



title: The Road to Coal
by: Patrizia Bonanzinga
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The Road to Coal takes as its heart the world's largest mining industry. China, in Patrizia Bonanzinga's photographs, becomes a soot-dusted terrain of small communities, isolated settlements and singular physical toil. The earth is as scarred as the cities are monotonous and remote. In an attempt to mark a response to the dense pungent omnipresence of coal, the photographer has travelled through Shanxi Province on journeys made intermittently since 1995.

The book seems to be driven by travel, and becomes a series of notations and brief encounters made across the region. Workers are met. Then they are gone, sometimes offering the gentle smile often kept for visitors. Activities are photographed, yet the pictures betray little of the process of mining – or of the physical and social implications of an awkward and poisonous occupation. Domestic and social spaces are included, but are less successful, and generously edited.

Bonanzinga is at her best when she engages with the simplest moments. Her pictures become denser, more intriguing and thoughtful. Through a coal black window frame a man cradles a child and stares ahead, in shadow against his home and landscape; an interior wall presents an abundance of photographs: the family, the state and the future. When approaching the wider rural landscape too, the photographs acquire an authority. We begin to experience a sense of land use, of opportunity and struggle. These, and the still lives which punctuate the work, become rich, evocative meditations that resist the transient detachment of the passing observer.

Ken Grant