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Montañas, José Angel. "Mieres, Contemporary Art descends into the mines." *El País*.
October 18, 2021.

EL PAÍS

The Santa Barbara well, located in the Turon river basin, 10 km from Mieres, was once one of the largest mining wells of the Asturias region in Spain. The Hulleras del Turon society opened it in 1913 in the search for precious coal and, with its two vertical wells, ended up developing it into the axis of an economic center which controlled the extraction and transfer of resources towards the Basque country and the Levantine steel mills, thanks to a connected railway system and a port. At its height, around one thousand miners worked there and put their lives in danger on a daily basis in the search for coal. In December 1992, a 600-ton slab of slate buried four men 300 metres deep.



Installation by Anthony McCall in the Santa Barbara mine. PACO PAREDES

Yet the activity ceased in 1995 when Hunosa, the public company which controlled Hulleras del Turon since 1968, closed the Santa Barbara well due to lack of profits despite the mobilization against it across the entire valley. Ever since, the machines and spaces that were vital for the mine to run for 82 years lie silent yet have continued to dominate the landscape of this green valley and the 400 hamlets scattered across Mieres. This municipality has seen its population halved (37 500) in the past decades, as 9 different mines were shut down. Today, Mieres is home to the only active coal mine in all of Spain: La Nicolasa, which killed 14 miners when a firedamp exploded in 1995.

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Between Cinema, Sculpture and Architecture

Since last Friday, life has returned to Santa Barbara, the first mine declared to be of patrimonial value in Spain in 2009. It has become the Santa Barbara Well, a contemporary art center where one can see *Face to Face II*, an art piece by Anthony McCall (London, 75 years old), placed in the compressor room which was restored in 2015. The British artist spent a week in Mieres installing the work, one of his most complex, since it requires two projectors facing each other beaming white light which, with the help of artificial mist, create geometric structures. The art piece is part of his Solid Light series, works conjoining sculpture, cinema and architecture generating structures both dreamlike and spiritual, interrupted by the viewer's intervention, a fundamental element of his installations and performances, which have visited centers such as the Tate Gallery, the MoMA, the Whitney and the Pompidou, among others.



Exterior view of the Santa Barbara mine in Mieres, reconverted into a contemporary art center. PACO PAREDES

The 2013 piece was not envisioned with Santa Barbara in mind, but the artist believes the space is nonetheless perfect for it. In the machine hall, art critic and historian Gloria Moure has created an immense rectangular box in which, much like a mineshaft, no exterior light ever enters. When visitors enter it, in groups of 5 or 6, they lose all sense of space, which is only regained once the eyes acclimate to the new environment. It is only then that small light fixtures, reminiscent of miners' lanterns, appear and allow for safe movement within the space. "The choice of McCall's work, so intimately tied to the questions of energy and memory of the mining world, is perfect", said the conservator.

"We do not want to operate a museum that is nostalgic for the exploitation of miners, stagnating in the past: we want to look forward by creating something innovative. The experience of descending into a mine already existed; but not so the installation of an artwork such as McCall's in a compressor room", explains Juan Antonio Ponte, the young and energetic advisor for culture of Mieres, who is promoting this new installation connected to the Cultural Center of Mieres (MCC), where 5 other works of McCall, made in the 70's, can also be visited.

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The artist Anthony McCall at the Santa Barbara mine in Mieres. PACO PAREDES

Ponte has the support of mayor Anibal Vazquez of the United Left, who governs Mieres with his 15 councilmembers, facing an opposition of 4 Socialists and 2 Conservatives, giving him an absolute majority. In Mieres, no family has been untouched by the mining industry. In every house, ancestors were miners. Vazquez was one, too: "I worked in Santa Barbara until my retirement. I was never scared of descending into the mine, despite my uncle dying there in 1992. The mine is a way of life, and we are accustomed to live with death, it created cohesion and a communitarian conscience", he explains.

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Ponte and Vazquez are convinced that the transformation of mines into contemporary art centers is an investment which will reawaken the Turon valley and the municipality. “It’s a strategy of visualization on how to use industrial heritage in a new way, focusing on the wealth that the cultural sector can generate, which will allow new people to move into the valley and create new jobs”, explains the advisor, who admits that when he first visited the turbine room at the Tate Modern, he thought of new ways to “bridge the distance” and bring this cultural power to Santa Barbara.

McCall’s installation runs through January 31. Ponte and Vazquez are already scheming about the next proposal. “There are still no specific names, but the direction we have taken is one of continuing to install and show works that impact and ask questions about the future” they conclude.