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Coal + Ice @ Fort Mason + Clifford Ross Interview

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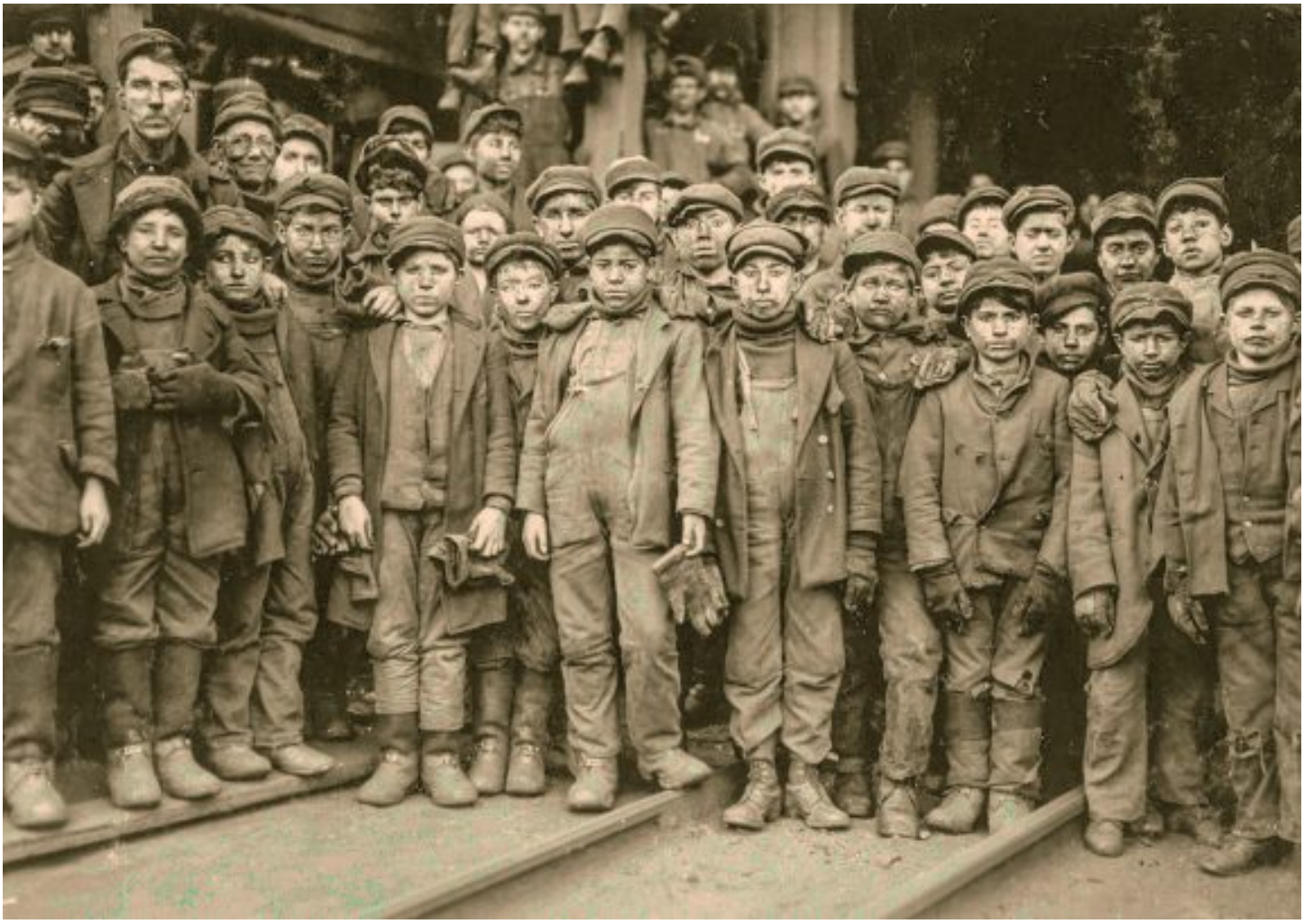
by David M. Roth

In 2016, Nairobi-based American photographer Nichole Sobecki captured this image of a mother and child fleeing drought in Somalia: evidence of how climate change has created a new class of refugee.

Even if you consider yourself well versed in the issues surrounding climate change, there's a lot you can learn from *Coal + Ice.* It's a large, emotionally wrenching exhibition of documentary photography spanning 50,000 square feet of space at Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, on view through September 23. The show, part of a citywide series of climate-related events designed to showcase California's pushback against Trump, breaks no ground in terms of content. The imagery, current and historic — of miners, floods, hurricanes, droughts, refugees, industrial pollution and melting glaciers — is familiar, having been chronicled extensively over the past century by *National Geographic* and others, chief among them Sebastiao Salgado, Edward Burtynsky and David Maisel, artists whose work combines activism and aesthetic considerations in equal

measure. What sets *Coal + Ice* apart — and what makes it a must-see exhibition — is the innovative presentation. Relying almost entirely on large-scale projections of still and moving images presented in cinematic darkness, the show delivers evidence that will likely enlarge your appreciation and understanding of the profound human and environmental toll exacted by mankind's addiction to fossil fuels.



Lewis Hine, breaker boys employed by the Pennsylvania Coal Company, 1911

The first things you see when you enter the dim hall are illuminated banners hanging from the rafters. They serve as previews for the core elements of the exhibition, those being seven small pavilions, each comprised of four large video screens onto which images from one or more photographers are sequentially projected on both sides. To enter into them and be surrounded by life-sized photos is to become immersed in the lives and events depicted. It's one thing, for example, to view **Lewis Hine's** turn-of-the-century photos of child laborers in reproduction or as small prints; it's quite another to confront his subjects at full scale, their adolescent faces prematurely aged by coal grime and anguish, staring out at you from across a century. Hine photographed these boys in Pennsylvania and Tennessee in 1910 and 1911, before child labor laws ended those practices in 1938. Those laws, it's worth remembering, were enacted, in part, as a result of the outrage sparked by his photos.

While images of this sort arouse empathy for the victims of bare-knuckle capitalism, it's an open question as to whether they can help people make the connection between human activity and the impending environmental apocalypse. *Coal + Ice* attempts to bridge that gap by focusing on global warming's impact on people rather than on seemingly arcane matters of science. (Those it addresses separately, in a room at the back of the hall devoted to sustainable energy solutions.)

Geng Yunsheng, miners at Wumeng Mountain, China

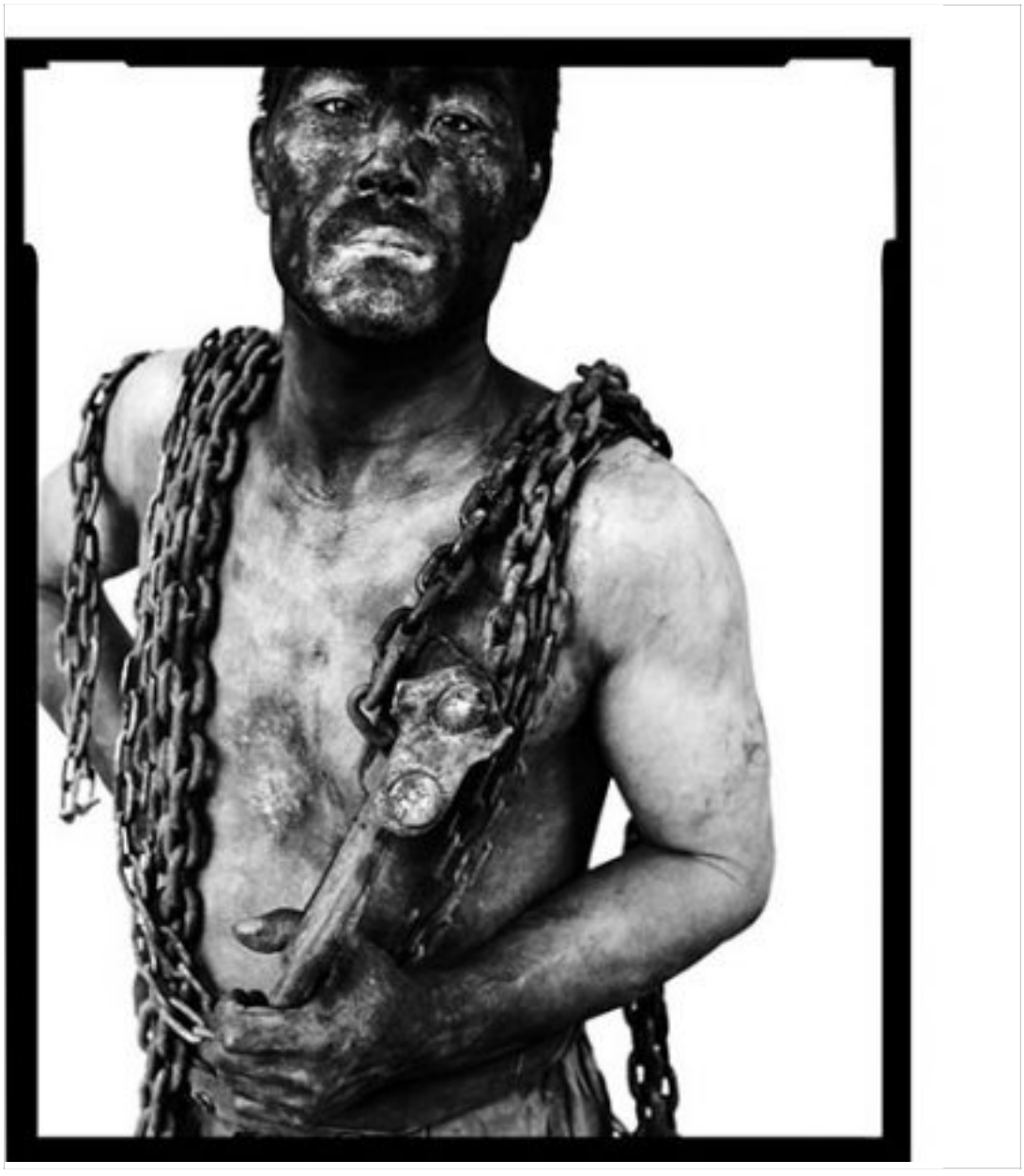
The show, organized by the Asia Society, includes 65 works made by 39 renowned documentary photographers and one outstanding media artist, Clifford Ross. It arrives, after stops in Beijing, Yixian, Shanghai and Paris, with impeccable credentials: The esteemed journalist and China scholar Orville Schell served as executive producer; Magnum photojournalist Susan Meiselas and the audio-visual designer Jeroen de Vries co-curated the show. Not surprisingly, many of its strongest images come from China, a nation whose heedless pursuit of industrialization poses a regional and global threat. Unlike the U.S., which is driving environmental policy backwards at a frightening pace, China at least *appears* to be reversing course, thrusting itself into the forefront of renewable energy production and taking measures to reduce its longstanding dependence on coal. Yet aspects of its recent past — and present – remain truly appalling.

Geng Yunsheng's photos show workers in Yunnan Province laboring like oxen, dragging or hauling on their backs immense tree limbs (presumably for fuel), and living in squalid conditions (See photo above.) **Niu Guozheng's** harrowing images of workers harvesting shale from
Song Chao, Shangdong Province, China, 2002

smoldering slag heaps, could, under different circumstances, be credibly viewed as war zones or scenes of volcanic activity. The same brutal conditions echo in the photos of **Song Chao**. He worked as a miner in Shandon Province from 1997 to 2001 and made black-and-white portraits of his co-workers in the style of Richard Avedon: in natural light against white backdrops with faces and torsos severely cropped, framed at the edges by ragged black borders. Their contorted body language and sometimes-morose facial expressions mirror the grim reality of "resource extraction."

The show's one big flaw is sparse documentation. Each grouping of images carries only the photographer's name, subject, location and date(s). The information flashes briefly across the screen before the photos roll. And while the pictures speak for themselves, too much critical information is missing, and in instances where the photographers' efforts span multiple locations, it's unclear where, exactly, the images were shot. Notable exceptions are two displays documenting miners' strikes in Borinage, Belgium. One, Misère au Borinage (1934), a silent film by **Henri Storck** and **Joris Ivens**, details the saga of miners who, after calling a strike,

were forced out of their slum homes with little more than the clothes on their backs. The other is a series of still shots by **Dolf Kruger**, made in 1957, before the mines closed in the 1960s, leaving the region with the nation's highest unemployment rate – a plight that continues to this day. Kruger's images show tense stand-offs between miners and police, as well as conditions similar to those pictured by Guozheng, of workers gathering shale in the absence of any other fuel to heat their homes. Both segments benefit from short but informative intertitles, as do heart-rending photos of drought in Africa recorded by Nairobi-based **Nichole Sobecki**. There, the lack of water has created a new class of refugees and set off political violence, much of it directed at nomadic tribes in Somalia that have come under attack from Al Shabab. She calls the series *Climate for Conflict*.



Henri Storck and Joris Ivens, still from Misère au Borinage, 1934

South African videographer **Gideon Mendel** documents the other side of the climate change equation: flooding. His portraits, collectively titled *Drowning World* (2011-15), depict people in inundated homes attempting to reclaim what's left of their lives. Among these, no single clip stands out — the impact accrues cumulatively, reaching a searing climax in images of water-damaged family photos. Their phantasmagorical character calls to mind Sigmar Polke's photographs of Afghani hashish smokers in which the artist intentionally used fouled darkroom chemicals to impart an otherworldly aura. Mendel's rescued images stand out less for what they show than for the existential dilemma they embody: the destruction of memories.

Gideon Mendel, From the home of Shirley Armitage, Moorland Village Somerset, UK, 2014

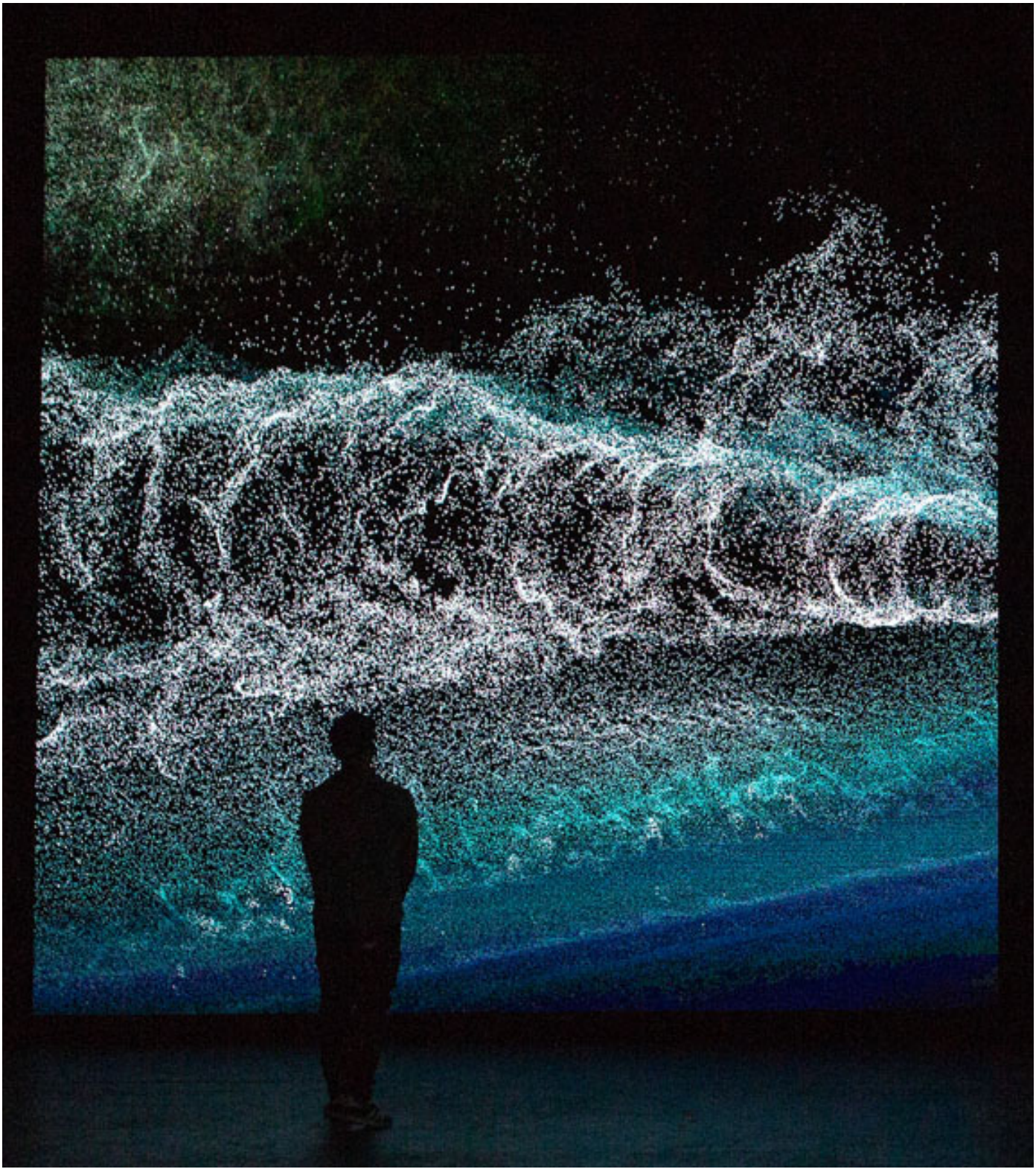
Mankind has always endured and dealt with natural disasters. Man-made disasters are something else. They threaten Earth's ability to sustain life, forcing fundamental changes in how we live and how we see the future. That future, according to climate scientists, will likely be defined by melting ice, photos of which, projected at monumental scale, occupy approximately 50 linear feet of wall space. They come from mountaineer **David Breashaers** who ten years ago photographed Mount Everest and other sites in the Himalayas from the same vantage as **David Mallory**, **Vittorio Sella** and **Major E. O. Wheeler** did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The point of this arresting display, which seamlessly cross-fades between Breashaers' images and those of the others, is to show the loss of icepack that has occurred over a relatively short timespan. Problem is, without the ability to view these images side-by-side, it's difficult to gauge the loss. What these juxtapositions more effectively convey are the seismic shifts that have occurred in the meaning of the word sublime, used by Edmund

Two photos made at the exact same location 88 years apart show the loss of icepack. L to R: Major E.O. Wheeler (1921) crossfading to David Breashears (2009), Kyetrak Glacier, Northern Slope of Cho Oyu, Tibet, China, 26,906 ft.

Burke in the 18th century to describe the combination of awe and terror humans once felt before wilderness. The experience back then was primordial, and to some extent it still is judging from Breashears' images; but now it's diluted, poisoned by visible changes and the incontrovertible knowledge that human activity has forever altered the environment and our experience of it.

Clifford Ross addresses this "post-nature" condition directly with *Light Waves II,* a video displayed on two 18 x 18-foot LED walls that appear side-by-side on the back wall of the exhibit. Ross, the nephew of Helen Frankenthaler, is an outlier in this show, in that he's the only one in it who's not a photojournalist. He began his career as an abstract painter, and has since explored a lot of different media, including sculpture and still photography. Here, he employs computer-based animations to build simulations of crashing waves that approximate his physical experience of them – something he did previously with high-resolution cameras of his own invention, which he operated while standing or floating in the surf, attached to a tether held by assistants. Those efforts yielded dramatic still photos, but they failed to capture all that he was feeling, so he sought other means of representing the experience. The solution he hit upon was programming millions of tiny LED lights to produce swirling, cascading, exploding shapes – pinpoints of light that credibly synthesize, from multiple perspectives, the look and feel of the ocean.

What follows is an edited version of a conversation I had with the artist on September 5 at Fort Mason.



Clifford Ross, detail from Light Waves II, digital wave displayed on LED Wall

# # #

David M. Roth: Can you explain, physically, technically and electronically what it is we're looking at?

Clifford Ross: We're looking at two 18 x 18-foot LED rolls. They are made up of approximately 2 million LED bulbs each, and I believe that they are 3.8 millimeters apart on center. Each one

Clifford Ross

is carrying a separate video program that was generated completely by computer animation. They are based solely on my own memory or feeling for the ocean; they're not based on a photograph or specific video. We work with a software program which is used by others but which we rebuilt for our own needs. So in this case, not being particularly adept digitally, I work with one or two extraordinarily capable people who understand my drive with working in computers, which is to make them behave in non-computer-like ways. What I wanted to do originally was to video myself in the ocean in high-def slow motion but it was physically impossible because the cameras are too big. I go into the ocean when I'm taking my still photographs with a wetsuit and flotation device roped up to one or two people on shore, and I'm sometimes in up to my neck. So in a way I rope up with my digital team and go into a computer.

DR: But prior to this you did mainly still photography, correct?

CR: My best-known works are the black-and-white photographs, which are captured either with film in the early days or with a digital camera. They're still images. And about 90 percent of my artistic practice is in the printing. I will print an image, 20, 30, 40 times — balancing, changing it, tuning it until it has the expressive content and fits my memory of the experience. To some extent I remember certain waves; I can't say I remember the specific photograph of the wave. When I'm working with a still image I'm trying to give people the feeling, the experience I had when I was in that water through a still photograph.

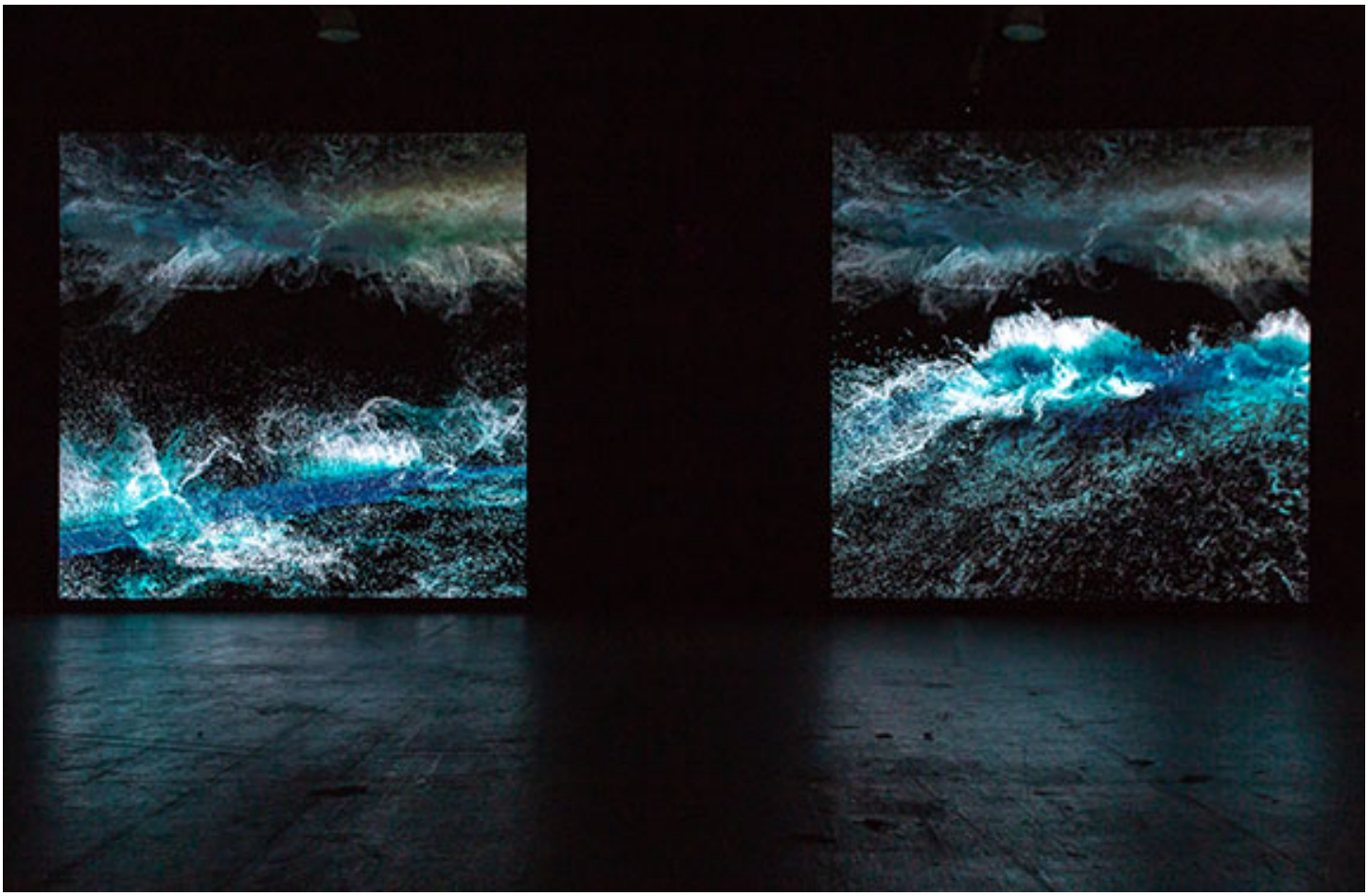
Hurricane Edouard IX silver gelatin print, 12 x 13 inches, 1997

DR: One of the things I learned early on trying to take pictures is that you can't photograph a feeling. You can point your camera at whatever is producing a feeling, but to establish it in an image you often have to find other means, something other than a direct approach.

CR: I actually think that is my challenge. One of the reasons you're seeing a second attempt to deal with the subject of the ocean and what the ocean does to me when I'm looking at it is that realism takes me only a certain distance. I always end up feeling there's something left on the table. There's something of my understanding, my feeling, my reaction to nature, which I've not yet put into a still photograph. That's what drives me towards abstraction, which I think carries enormous capabilities for expression. The work we're seeing here is halfway toward abstraction. If you freeze them you'll see that my ancestors for this work artistically are Pollock, Morris Louis and certain modernist tendencies that I grew into as a painter. There are many masters besides nature driving me toward the destination of this work. It gets woven in, but not consciously.

DR: So there's a gulf between what you were feeling and seeing.

CR: My experience with a photograph on a wall is that I can create a certain amount of drama. If I go large with a print there can be a greater threat from a wave just because it's bigger than the viewer. But there's something about the wind blowing, the sound, the sense of being physically moved that was not as evident as I wanted to make it. When I was interviewing an animator for a totally different project, and he showed me his reel, there was a slow-motion shot



Installation view: Light Waves II, Digital Wave @ Coal + Ice, Fort Mason

of a Ford truck tire hitting a puddle, and in slow motion the splash captured my imagination, and I hired the man immediately to start a whole new project for me. And he was rather confounded because it took at least year of intense work to begin to teach me what was possible in computer- generated animation, and it took almost a second year to break it down to fulfill my needs, which originally involved projecting these digital files as videos on a screen.

DR: But you subsequently switched to LEDs at some point, right?

I was in Secaucus, New Jersey at a huge facility where we were testing out projectors, and way off, it might have been three blocks away in a warehouse, I saw a huge black wall, and I realized it was an LED wall. And I hate LEDs, or I should say I hated LEDs – I find them crude, harsh, etc. And I walked over when it was off and it was this beautiful, almost minimalist sculpture, and it spoke to me as an object, and I had this immediate impulse to try it. I turned to one of the guys and I said, 'I don't know what this is. Can you bring my computer over here and fire up this roll of my images?' And they all started laughing. They knew I would find this thing, and they'd already wired it up. And they flipped the switch, and as soon as I saw it I realized that the force of the light could be a simulacrum in a way, some equivalent of the force of nature. It was an element of the medium, of using video with an LED wall – it was not available to me in still photography. So with that, I went back to creating these videos, no longer projected, but using the force of the LED light bulb. And in this case it's several million little LED bulbs that I'm harnessing with digital means, and when we orchestrate some of these waves we've basically building a patch of ocean seen from a bird's eye view. My drive toward abstraction and the emotive power of dealing with flat images could be deployed this way. So I began looking at everything from above rather than straight-on as with still photographs. And I realized when a wave crashes, there's this powerful moment of light. That light is like the sound and the pulse you feel in your body when you're in a crashing wave. And that was the way in.

Clifford Ross photographing waves. Photo: Robert Eckholm

DR: A lot of the power and beauty from this display comes from slowing down motion. You sense all of this in real-time, when you're looking at the ocean, but when you bring it down a notch you can really appreciate how it unfolds, disperses and recombines.

CR: That's a great perception, and it goes right to the core of what goes underneath these things. When I'm shooting in the water I don't hear much. I don't feel that the world is moving in real time; everything slows down for me when I'm working. [The LED projections] aren't so much slow motion as they are the suspension of gravity in the software program. Sometimes we slow it down, but a lot of what you're seeing is half gravity, so everything moves more slowly. But it's consistent with my experience of nature, which I see in slow motion.

Digital Wave 9

DR: One of the reasons it's so difficult to capture the experience of the ocean is that it combines so many different kinds of sensory input. You've addressed that by moving the focus away from matter toward light, and then changing the way light is represented and dispersed.

CR: Hans Hofmann, a fantastically important abstract expressionist painter who was building on Cezanne, always believed that if you don't deal with the essential aspects of the medium you're working with you're probably not using it to its capacity. What you noticed about the individual dots – we're not working with just the video program, but with how we send the video to the LED wall in a way that is unique. Typically, one pixel might share two or three different LED bulbs. What you're seeing, and what you just picked up on, is the fact there are individual dots here. We tried to harness this. I took advantage of the fact that there are these tiny bulbs. I wanted the bulbs to express themselves. And I used my video to light them up.

DR: So is each bulb programmed separately?

CR: In effect, the computer and the translation of my video towards the screen, it's done in a way that a pixel moving across the surface never lights up more than one LED at the time, and that is not normal. That's one of the things we did in order to make use of this medium. If I'm using oil paint and I put linseed oil in it, it's because I want it the to be, perhaps, smoother or shinier. The medium can help you. Desperate artists like Van Eyck invented oil paint to paint flesh more realistically. So what I found ironically was with this computer-generated work I was able to pay attention not just to my computer, but to where that video signal would land. So I'm paying a lot of attention this physical wall and the 2 million LED bulbs that make it up. I want them to be used in a way that is fresh and new and fulfills my need, which gets back to Hofmann and Cezanne.

DR: As for bridging the gap we spoke of earlier, I've read that you're almost never satisfied.

CR: It's pretty true. I'll be dissatisfied with something. I wouldn't say I'm disappointed with this work. I feel good about it. But it reveals itself to not encompass everything I wanted. That's next week, next month, next year. The simplest thing for sure is that a still photograph can only suggest movement. This is movement in the sense that our eye is perceiving the movement of a light across a fixed set of LEDs. So there is a very real capability this almost abstract work has…

DR: …to use light to simulate water.

CR: Yes, that's the essence of it.

DR: I note that the word sublime seems to have entered a lot of conversations lately, particularly those that concern art and nature. What does it mean for you?

CR: Having my socks knocked off.

DR: Does that mean elation, fear — some combination of two?

CR: There are fancy-pants philosophers who've done a very good job of making it complicated. But whether it's Edmund Burke or Emmanuel Kant – fear and elation and a certain version of strange joy from being overwhelmed — the words you've suggested are perfect. The sublime is my obsession. The irony of the moment is: all of my work on the sublime has now taken on a somewhat different cast in light of the fact that I thought I was photographing, or painting or presenting a version of nature, however abstractly, something that turns out was not nature, and that painful, tragic irony, now haunts me. I'm still after the sublime, but I'm willing to see it as a companion now to an almost tragic vision.

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Coal + Ice at Festival Pavilion, ***Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture*** *through September 23, 2018.*

About the author:
David M. Roth is the editor and publisher of Squarecylinder.