

Art in America

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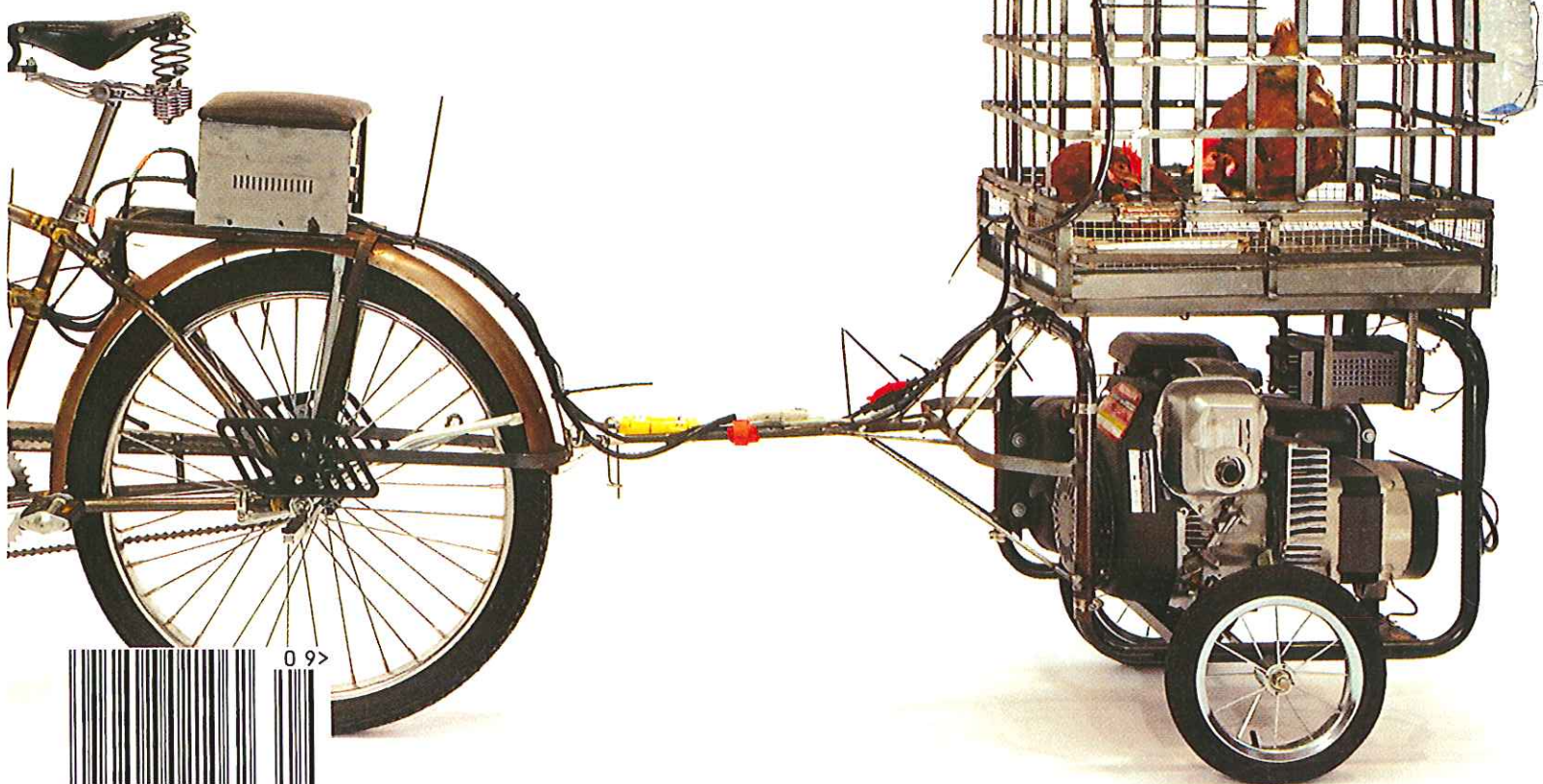
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China, Documented and Invented

This year's FotoFest surveyed modern Chinese photography, from 1930s social documentation to today's avant-garde conceptualism.

BY CHARLES DEE MITCHELL

FotoFest has taken over the city of Houston every two years since 1986, when the organization held its first International Biennial of Photography and Photo-Related Art. By this past March, the festival had grown to encompass exhibitions in 105 venues, ranging from the city's major museums, commercial galleries and nonprofit spaces to suburban shopping centers and a few restaurants. There were also film series, workshops and lectures, along with a month-long portfolio review that enabled over 400 photographers to present their work to an international roster of dealers, curators, publishers and critics.

In 2006, FotoFest sponsored an auxiliary event in Beijing, which in turn generated this year's multi-venue focus exhibition in Houston, "Photography from China, 1934-2008." Whatever groan factor there might be at the thought of yet another survey of Chinese photography was mitigated by the expansiveness of the curators' vision. Wendy Watriss and Frederick Baldwin, the founders of FotoFest, worked with Gao Lei, a freelance photographer and master digital-output printer, as their principal curatorial associate in China. Along with 10 other Chinese consultants, the pair put together a combination of monographic and group exhibitions that gave U.S. viewers a wide-ranging look at the history and current state of Chinese photography.

Even at its immense scale—Hewlett Packard, a principal sponsor of the festival, produced over 1,000 prints in Beijing—"Photography from China" did not pretend to be encyclopedic. In the catalogue, Gao Lei emphasizes that Chinese photography began long before 1934. The curators bypassed the pictorialism of the early 20th century, when Chinese photographers were essentially creating "traditional Chinese literati paintings applied to photographic paper." Today, parodies of this style appear in Wu Gaozhong's delicate, close-up "landscapes" of moldy bread and in Yao Lu's Photoshopped scenes incorporating a panoply of Chinese motifs created from building models, draped green netting, pebbles and dirt.

In 1934, Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984) traveled to what was officially known as "the uninhabited land" of far western China. His original destina-



RongRong: 1997 No. 5(2), 1997, inkjet print, 43¼ inches square. Courtesy Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

tion was Tibet, but following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama the region was closed to him. So he worked instead among the many minority groups living along the borders of Sichuan and Tibet. Zhuang proceeded in an ethnographic manner, filling countless notebooks with small photographs and written observations. Although he theorized about the relationship between content and aesthetics, and occasionally exhibited his photographs from pictorial publications, he would probably be astounded to see his work presented in an art context today, in posthumous prints ranging from 20 by 20 to 40 by 40 inches. The new life given to these images brings out how Zhuang departed from ethnographic conventions. His subjects never appear to have been mustered in front of the camera to demonstrate some particular detail of dress or adornment. The images are remarkable portraits of beautiful young women, dignified rulers, and elders feeling the strain of changing times.

Zhuang's work was in a subsidiary exhibition titled "Ethnography, Photojournalism and Propaganda, 1934-1975." The photojournalist was Sha Fei, a fig-

ure almost unknown in the West but of legendary status in China. When war broke out with Japan in 1937, he went to the north to photograph the preparations made by both the army and townspeople to defend the front. We see women learning to throw grenades, solitary soldiers on patrol and families going through the debris of their destroyed homes. Sha Fei was an excellent war photographer, but much of his reputation rests with the agency he put into place for the Chinese Communist Party. He said that he wanted to use "photography as a weapon of war" and "to increase national patriotism for the war effort." He trained almost 1,000 photographers during what is known in China as the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, and organized a constant flow of their images to magazines and public exhibitions.

The task of refining the patriotism machine would fall, from the mid-'60s to the mid-'70s, to the propagandists of the fanatical, intellectually destructive Cultural Revolution. Many of Sha Fei's

motifs reappear in their images, but with genuine heroism and courage replaced by a combination of spectacle, playacting and manipulation. Recent photographers have exploited the kitsch of these images of singing children and flag-waving thousands, but seeing the prototypes is a saddening experience. It is easy today to consider someone like Weng Naiqiang a color pioneer. His spectacular images are dominated by a rich, deep red that reappears on flags, clothing, grandstands and hundreds of copies of Mao's Little Red Book. But always hovering over the work are China's internecine death tolls and the near ruination of a country.

The organizers of FotoFest seemed to pour great enthusiasm into "Independent Documentary Photography, 1985-2008," in an effort to establish international reputations for Wu Jialin (b. 1942), Lu Nan (b. 1962) and Li Lang (b. 1969). All three men, from two very different generations, have worked more or less in isolation on long-term projects that until recently had little chance of reaching the outside world. The artists have indefatigably chronicled the changes occurring across

China, in ways that reference earlier ethnographic traditions as well as the documentary techniques established by the photographs of Magnum and other groups earlier in the 20th century.

Wu Jialin has practiced mostly in the Yunnan Province of southwestern China. He worked as a reporter for a provincial news agency during the Cultural Revolution and took up photography when asked to fill in for a photographer who had fallen ill. He says he learned composition from watching the Russian films shown in his hometown of Zhaotong. He had no real notion of Western photography until 1988, when he saw the work that French photographer Marc Riboud had done in China. In Houston, Wu presented images covering over 20 years of activity in Zhaotong, a prefecture-level city encompassing both an urban core and extensive rural environs. His early images include shopkeepers, farm laborers and the elderly on the narrow sidewalks outside their homes. Eventually beauty shops appear, displaying more posters of Britney Spears than Chairman Mao; cell phones replace phone booths; and painted walls advertise new housing developments.

Li Lang is also a recorder of rapid change. He has worked for a decade with the Yi people, one of the ethnic groups photographed in the 1930s by Zhuang Xueben. Traditional ways continue for these remote people, but now the young go into town on the weekends and pose for portraits, often in Western-style clothes, in front of painted backdrops brought around by itinerant photographers. Li's portraits of these portraits incorporate the people, the backdrop, the setting and sometimes the visiting photographer.

Lu Nan contends that "my job is caring about people." He has photographed various Tibetan populations and members of the often politically vulnerable Catholic Church in China. His series on the treatment of the mentally ill in rural areas was the most difficult viewing experience in all of FotoFest.

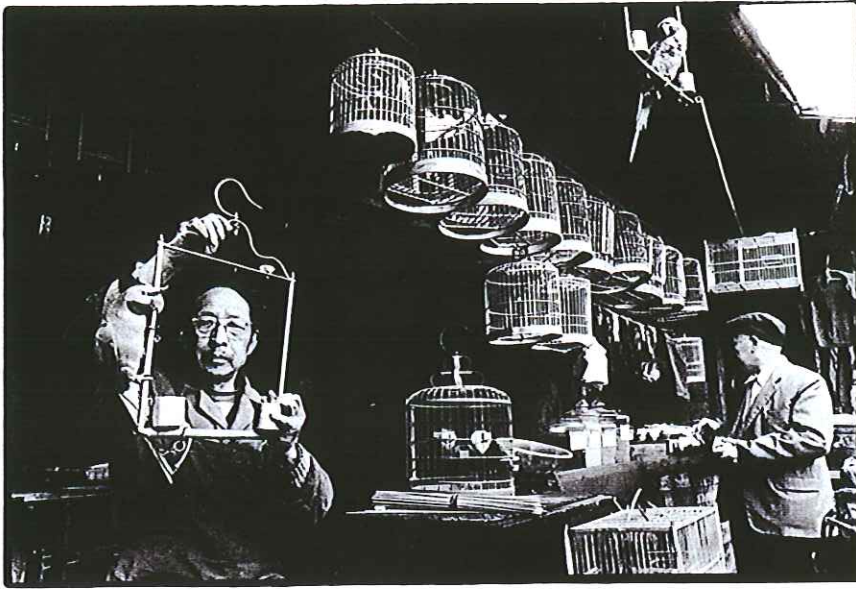
Staged and Conceptual Work: 1994-2008" involved 24 photographers spread across five venues. This is the material most familiar to Western audiences, although even here the organizers managed to provide both historical perspective and many new artists. *New Photo* was a photocopied magazine of never more than 30 or 40 examples brought out by Liu Zheng and RongRong in Beijing between 1996 and 1998. One section of the show brought together work from 1994-98 by 14 photographers originally published by *New Photo*, demonstrating some of the earliest conceptual approaches Chinese photographers adopted alongside an ongoing commitment to documentation. Color appears here for the first time since the propaganda images of the 1960s, but the spirit 30 years later is rebellious. At times the work is exuberant, at other times very dark. Liu Zheng continues to chronicle the people of the new China in portraits of partying business-



Above, Sha Fei: The Front—Field Exercises, ca. 1940, inkjet print, 13 by 20 inches. Courtesy Wang Yan.

Left, Weng Naiqiang: Propaganda Performance at the People's Workers Cultural Palace in Beijing on May 1st, Worker's Day, 1996, C-print, 19½ inches square. Courtesy 798 Photo Gallery, Beijing.

Below, Qui Zhijie: Fine No. 001, 1997, inkjet print, 24½ by 28½ inches. Courtesy Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.



Above, Wu Jialin: Yibin, Sichuan Province, 1989, silver gelatin print, 16 by 20 inches.

Right, Chen Lingyang: Twelve Flower Months #4, 2000, giclée print on rice paper, 7 inches in diameter.

Below, Lu Nan: Mental Hospital, Tianjing, China, 1989, silver gelatin print, 12 by 18 inches.



Qui Zhijie's young men strike heroic poses from Socialist Realist posters, though they are attired as college students wielding umbrellas. Chen Lingyang depicts her own monthly blood flow.

men and provincial performers, but he also restages scenes from Beijing operas using partially nude models. The young men in Qui Zhijie's images strike the heroic poses of farmers, workers and soldiers familiar from Socialist Realist posters, but they are attired as college students and wield umbrellas rather than shovels or weapons. RongRong, either nude or in inventive costumes, joins his wife in her white wedding gown to create a grand theater of their love for each other in a ruined building whose windows look out onto a devastated landscape.

These *New Photo*-era works, even with their expressive freedoms and deft conceptual strategies, originally presented the transformed Chinese experience only to a local band of artists and intellectuals who were simultaneously experiencing those same changes. The Western world was not yet taking much interest. But many works in the later part of the exhibition, surveying the years 1998 to 2008, seem directly to address an international market with approaches to content, scale and presentation that play well globally. Bai Yiluo takes shots of delicate calligraphy formed from crushed insects. Sun Guojuan covers herself in sugar for annual, often life-size nude self-portraits, and Chen Lingyang photographs the monthly blood flow from her own genitals.

After viewing some 1,000 images taken in a period of over 70 years, you might feel, when confronted by the most recent work, that you had wandered into any one of several recent art fairs or international biennials. Clearly the FotoFest organizers sought to present the leading edge of China's photographic practice. Yet, as with Sha Fei or Zhuang Xueben in their day, the fundamental work of documenting change still goes on. Zeng Han is a young photographer who has traveled China photographing failed building projects, abandoned theme parks and the cities soon to be submerged after the completion of new dams. His modestly scaled color images are surreal, funny and elegiac—both a simple record of what is there and a complex metaphor for changes whose outcome nobody can predict. □

FotoFest 2008 was on view at art venues throughout Houston, Mar. 7-Apr. 20.

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