

in conversation

This interview is an excerpt drawn from 2 contacts, a recorded lengthy informal conversation held between Neville Petersen, Mandy Conidaris and Kevin Sneider in Johannesburg on 20 May 2013, and a short email interview between Neville and Mandy on 17 July 2013.

MC - How did you get started with photographing the mines?

NP - Mines have always been part of my consciousness, since I was a little boy growing up on the East Rand. I used to watch the shafts go by from the back of my father's Dodge. In later years, as a Press Photographer I would be sent out to photograph a mine when something went wrong, a cave-in, underground explosion or unrest at the hostels.

When I started freelancing, I realised my angle needed to be different, my work will have to stand out somehow as so many photographers specialise in landscapes or the Big Five - that well-known leopard in a tree and then those dusty township scenes or the street photography images. Luckily my path became clear when I received a request to photograph a diamond mine. I was fascinated by the structures, activities and processes you find at these heavy industrial sites. I realised that this was a way forward for me.

It wasn't an easy task to get permission for access to the mines, as these are some of the most sensitive industrial sites in our country.

MC - What are they mainly concerned with?

NP - The first manager I ever asked about access suspected I might be a journalist wanting to do an exposé on mining, acid water or some other environmental issue. It took a lot of convincing and showing samples of previous work I'd done before he believed me and said yes. I went on to do their whole group's plants and shafts across the Reef [Witwatersrand]. It is mainly about trust and your professional conduct while on site. That person needs to know he won't get into trouble for letting a photographer loose at this highly sensitive, heavily guarded site. They have so many concerns to take into account: personnel and visitor's safety, theft, smuggling and of course trade secrets, divulging unwanted information even inadvertently. So yes it's hard, but I need to get inside, I can't take a photo through the fence and think that it will be a good shot.

MC - How much do you plan your work before you go out?

NP - I don't really plan a lot, but I always hope there is something interesting at each new site. I have photographed so many mines, each shaft is different. Although they all basically need the same machinery, they date from different eras, are painted different colours and constructed in so many different ways. I'm always drawn to the headgear, the tall visible part of the mine – it could be constructed entirely from steel as in the old days, more

modern headgears are concrete and maybe not as photogenic as the old stuff. Here and there are traces of a wooden headgear, the very oldest mines, but it is very neglected and unrecognisable. Then there is the winding room, which always interests me. There are massive pieces of equipment inside that we imported decades, some more than a century ago, from all over the world – compressors from England, winders from Russia and even a backup jet engine from the US.

I could spend anything from a few hours to a whole day at a mine, depending on the time the staff grant me. However long I am allowed to be there, I get to work immediately and cover whatever I can.

MC - Do you just go in for a day or over a couple of days?

NP - No only one day, as its difficult get permission and they are so worried about security and your safety. It is very dangerous at any mine, operational, moth-balled or entirely decommissioned. There are surfaces that look fine but give way when you step onto them, there are rusty walk-ways 30m in the air that you have to tread very carefully not to go crashing through. I once photographed in between huge floatation tanks, the ground was filled with the sludge that spills over the sides, I thought it was safe and suddenly fell into a concealed gold sludge pit with camera and all. It was a mess and the camera was covered entirely with fine grained, sticky mud. We cleaned it as best we could and carried on shooting, it did go on to give several errors and the lens eventually packed up all together, but I still use that same camera today. So yes there is always danger to yourself and your gear. There are also toxic gases and pressurised tanks filled with the harshest chemicals wherever you go. When we photographed a mine in Barberton the smell of almonds was constant from the natural cyanide occurring in that area and from the use of cyanide in the process of gold extraction.

MC - And currently the issues around mining are in the news, you were doing it quietly for so long and now that you are ready to release your work, it's so topical. Are the mining houses interested in seeing your work afterwards?

NP - Some yes, some not. When I started photographing a certain group's mines in one area there were about 30, when I finished that area there were 8 left. It costs the owners too much to keep the sites intact once operations have ceased, with looting and illegal mining. It is more cost-effective to clear the sight, sell the scrap metal and move on. I'm trying to capture every shaft and hope my work could form part of a heritage one day.

MC - So part of your interest is in documenting history for the future?

NP - Yes, I have worked alongside demolition teams at quite a few sites, and then I knew my photos were the last record of that particular place. I realised too that the gold mines in and around Johannesburg were disappearing fast. Many sites are cleared and sold off for housing developments. Some of those mines were over a hundred years old.

MC - How do you actually close down a mine? With the shafts and everything?

NP - I was quite shocked when I heard the method the first time. At most mines they take apart the headgear, demo the buildings, bring in the earthmoving equipment and dump everything down the shaft. When it's all gone they "plug" it, sealing it with a concrete casing.

There's an interesting story, I was at a mining village, and I don't know if you know about the illegal miners?

MC - What, they go into the old shafts?

NP - It's a secondary mining industry going on. These Zama-zamas are organised, their primary targets are abandoned mines where access is easy. They go down the old shafts and stay for weeks. Runners above ground supply food and drink, even women. There is no electricity, no machinery – nothing. They climb down makeshift ladders or cables and risk everything for a few grams at the end of the month. It is widely reported in the news the cases of illegal miners dying due to rockfalls etc.

The first time I personally encountered a group was at a Welkom mine. I saw them on the horizon and asked the guard who they were, he told me and said that if I was going toward them, he will be turning around and waiting for me at the car, he was too afraid to go any further. They often get into scuffles with the Zama-zamas and lives have been lost in the conflict.

As I approached them they were watching me, most of them stopped what they were doing and came closer to find out what I was doing. There must have been about 15 men gathering around. They come from all over Africa and only a few spoke English, so it was hard for me to explain that I meant no harm, I was taking pictures for a book. I motioned with the camera and made a gesture with my hands opening up like a book and they suddenly understood. One or two jokingly posed and then they gathered on some of the structures for an impromptu group shot. I hurried out of there as soon as I could. Later when I viewed the photos on my computer, I saw one standing with a rock held up, threatening to throw it at me, never even realised it at the time. Was a very scary situation.

MC - After hearing this, I wonder if you get nervous to go to the mines?

NP - I wouldn't go alone, always with security, or if it's operational still, they'll send someone from their safety dept. It's very dangerous.

MC - I would have thought a mine would have been made into a safe environment?

NP - I'm sure over the years the process has been cleaned up a lot and the mines take better care of their immediate environment and personnel, contrary to what the mainstream media want us to believe. However, unfortunately it will never be a perfectly clean or entirely safe industry, and one of my reasons for wanting to photograph the mine is to show the risk factor.

But another reason was about the people, the mining community. You hear so many people saying, get rid of the shafts and mine dumps, they make Joburg look so ugly! But the workers on the mines are unbelievable people, they'll help you, they are friendly, they go all out to help me make my shoot good. And they all have stories to tell.

I recall a tale that our guide told us while shooting on top a huge mine dump, just East of Westonaria. In the late 1890s there were more than 8000 Chinese miners in the area. They were given the usual local staple food to eat, and finally one day they downed tools and about 2000 of them walked up one of the big mine dumps and held a sit-in all along the ridge. They protested against the *mielie-pap* and demanded to be served rice from then on. I can imagine this line of men visible on the edge of the dump, must have been extraordinary.

MC - Listening to what you say, you describe yourself as a documentary photographer, but at the same time, you are always interested in the stories, perhaps you are also a storyteller? My sense is that you have that human interest always.

NP - Yes. A visual story-teller though, not so good with words.

MC - As you go into a mine, what attracts you as you're walking through it?

NP - Always the shaft. The size and scale of it all, everything is big and imposing on a mine.

MC - You have a lot of images with circular formats, and some of them have a mystical or spiritual quality. How did you take some of these shots?

NP - It was quite unplanned. The first time, I was at a mine between Boksburg and Germiston, it has this huge, very mysterious looking concrete cylinder and I was curious to know what's inside. I walked around until I found an opening in a rusty vent. I took my camera and lens apart, as it wouldn't fit, assembling the two inside – then I just started taking pictures blindly not knowing what to expect. It came out beautifully with sunlight angled in perfectly through the grid above, highlighting this unique lining on the side walls, with exposed rock right at the bottom, closest to me. When I emailed a sample to the manager of that mine, he had no idea where it was taken and couldn't believe where it was from. That was my first circle, it was a purely practical solution to a technical problem, I hadn't intended any deeper meaning.

Due to the nature of the processes and machinery I often come across a sphere or a circular pattern or structure. I enjoy photographing it although I do not focus on it exclusively, maybe it is because it forms a nice variation from the rectangular viewfinder that I always see and often frames a subject in a pleasing way.

MC - What's interesting is how you get the sense of how you are somewhere else looking in, you've positioned the circle down and not cropped it?

NP - That's the way I work, there's no cropping, the image is what I see through the camera. My ultimate goal is to get that unusual or unexpected shot, that's out of reach or sight for others.

MC - **You have an amazing eye, your compositions, and they are relatively spontaneous.**

NP - I think I was born with a good eye. You can acquire photographic skills over years of trying and training, but you also need a feel for it. Sometimes I'll walk into a place, especially an old place that's full of dust, and I feel overwhelmed by all the possibilities. I have to go back outside and I'll just sit and look at the shaft and refocus myself before re-entering

MC - **If you go to a mine on a shoot, how many pictures do you end up with?**

NP - Anything between 800 and 1000.

MC - **How long will it take you to get through those?**

NP - I go through the images after the shoot, delete the ones that don't work, so you really have to do your best on the day. But I decide quickly if the image is good or not.

MC - **So you just go on a shoot and then go back to your computer and either delete or keep the image without working on it?**

NP - Many people don't believe that my photos are straight off camera. Well I occasionally make minimal adjustments like sharpening or levels fine-tuned, but that's it. I am a photographer not a Photoshop guy. If I don't like it, I delete it.

MC - **Well this comes out of a lifetime of photographic experience, and especially Press Photography.**

NP - Yes. I stopped taking photographs for several years after the Press Photography, and then I came back to it, rediscovered my love for it.

MC - **The mechanics of photography changed hugely over that period.**

NP - Yes, things had changed a lot. With everything being digital, it has taken a while for me to become comfortable with the new type of systems etc. Luckily the principles of photography still apply and I am thankful for the training I received during the analogue era, it was a good foundation. Although I do have extremely basic equipment and I have seen some people's jaw drop when they hear what I use to take photos! And that I use my camera with manual settings.

MC - **That's what I hear many of the professionals say you should do, not to use auto.**

NP - I just go back to my normal settings, my manual focus. And whatever I photograph, I still rely on my own intuition. In fact, at the moment I'm beginning to feel myself drawn towards taking portraits, though I'm not sure why.

MC - But then maybe what's taking your work out of pure documentary is your sense of what's really going on, the story. Which is what comes from your background, growing up in mining towns, with the people, it's part of you. It's not like you're a photographer from Cape Town who's come to photograph the mines, you understand the community and what mining means to the community, and that can expand out to any industrial theme because they all have the same thing of a community that builds up around that industry. Just listening to what you say, you are still coming from a very human perspective & maybe that's why you are drawn to portraiture.

Thanks Neville, it was a really interesting conversation.