be true, many of Sheddon's images were obviously posed, which may have been an outcome of the context in which they were created, but may also have been due, as Angus details in *Cage Call*, to the difficulties in capturing such a tough profession like mining. Perhaps realizing this, Palu worked hard to integrate himself into the mining communities, following the miners to the depths, gaining their trust so that he could capture them in their working environment with natural ease,⁷ and this shows in his images.

Perhaps the most glaring difference between Palu and Sheddon is that the mining companies commissioned Sheddon, while Palu was not. This is why, in addition to featuring the miners and their working environment, almost half of Palu's photographs in this monograph document the destruction and damage inflicted by mining on both the people and the landscape. As Angus

6 Louie Palu, "Cage Call: Life and Death in the Hard Rock Mining Belt," <http://www.louiepalu.com/projects/cagecall/index.html> (accessed on 31 August 2008).

7 Details of his work are recorded in an interview in *LensWork Magazine* (Issue 73, Nov.-Dec. 2007).

writes, “Today’s miners are no longer low-paid grunts, but highly paid specialists with wages unmatched by other blue-collar work” (p. 50). Ironically, we do not see many examples of this high-paying lifestyle, but rather mostly a picture of decay and shadows left in the wake of the mines. This conflict between victimization and empowerment of the miners is constantly at play throughout the book, in both the images and the text.

Another major difference between *Cage Call* and *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968* are the texts accompanying the photographs and how they have been used. The Sheddon images, photographed decades before the text was written, were used to illustrate how an image archives can be repurposed and includes wonderful and informative essays by labour historian Don MacGillivray and photo theorist Alan Sekula. The text in *Cage Call*, however, was written contemporary to the photographs, and, it seems, was meant as more of a backstory to the images. The photographs are all supplied with captions, which give us basic information, but it is Angus’s text that provides a deeper context to the photographs and provides the archival “meat” to the book.

Angus’s writings contain stories of union and labour issues, injuries, death, and ideas of community. They are a combination of personal observations, and narratives of miners and their families. The written accounts transport the reader to the deep mines, eight thousand feet underground in some cases, with temperatures reaching as high as 112 degrees Fahrenheit. They serve as a record of what appears to be a changing industry in Canada, with many of the retired miners – while acknowledging the harm and risk involved to their lives, health, and family life – still talking wistfully about the sense of community and family surrounding their livelihood. Capturing these ideas about community, Angus includes a quote from former miner Rick Chopp from Timmins who said: “I think about it everyday. I even dream about it, I miss it so much” (p. 54).

Two reoccurring themes, the value of life and the need to live in the present, appear in both the photos and the written accounts of those working in the mining industry. There is the story of Glen Harwood who was trapped underground in an accident at Kirkland Lake on 20 December 1991. Harwood survived but his mining partner was killed. He goes on to tell of other accidents that killed his brother-in-law and other members of his community. Harwood acknowledged the hard choices one has to make when deciding to work in this dangerous profession and the impact this can have on miners and their families after an accident. At the same time, however, in Harwood’s account, as well as several others in the book, the proximity to the constant threat of danger seems to make all those moments spent above ground with family and friends that much sweeter.

As I neared the end of the book, I found myself wishing for *more*. In the credits section, Palu mentions eighteen mines, mills and smelters, and five

strikes which were studied and visited, from which a large portion of photographs could not be included in the book. There are only fifty photos – a small sample of thousands of images from a project spanning more than twelve years of photographing and two years of editing. Realizing that there may be restrictions on the number of pages allowed in the monograph by the granting body Photolucida, it does offer the hope that there may eventually be a follow-up publication to this project in the future. I found myself constantly flipping from the photos to the written accounts, trying to put a face to the names in the stories. Sometimes I found a match, but often I was left wishing to see what the people from these harrowing accounts looked like, or to find out the story behind a particular photograph, other than the basic title information provided.

The book ends with an excerpt from Angus's interview with one of the first female miners to go underground, Carrie Chenier, who talked about the closing of the mine at Elliot Lake, Ontario: "... [Elliot Lake] now has a big Mining Museum and tells the story of the owners. Who is going to tell the story of the miners" (p. 59)? Despite its small size, I think *Cage Call* is an excellent start.

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