

Appalachia USA

Builder Levy, Photographer

David R. Godine (Jan 31, 2014)

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Levy brings a human face to the issues present in the coalfields and leaves us with a deeper understanding of what is at stake in Appalachia.

Mountaintop-removal surface mining has destroyed thousands of square miles of Appalachian mountain habitat, causing devastating effects on mining communities throughout Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. For over four decades, photographer Levy has chronicled the lives of miners and their families in the coalfields of Appalachia, compiling photographs that capture the gritty, determined nature of people who have faced lifetimes of dangerous, physically demanding work while under the constant threat of unemployment, destruction of property, and death. As the debate over America's energy future continues, Levy brings to the forefront the people behind the scenes, refusing to let America forget those most affected by the coal industry.

Levy began photographing during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. "I have sought a hardscrabble realism," he states, "a realism that might project the possibility of a better world." His ability to capture true life in compelling images has been rewarded with inclusion in more than two hundred exhibitions around the world and over fifty public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

The raw authenticity Levy seeks is evident in this collection of photographs, some of which were included in his earlier book, *Images of Appalachian Coalfields*. About two-thirds of the sixty-nine photos presented here are from the early 1970s, but changes in the mining industry propelled Levy to return in the new millennium. The development of mountaintop-removal surface mining and the proliferation of huge open reservoirs of toxic liquid coal waste have changed the face of mining in the region and forever altered the geography of the Appalachian Mountains. The massive scope of these operations is brought into stark focus in aerial photographs Levy took between 2002 and 2006. The photos are breathtaking in their powerful portrayal of the destruction already wrought, evoking a sense of urgency to stop any future ruin.

The organization of the photos within the book provides the strongest impact for delivering Levy's message. He roots the issues at hand in a social context. Readers get to know the communities, see the people at church and with their families. Then come some of the most powerful photos: the miners themselves. In pictures of miners waiting for their shift to begin, crouching in the darkness underground, or emerging from the mines, Levy captures images of people radiating a quiet determination to survive and maintain the way of life their families have known for generations. When he presents the photos of mountains laid bare and valleys filled with rubble and toxic waste, one can't help but think of those people and wonder if the life they've always known will still be there for them in the future.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (Spring 2014)

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