

The death of mining

EXHIBITION

RACHEL HORNE: UNITY IS THE KEY
Novas Gallery, London NW1

ARTIST and strike baby Rachel Horne's home village housed one of the most militant mining communities in militant South Yorkshire. But 21 years of cutbacks followed by corporate cherry-picking have erased Cadeby pit totally.

The slag heap is now a flower-sprinkled grassy knoll, Horne's generation rich pickings for the overstretched British army and the National Front.

On July 17, the Novas Gallery in north London screened Horne's three short films which collage 20th century material with contemporary footage. One features 1930s miners. Small, muscular, both boys and men in their multitudes, they worked the coal face half naked, crouching, hacking at seams with picks, pushing six or seven loaded trucks from the back while ponies pulled from the front. The human workers looked out for each other above all else. Black and white takes on a whole new meaning.

By the 1972-73 strike, as Horne's footage shows, South Yorkshire miners were telling TV cameras that, for six hours every day, they "don't stand up straight. There're no toilets or anything like that. Lads are down that hole for a decent living, not for luxury."

Quick-succession colour stills of Cadeby pit falling to dynamite filled me with the sort of grief normally reserved for

funerals. The scarred and scabbed back of the NUM, whose members created massive wealth not destined for their own pockets, was indeed broken.

Each of Horne's pictures — collages, drawings, photos showing in the gallery's current exhibition — is framed. Even her films flicker and talk from inside little gilt squares and rectangles. Some of the frames came from her father, who put away his miners' boots in 1986 after 30 years' use and tried the picture-framing business, a struggle for the whole family surviving in new historical circumstances.

Horne's Arts Council-funded 2006 installation *Out of Darkness, Light*, which was staged and filmed on the River Don, shows what ordinary people can achieve in those circumstances. And the campaign to get ex-pits marked on Ordnance Survey maps continues.

The film screening also provided a platform "in the spirit of trade unionism and social justice" for Novas director Michael Wake and artist and writer Jeff Sawtell, who reminded everyone about women's central role in the 1984 strike.

CWU London committee member Mole Meade pointed out that the postal workers' strike, which has been solid so far, is also a fight against the killing of a universal postal service.

Rachel Horne is using camera work whose technology has changed radically since the 1930s. So has the economic map of Britain, along with the rest of the world. But traditions don't necessarily die. Horne is certainly regenerating the tradition that Sawtell spoke about.

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