

ArtForum February 2008- Jane Morris

PARASOL UNIT FOUNDATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Although British artist Darren Almond's simultaneous solo exhibitions are linked by a common aesthetic sensibility, the tone of the two shows is strikingly different. At Parasol Unit, "Fire Under Snow" is overtly political, as its title—taken from the autobiography of Tibetan monk Palden Gyatso, who survived thirty-three years of imprisonment and torture in Chinese jails—might suggest. A three-channel film acts as the pivot for the show. In *the Between*, 2006, interlaces mirror images of a trans-China express train carving its way through the wilderness with the gently chanting monks of the seventh-century Samyey monastery in Tibet as the calm center of the triptych. It is a clear comment on the military, industrial, and financial threat of the emerging superpower, but it is more ambivalent, perhaps, about the impact of well-meaning Westerners on a threatened culture. The monks perform their apparently timeless rituals, while we, the viewers, experience the strange, mesmerizing quality of time suspended; the train is a point of stillness as the barren landscape streams by. Are we allowed to observe the monks' closed, spiritual community? Are we as dangerous as, or more dangerous than, the obvious oppressors, with our love of speed, comfort, and far-flung places to exploit at our (quite literal) leisure?

Other works in the exhibition raise equally uncomfortable questions. The polluted, corrupted landscape of Norilsk in northern Russia, one of the world's largest producers of nickel, platinum, and cobalt and a onetime gulag, is transformed, in Almond's hands, into dead forests of striking allure. In *Bearing*, 2007, viewers witness the physically exhausting work of Indonesian laborers digging and carrying sulfur from a poisonous, dusty open-cast mine. Yet there is an eerie beauty in the yellow haze surrounding their painstaking endeavors, and surely an unease about our complicity in the conditions that have led to their backbreaking toil.

Almond is masterful at this tension between beauty and ugliness, responsibility and guilt, memory and time, and his own implied ambivalence about the scenes he presents is the crucial leaven in what could easily have come across as a sermon. "The Moons of the Iapetus Ocean," a reference to one of the natural satellites of Saturn and the title of his exhibition at White Cube, is an altogether less politically charged affair: Since 1999, Almond has taken long-exposure photographs of landscapes at night. He has filled the gallery with images of moonlit rocks and seas. It is a modern, perhaps ecologically minded return to the wonder at nature so evident in Romantic painting. These images are lovely, subtle, but much less discomfiting than the rest of Almond's art now on view in London.

