

Block Museum exhibit digs into photos of 1960s miners



Untitled shot by Bruce Davidson from the portfolio, *Welsh Miners* (1965). (Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos)

By **Gina Grillo**
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The new photo-centered Block Museum of Art exhibit, "Mining Pictures: Stories from Above and Below Ground," explores the visual representation of industrialization and the plight of the common laborer.

According to organizers, "Mining Pictures" traces ways that artists have constructed narratives about industry and labor from the late-19th century through the 1960s and features the mining photography of Bruce Davidson (b. 1933) and W. Eugene Smith (*American*, 1918–1978).

The creation of the exhibit was a collaboration between exhibition curator and 2016-17 Block Museum Graduate Fellow, Talia Shabtay, and Corinne Granof, Curator of Academic Programs at the Block, who mentored Shabtay throughout this process, as she does all student curators.

Shabtay, a doctoral student in the Department of Art History at [Northwestern University](#), used the Block Museum collections as her primary source of inspiration in curating the exhibit, as the works themselves

revealed surprises about the historic representation of mining in America.

"What started as an interest in one photographer, (the portfolio of Bruce Davidson) became a thematic quest to consider the visual representation and history of mining in a larger context," Shabtay said.

Davidson's photographs in the show are part of his independent photo-documentary project, "Welsh Miners," taken in a South Wales coal-mining town in 1965. Smith's photographs on the other hand became part of a 1967–68 advertising campaign for the International Nickel Company, which later appeared in Time Magazine.

Taken together, the work of these two photographers offers an appraisal of the relationship between pictures and industry, and juxtapositions between scientific progress and human sentiment, which has shaped this endeavor since the advent of photography.

Photographs are set in conversation with prints, drawings and other works such as, "Industry" (1936) by Irene Kissel, Drypoint on copper, "Miners Shacks," (ca. 1935) by Riva Helfond, Color lithograph, and the 1893 book publication entitled, "Mongst Mines and Miners: Underground Scenes by Flash-Light," by John C. Burrow, which harkens the early invention of flash photography, and the dangers of its use in the confines of a mine.

"It was exciting to bring in the 1893 book into the same exhibition as Eugene Smith's 1960s advertisements in Time Magazine, in order to show a correlation of visual representation over time," Shabtay said.

Since a mine by its very nature denotes physical inaccessibility, Granof describes the muscularity and beauty of the works in the show brought together by Shabtay's curatorial hand. "This modest installation provides comparisons showing life around mining communities," Granof said. "It's fascinating to see how photography makes visible this world that is not apparent to most people, giving us insight to the impenetrable lives of miners."

'Mining Pictures: Stories from Above and Below Ground'

When: Through April 2; Gallery talk 4 p.m. March 7

Where: Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston

Admission: Free

Contact: www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu

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