

ART REVIEW: Miles Coolidge Melds Art and Science in “Coal Seam redux”

January 10, 2017 by Charles A. Riley II

A strange and subtle show of works by **Miles Coolidge** at the **Peter Blum Gallery** on 57th Street in Manhattan digs deep into the relationship between science and art. The exhibition, “Coal Seam *redux*,” combines large-scale photographs of a coal seam at an active mine in the Ruhr valley with a series of small works on paper that replicate a landmark chemical experiment by F.F. Runge.

These seemingly disparate ideas, resulting in dramatically different visual presentations, actually share a number of hidden connections. The works on view are also full of satisfying surprises, such as the glints of light that sparkle in the mine, flashing white facets that glimmer in the darkness of the shaft in *Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel #1*. Who knew that coal—that *bête noire* of the energy industry—could be so elegantly beautiful?



"Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel #1" by Miles Coolidge, 2013.
Pigment inkjet print, 57 x 50 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Miles Coolidge photographed the mine with an 8x10 camera, using long exposure times to collect an extraordinary range of textural detail. The works also explore the different ways that these textures deflect what must be minimal light on surfaces that are printed at times in a velvety matte black-on-black and at other times with a diamond-like white, as in the radiant oval just below the center of *Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel #5*.

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*"Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel #5" by Miles Coolidge, 2013.
Pigment inkjet print, 57 x 50 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.*

The “highlight” of each of the five large-scale images, which measure 57 by 50 inches, is the jagged crack that runs like a scar across the three works on one wall and cuts across the other two that are side-by-side on the next wall. Like the set for a production of Richard Wagner’s Ring cycle, these images convey the epochal duration of geological time, millions of years of compression. They also capture the somber blackness of the ancient ore that is responsible for a choking smog in Beijing, which even the local officials (known for their bald-faced lies on climate change) are calling a “meteorological disaster.”



*"Coal Seam Redux" by Miles Coolidge, on view at Peter Blum Gallery.
Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.*

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Another operatic comparison comes to mind: The alluring glimmer of striations in the rock evokes the ribbons of LED lights used to conjure the Mediterranean in the stage set for a contemporary opera that recently made its debut at the Metropolitan Opera House, the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's "L'Amour de Loin." I'd even go as far as to compare Coolidge's undulating forms to the arpeggios of the composer's mesmerizing score. The illumination, the layering of blacks, and the patterns remind me of some of the best prints (usually grey on grey) of Jasper Johns or the untitled back-lit sculpture made in 1966 by Bruce Nauman, given to the Museum of Modern Art by Joseph Helman (who was connected to this space when it was known as the Blum Helman Gallery).

There are so many subtexts below the surface of these works, both art historical and scientific, that the in-depth experience is a matter of historical digging. The series has art historical roots, because the Ruhr valley is best known in photographic circles as the stomping grounds of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Coolidge's teachers at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. Their elegiac images of industrial structures are now considered classics. Like the Bechers, Coolidge's work is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, as well as the Albright-Knox Gallery, Guggenheim Museum and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Better known in Germany and on the west coast than in New York, Coolidge is a Montrealer (born in 1963) who studied in Dusseldorf but earned his MFA at the California Institute of the Arts and lives in Los Angeles.

Although it sounds a bit like a ruse, another twist on these works is that they are printed by an inkjet method using pigments derived from coal. The conceptual click of this knowledge of the material link between subject and object is part of the signal sent by the word "*redux*" in the exhibition's title.

In a new book on the epistemological challenge posed by abstract art, "Reductionism in Art and Brain Science," the Nobel laureate Eric Kandel offers a compelling case for the "top-down" processing of abstract art, a splendid key to the painterly impact of the five large works, richly printed in their luscious range of mineral blacks.

The bridge from the photos printed with carbon to the second part of the exhibition—the little works on paper that are as airy as the mines are dense—can be seen in the studio process of using a coal-based chemical to start these "self-grown pictures." The descriptive title was assigned to the process by F.F. Runge (1794–1867) who pioneered the major breakthrough in analytic chemistry that made the process possible.



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A correspondent with Goethe during the period of the great author's research into color theory, F.F. Runge should not be confused with the painter Otto Runge, another friend of Goethe and significant figure in the history of color research. F.F. Runge (best known for discovering caffeine) began using filter paper for carrying out chemical reactions. He identified the first coal tar dye (aniline blue), depositing it with other chemicals to create reactions on the surface of the paper, where the water-soluble compounds would seep into rings of delicate colors.

The best of Coolidge's small works on paper have blue at the core, morphing into ambers and oranges that shimmer like the iris of an eye. Following Runge closely in the creation of the chromatographs, as they would be called later, Coolidge combines chance and choice in an operation that looks almost too biological and faint to hold its own with the industrial pressures of the mine photographs. Like the watercolors of Emil Nold or Paul Klee, they let the tints run at will to edges of saturated paper, where the interaction of color is a matter of chemistry.



"26.2 1) Chloraluminium 60 B. -2) Gelbes Cyaneisenkalium 1:16. - 3) 1 Theil schwefelsaures Kupferoxyd 1:8. 3 Theile Chloraluminium 60 B."
by Miles Coolidge, 2016. Chemical solutions on chromatography paper, 12 x 9 inches. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

I admire the way Coolidge avoids bashing the viewer over the head with an overt protest against the extractive industries, as mining is called in corporate circles. The missing color in this show is green, and its absence is a strength. As with corporations that make as much as they can of sustainability efforts in their corporate social responsibility reports, art that makes carbon emission into propaganda can rapidly turn into excessive "greenwashing," which in turn can be counter-productive because the ear and eye naturally blot it out along with other political rhetoric.

Even the geographic context of the works is loaded with irony, as Germany today leads the world in its commitment to replacing fossil fuels in its energy grid. By contrast with the usual type of overstatement for effect, Coolidge slips his message in with nuance, a superb example of art's role in shaping consciousness when it comes to the issue of the environment.

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This approach reminds me of Oscar Wilde's observations about the atmospheric paintings of J.M.W. Turner and the literally lethal fogs of Industrial Age Britain: "Before Turner there was no fog in London. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold. And so, let us be humane, and invite Art to turn her wonderful eyes elsewhere."

BASIC FACTS: "Miles Coolidge: Coal Seam *redux*" is on view December 16, 2016 to February 4, 2017 at the Peter Blum Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019. www.peterblumgallery.com.

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