

Pam Langdon

Synopsis

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SAM DOCTOR: 'A SONG FOR THE STONEBREAKER '.

PICA, 17 Feb-3 April, Screen space.

Sam Doctor's video was screened in a small very dark space on the first floor of PICA. The dimensions of the screen are approximately a 5m by 3m area on the back wall of a small room. There is a single leather bench seat, behind a black draped curtain.

My first glimpse of the video was a fleeting one, as I was on my way out of PICA after viewing another exhibition. The video's haunting beauty caught my eye and I was compelled to sit in the cave-like darkness and watch it. The conditions in PICA on the day were very hot and airless. I was sitting watching the video, feeling very hot and uncomfortable with perspiration running down my face and body.

The opening scenes are of a distant lake and mountains, viewed through a haze of smoke. Initially the view is with no sound, but slowly the scene becomes more apparent as the camera gradually zooms in to reveal details of at first tiny ant-like figures walking through the smoke haze with faint voices calling out from the distance. They are men and boys, carrying heavy loads in cane baskets on their shoulders, who appear through the billowing smoke, walking agonisingly slowly up a steep and dangerous looking pathway leading from a primeval, backbreaking mining operation. The miners work in deplorable conditions, carrying very heavy loads that make it necessary to stop to rest and adjust their loads frequently during their long uphill climb. The workers are wearing ill-fitting gumboots, everyday clothes and makeshift handkerchief facemasks that provide their only protection from the obviously very toxic working environment. The workers' laborious drudgery and helplessness is felt through their repetitious and agonising climb up the rock strewn pathway.

The isolation and desolation of the very harsh environment adds to the feelings of despair and helplessness, leading me to ask myself a number of questions, including the very obvious one - why? The colour of the smoke plumes and toxic yellow of the sulphur rock are both forbidding and hauntingly beautiful at the same time. The atmospheric scenes throughout the video are very surreal and captivating, reminding me of romanticism painting, with combinations of subdued colour and movement within the toxic smoke scenes.

The title of the work and its connection to Gustav Corbet's 1849 *The Stone Breakers* adds to the romantic illusion of the work. Corbet also portrayed ordinary, everyday people in his art. The use of the continuous loop video is a persuasive tool and I was totally captivated by the very slow process of change to my realization of the horror of the workers situation appearing before me. It was very easy to view the hypnotic scenes many times. Despite the hot conditions of the space, I watched totally absorbed three times before escaping.

After seeing '*A Song for the Stonebreakers*' video it made me ask many questions and led me to research sulphur and why we mine it in the first place. Sulphur was formerly known as brimstone - a reference to its origin from volcanoes. Sulphur mining has a long history of horrific exploitive mining conditions. Sulphur was a mining resource in Sicily during the 1700's and although mined all over the world, today it is only economically viable in the Americas and Asia, where cheaper labour and perhaps less restrictive mining regulations exist. Sulphur has wide spread uses including refining petroleum, making fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, disinfectants, bleaching, detergents, adhesives, animal feed, fumigants, soaps, skin creams and lotion, refining sugar, wine, dried fruit and medicines. This list only scratches the surface of our uses for sulphur.

I viewed '*A Song for the Stonebreakers*' on two more occasions, on cooler days this time and the conditions at PICA were now acceptable temperature wise, although I did find the video space to be a haunting match for the work. The oppressing conditions in the sulphur mine seemed to pervade through the walls of PICA. The isolation in the remote and hostile area of the sulphur mine was surrounding me. It seems a bit ironic that the far from perfect conditions at PICA actually enhanced my viewing experience of the video; normally these uncomfortable conditions would be an unwanted distraction whilst viewing an artwork.

People, especially in developed countries cannot do without the prolific use of Sulphur, and whilst endeavouring to fulfil these needs we seem to exploit poorer countries and their people. The horrific conditions among the sulphur plumes eats away at the workers' teeth, skin and lungs, lowering life expectancy but these usually poorly educated workers frequently don't have any other option to make a living. To earn a very good living (by local standards, 10 to 13 US dollars a day), the miners are required to haul up to 100kg of Sulphur rock up the mountain twice a day in oppressive, appalling conditions.

I have travelled extensively throughout Indonesia and have seen living and working conditions very similar to those portrayed in the video, it is a very disturbing fact of life that these conditions exist. Sam Doctor's '*A Song for the Stonebreakers*' is a stark reflection of some of the less palatable traits in our society such as exploitation of the poor and overconsumption by the rich. I found the video compelling, disturbing and very thought provoking.