

EXHIBIT REVIEW

“*S*teel: Made in Pennsylvania.” An exhibition by the Society of Industrial Archaeology, State Museum of Pennsylvania, the National Museum of Industrial History, and the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area. On exhibit at the State Museum of Pennsylvania, October 2006 through April 2007; Bethlehem’s Payne Gallery, July 2007 through October 2007; and Homestead’s Rivers of Steel, November 2007 through March 2008.

“I think working in steel mills gave me a whole notion of how to use steel in a way that it hadn’t been used before.” So said American sculptor Richard Serra, whose creations breathed life into and derived strength from that metal medium. Serra—who saw that steel and art were meant for each other—now has company. “Steel: Made in Pennsylvania,” an exhibit which ran at the State Museum of Pennsylvania from October 2006 through April, 2007—and which is next headed to Bethlehem’s Payne Gallery (July-October 2007) and Homestead’s Rivers of Steel

(November 2007—March 2008)—similarly reminds us that steel not only transformed the state and national landscape, but also the lives of those who worked in the furnaces and mills where laborers blasted iron free of impurities and transmogrified it, first into something molten, then into something hardened, always into something laden with meaning. In the process, as this treasure house of original photographs illustrates, the rollers, cindermen, machine operators and stove tenders who labored in and lived near the mills were engaged in transformative work. It was a kind of industrial magic, albeit of a gritty and dangerous kind, and all of us across Pennsylvania still bear the stamp of the changes they wrought.

Funded by Vance Packard, founder of the Society for Industrial Archaeology, and produced by the State Museum, along with the National Museum of Industrial History and the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, the exhibit was coordinated by Robert Weible, Public History Director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Its designer was James Booth. “We wanted this to have a wide reach,” Booth explained, “But not to be your typical museum exhibition with tons and tons of text.” In fact, the photographs speak for themselves, as explanations are restricted to the titles. No small matter, this leap of faith. As Weible hoped, onlookers provide the best commentary: “Is it art? Is it History? Is it Photography? Whatever it is, it has the effect on visitors of making them talk to each other.” That is a ringing articulation of the principle undergirding what is, after all, a democratic cultural expression; an American approach to ideas, history, and life which puts interpretation in the hands, not just of the elites, but of the people themselves. Here is the crucial spot at which “Steel: Made in Pennsylvania” reveals itself as truly *public* history. It lets a public audience appreciate a public story, and a story to which many Pennsylvanians relate in personal ways.

It took an artist’s eye to appreciate the aesthetic possibilities inherent in a pair of pressure gauge’s both reading “0,” a bed of ferns growing in an abandoned Bethlehem electrical shop, or a graffito by a no-doubt disappointed worker-*cum*-football fan reading “Fuck Pittsburgh, Go Browns!” Reading that profanity, the mind calculates: Cleveland usually loses to Pittsburgh, and, more to the point, how frustrating was it to be a steelworker who rooted against . . . *the Steelers*? Other wall scrawls prompt introspection. Who was “Rat Face Jones,” and why is the name written on that wall? The “Mondale/Ferraro ‘84” sticker on

a broken locker door, underneath a union notice, shows its own bathos. A row of piston valves, which will never move again and now sit encrusted in caked oil; fronted by a row of buttons, resembles nothing so much as a musical instrument which once played a song of sweat, muscle, and hardness. And some pictures are harder to define. A series of large rings, row on row, arcing delicately and surrounding bending bars of white-hot metal suspended between liquid and solid state. . . What it is, escapes all but the experienced; what it means, that it means something big, is inescapable, if multivalent.

While this is all a didactic commentary on deindustrialization, it is also, assuredly, art. Photographer Donald Giles recalled Packard commenting on that fact and giving him advice. "Don, I never thought about all this as art before. Art is everywhere in these dirty, dusty, old buildings. You never know where you're gonna find it," Packard continued, "So don't ever stop looking for it." Giles did not stop, and, armed with a camera and a yen to capture the stories which hulking, once-crowded, now derelict or nearly empty factories still have to tell, found what the creative team was looking for. "We wanted something with a vision," explained Weible. They got it.

The main aim of the photographs, individually and collectively, is to raise public awareness of the Commonwealth's richly significant role in the steel industry history. The appeal of the exhibit is obvious. First of all, many Pennsylvanians have personal connections to steel, either through their own professions or through family lore. Others live or travel near mills, functioning or defunct. Perhaps such folks have ventured inside, perhaps not. A master photographer was a propitious choice to unveil the truths and myths lying behind rusty gates; to vividly lay out the power, beauty, and pathos of a business—and lifestyle—so largely 'made in Pennsylvania.' In the best sense of historical work, the 60 original photographs, culled from over 1,000, advance understanding of complex phenomena. Simultaneously, in the best tradition of artistry, the pictures are at turns lovely, disturbing, provocative - yet always compelling.

The viewer first might note the holism of the endeavor. The frames and signage supports bear the look of rusted yet still-tough steel beams. The frames are, in fact, made of steel. In a unique process, Packard, Booth, and volunteer Jim Blackaby custom cut and shaped them, sand-blasted them, watered them to induce rust, and then coated the frames with sealant. The massive I-beams holding signs, however are a clever *trompe l'oeil*, MDF particle board painted to look metallic. They offer the only bit of trickery in the entire exhibit. The rest is unvarnished and true. The five dozen photographs, intensely colored, draw

one in several directions at once, which is no problem because they can be viewed in any order, at any pace, withstanding whatever scrutiny an onlooker brings to bear. A recent group of 15 seniors entered together, then promptly scattered in three directions, led by a trio who had clearly seen the pictures before. They made their own itineraries.

None of the photographs fails to evoke reaction, but some are more subtle than others. There is the classic ladle shot, as liquefied metal pours, slickly hot, into a cast. It is gripping, it is glowing, it is arresting. But there are other shots that unfold more slowly. In "Gauges, Glass-Blowing Engine House," the aforementioned pressure gauges both read "0," as they did the day they were turned off for the last time. Closer inspection reveals a shop towel wrapped around the meter on top. . . oil-soaked, the rag sopped up a leak, scrunched by a worker's hand into a shape it still bears years afterwards. Did that steel worker expect to return the next day, ready to wipe up the spreading stain? Did the worker who left his coveralls hanging on the john door know he would never don them again? Were the gates simply shuttered next morning? These are the questions Giles's pictures pose, silently, insistently.

There are persons in the pictures, but just a couple. There are plenty of ghosts. Despite the sense of yesteryear's glories, steelmaking is not dead in Pennsylvania. There just are not as many jobs as there used to be. Hence, the lone inspector monitoring the Seamless Pipe Production process. Giles assumed that most spectators would realize that, in an automated facility currently run by India-based conglomerate Mittal, one worker now surveys an operation that formerly took scores of strong people to perform. This was the only hand-held photo shot now on display, and the inspector, mounted seven stories high, still able to feel the convection from the torrid furnace below, is impossible to ignore. "I was praying the guy would stand still," Giles recalled. The guy did; he stands detached, above the system, watching machinery make more steel. He is a human check on instrumentology; an information analyst wearing a white hard hat and standing in a hot work place. He is brain, not brawn, and while forging steel in Pennsylvania is still a fiery concern, it is also a flickering affair.

This message, heavy but restrained, is intentional, Weible points out, and it comes across as Pennsylvanians contemplate the exhibit's inferences about a business that came to define post-industrialization and globalization. Too often, these are fobbed off as impersonal processes rather than trends that change lives. "It is not abstract. It's people who make decisions to keep a steel plant going, or to shut it down," Weible reminds us. As for

the ghosts, Giles had help from Booth in calling them forth into the viewer's present. A huge picture of the Welfare Room reveals hooks on wires, hovering in the breeze which wafts through broken windows. In times past, mill workers hung clothes and belongings on these hooks, their personal essentials too precious or delicate for the blast furnace environment. Today, the empty hooks rust and rattle, still suspended on those wires, but now holding only the memories of a busier time. Attendees are likely to get the point.

"Go anywhere you want," the Rankin Steel authorities told Giles. Among the places he went was the Carrie Blast Furnaces, shown from top-to-base, in great detail. The picture is a pan shot, revealing the sheerness of height and mass that Big Steel requires when it comes to perspective. Giles' reminiscence of treading the high cat-walk, stepping on taconite balls and hoping that the bolts holding the walkway held firm, leads into another central theme, which is connectedness. Ecology, we know in today's world, means that webs of connections tie all life together. But industry—especially mammoth, dirty, smoke-belching industry—has seemed antithetical to nature, and thus to the natural world of connected webs, ever since Charles Dickens first fretted over "the factory question." But Giles' work reminds us that Pennsylvania's steel industry spawned, and fit into, connections too complex to easily grasp. The taconite balls still rolling along the cat-walk are little round ore byproducts, processed Precambrian sedimentary rocks mined from the Mesabi Range, or other sites in the upper Midwest. Taconite was the choice when rich iron veins were tapped out. Taconite rock could be ground to dust, magnetized to extract its iron, pelletized, and shipped across the Great Lakes on great steamers like the Edmund Fitzgerald, which sank to the bottom of Lake Superior with its cargo, tons of small metal balls. Less ill-fated loads were transported to Homestead and used to create the Pennsylvania steel that a growth-hungry nation used to build itself. The Brooklyn Bridge, the Panama Canal gates, the Empire State Building all came forth from the industry that was for so long nearly synonymous with Pennsylvania. Is all of this spelled out in Giles' wide-pan photograph of the furnaces? Hardly, but it certainly is implicit. It is of course impossible to predict what a particular member of the audience will take away from "Steel: Made in Pennsylvania." But it is equally impossible to imagine any viewer taking nothing away. "There are three things extremely hard," the Commonwealth's own Benjamin Franklin once noted, "Steel, a diamond, and to know oneself." In the process of viewing this stunning exhibit,

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fortunate Pennsylvanians are likely to look at their steel heritage from new vantage points, and to learn much about themselves and the state they—and Big Steel—call ‘home.’

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