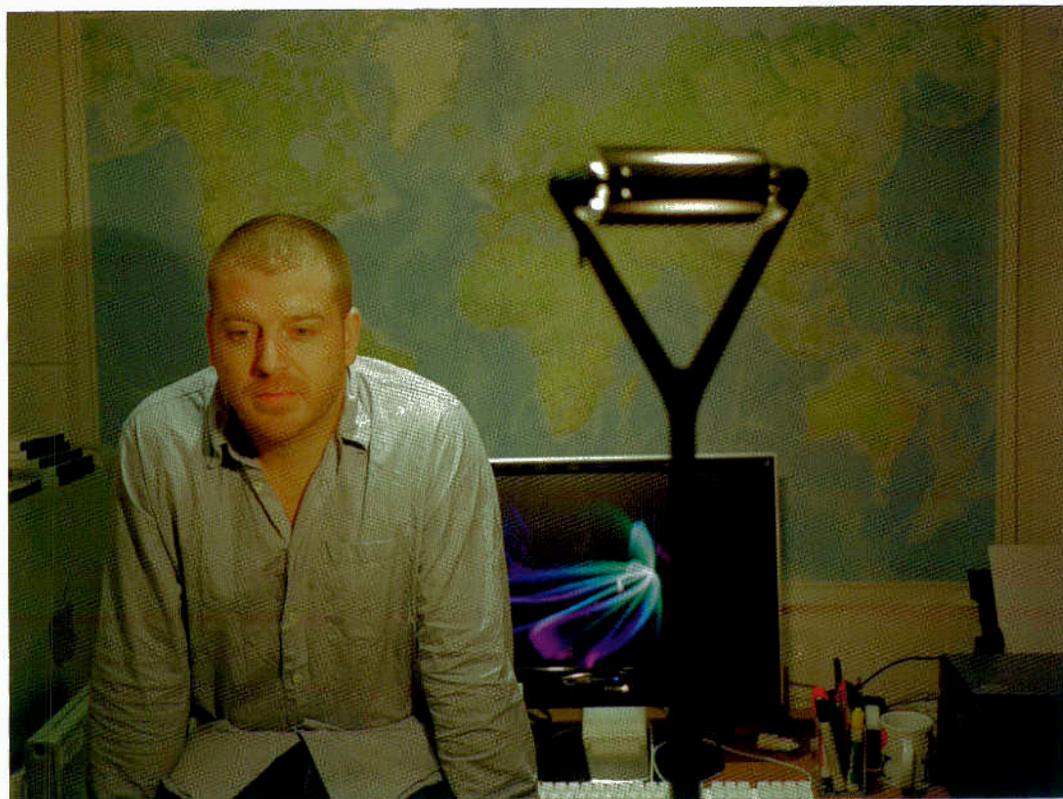


UNDER THE INFLUENCE

DARREN ALMOND ON NORILSK

portrait VALERIE STAHL VON STROMBERG



MY INTEREST IN THE NICKEL-MINING TOWN OF NORILSK started because of a visit to Antarctica. Once you've been to the Antarctic, logically the next progression was to go to the Arctic, just out of curiosity. I decided to go in through Siberia, because that way I could make a political journey through some of Stalin's old gulag sites. That's how I came to make many works based in the region of Norilsk, the first of which was a piece called *Arctic Pull* [2003], a single-channel video where I'm searching for the grave of Scott of the Antarctic, but because I'm British, I've gone to the wrong Pole. On the return from making that, I spotted a dilapidated old railway bridge. I wondered when it was built, because the trees there are just so dead and spindly. It turned out to have been constructed under Stalin's gulag regime, and that 60,000 people died working on the railway. That's how I began to discover the history of Norilsk, which was once the largest of the gulags.

I think you need to have a physical engagement with a landscape in order to understand its political aspect. I was photographing the bridge in temperatures of minus-46 degrees centigrade, which is when your eyeballs freeze and you can't focus. The people who were constructing the railway were wearing cotton sacks and cardboard shoes, so it's unbelievable the amount of torture they endured. I do believe that the landscape can hold a kind of memory. I'll never forget sheltering from the wind, feeling that all these railway workers, prisoners, sheltered there too. The landscape is pretty

extraordinary. The trees in the forest have been killed by the amount of toxins that has since been pumped into the atmosphere. Today Norilsk's nickel industry produces more sulphur dioxide in the atmosphere - more acid rain - than North America, including Canada, so people die there 15 years below the national average. It's owned by Norilsk Nickel, and it's a totally closed, private city.

The series of works I have made there build up to getting to this ogre of a city that's churning out pollution. At the moment I'm in its bowels. Everybody that goes there describes it as hell on earth. The snow is covered in black soot. Vast chimneys pump out sulphur that you can kind of feel. It's dark 24-7 through the winter, and it's bright 24-7 through summer. It's an interesting landscape politically as well, because it encompasses everything of the past century, all within such a short time frame. Marxism has become this capitalist machine, and there are a lot of people suffering, but it's beyond the radar somehow, though it's because of our needs that this kind of place exists. I've been returning again and again, trying to work out what my interest is, which began as a very emotional engagement with the people there. They are incredibly proud. They live off very little, because they can't grow anything outside, so they have small greenhouses in their apartments. They're all clustered together, in concrete monoliths that are all on stilts because of the permafrost. You're confronted by the strength of humanity, seeing how these people survive.

DARREN ALMOND IS AN ARTIST LIVING AND WORKING IN LONDON. HE CURRENTLY HAS TWO SOLO EXHIBITIONS, *FIRE UNDER SNOW*, UNTIL 30 MARCH, AT PARASOL UNIT, LONDON, AND *MOONS OF THE IAPETUS OCEAN* AT WHITE CUBE HOXTON SQUARE, LONDON, UNTIL 23 FEBRUARY



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TITLE: Darren Almond on Norilsk
SOURCE: Art Rev no19 F 2008

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