

NEW VEIN: A REVIEW

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The title of Jed Corbett's exhibition at Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, is deliberately ambiguous. *New Vein* is a wholly fitting title for a series of photographs documenting the Purbeck stone quarries in east Dorset. However it is also a metaphor for Corbett's exploration of the photographic medium, his development over more than 10 years of the project, and his discovery of the rich potential of colour.

He has contravened conventional wisdom by combining black and white and colour, and it is a brave move that works. Colour becomes one of the strong linking forces in the show, where rust red blood on a bandaged stone guillotine echoes the red quarrymen's gloves, red shirts, red brooms - even red mechanical excavators!

We are left with the impression of strange lunar landscape peppered with odd artefacts - carefully selected vignettes which go to make more than the sum of all the parts. And the parts, assembled over so many years, still have a timeless quality, drawn together by the patina of dust over everything.

The exhibition could have fallen hopelessly between two stools, aiming to provide an objective document of the quarries, and to chart a more personal journey of discovery, and failing to do either successfully.

But thanks mainly to painstaking editing and sequencing, it succeeds. True it fails to provide us with an exhaustive objective document, but Corbett gives us enough objective information in some of the pictures to place the whole show in context.

The aerial shot of Worth Matravers serves well in this way with its wonderful echoes between the contours of the quarry and strip

lynchets, as do the portraits of the quarrymen's sheds and the underground lane. Each picture is also accompanied by a detailed caption and a map indicating where it was taken.

These help the viewer to read the more segmented shots, taken one suspects for the joy in colour and texture and tone, and to unite the more traditional black and white portraits of craggy quarrymen with images like *Blue Boots* and *Southern Comfort*, where the round, red-shirted belly of a quarryman protrudes into the left of the huge square frame.

That this is such a coherent body of work owes much to the quirky vision of Corbett with his sense of humour and his eye for the extraordinary in the ordinary. *Jobey*, the old quarryman, is caught snatching 40 winks with his jacket over his head to gain some relief from the glaring light; a corrugated iron shed is clad in the most immaculate dry stone walling; a pallet of white stone is shrink-wrapped like a supermarket chicken, reminding us in the final shot of the show that everything, including the landscape, is reduced to a commodity in the end.

The exhibition leaves a question mark over the future of an industry that has survived in the Purbecks since Roman times. Corbett gives no clear answers, but perhaps the cryptic workshop sign - "Energy Fluid - May Be Left" - provides us with a clue.

New Vein is an important document of an industry, and a vivid metaphor for a constantly changing landscape. It deserves more exposure outside its native Dorset.

*opposite top: Disused open-cast quarry
opposite: Energy fluid*

Both from series New Vein by Jed Corbett

