

# ArtAsiaPacific

TODAY'S ART FROM TOMORROW'S WORLD

MAR/APR 2008

page 75

## TEXAS FESTIVAL FETES CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY

NEWS / HOUSTON

By Anjali Gupta

Photography's unique role in 20th-century China is the central theme of the 12th FotoFest biennial, which will open March 7 and run through April 20 in Houston, Texas. A citywide festival of photography hosted by 113 venues, including Houston's major art museums, universities, galleries and artist spaces, FOTOFEST2008 is organized by the independent, non-profit foundation FotoFest, which was established in 1983 by photographers Frederick Baldwin and Wendy Watriss and German gallerist Petra Bentele.

Though Chinese contemporary art has garnered attention in Europe, the US and even in Houston, where the Museum of Fine Art's recent exhibition "Red Hot: Asian Art Today from the Chaney Family Collection" featured many of China's current art stars, FOTOFEST2008 is taking a historical approach, foregrounding under-recognized Chinese documentary photographers.

In past biennials, FotoFest premiered photographers from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Korea and Japan. FotoFest's connection to China was first established in 1996, when Baldwin and Watriss invited Wu Jialin to show his photographs of peasants in the remote Yunnan province at FOTOFEST1996.

The groundwork for this year's biennial was laid during the Lianzhou International Photo Festival in November 2005, where Watriss and Baldwin formed a partnership with Lei Gao, an enterprising digital printer in Beijing, and Hong Kong entrepreneur Jimmy Chu. Together, they organized Meeting Place FotoFest Beijing in October 2006, a portfolio review of more than 235 contemporary Chinese photographers by international critics and curators.

"The range of work we saw in Beijing solidified our interest," Watriss told *ArtAsiaPacific*. She and Baldwin returned to China



CANG XIN: MAN AND SKY AS ONE SERIES 2: ENERGY (2007), Inkjet print, 120 x 180 cm.  
Courtesy the artist.

eight times between June and December 2007 with stops in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Taiyuan, Chongqing and Kunming, making nearly 60 studio visits and reviewing over 30 other archives and portfolios in preparation for FOTOFEST2008.

The biennial's central historical exhibition, "Ethnography, Photojournalism and Propaganda, 1934-1975," showcases Zhuang Xueben's ethnographic photographs in western China and Tibet from the 1930s, early Communist propaganda by Sha Fei and later works by agit-prop-styled photographers from the Cultural Revolution. Watriss explained that this work, much of which has never been exhibited for political reasons, "reflects and intersects with important moments in the political and cultural history of China," and that these archives "will change aspects of world photographic history."

FotoFest maintains strong connections with the exhibited photographers. Watriss stressed that, "this is not a one-shot relationship with China. There's too much good work going on there, and a real depth and continuum." Plans are in the making for a second Meeting Place FotoFest Beijing in 2009.