PRESS COVERAGE

Reversed Images: Representations of Shanghai and its Contemporary Material Culture

September 25 — December 23, 2009

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The Museum of Contemporary Photography Presents Robert Adams's 'The Rising Tide'

Birds at Bering, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shanghai's in the summer of 2008. This off-center and incised study advances the surface and microstructure of the Middle Kingdom's most acceptable photographers and other artists, including Irving Penn, Lissitzky, Ed, Stieglitz, and Penck. Cheng, and D. Yang, will select a few of his best-known photographs in the exhibition. The Museum of Contemporary Photography will present a new exhibition of contemporary photography titled 'The Rising Tide.'

The exhibition will feature approximately 50 works by Chinese photographers and other artists, including Zhang Huan, Li Jiansheng, and Cheng Shao. The works of contemporary photography will be displayed in a special exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Shanghai.

The exhibition will open on September 16 and run through November 16. The exhibition is curated by Li Min and Huang Hui. The exhibition is supported by the Shanghai Museum of Photography and the Shanghai Art Museum.
For most of us, the artists working in China have only been accessible across the
internet, magazines, or other media. Fortunately, there's been a subtle wave of exhibitions featuring Chinese art in Chicago this year, the most notable being the sculpture in Millennium Park and the large survey at the Chicago Cultural Center. "The Big World: Recent Art from China." Joining these exhibitions is the Museum of Contemporary Photography's (MoCP) survey of Shanghai artists, "Reversed Images: Representations of Shanghai and its Contemporary Material Culture."

Shanghai has grown into a city of approximately 18 million people, among the one of the largest cities in the world. If the construction boom in the U.S. was noticeable, in China and Shanghai it has been totally transforming, as neighborhoods are swallowed by massive high-rise developments. The overwhelming urban nature of Shanghai is addressed by almost all the artists address in some way.

I'm most likely not going to get to China anytime soon (unfortunately), but I am extremely curious to know what it is like to be an artist in a country that is Communist, holds the most U.S. diplomats, is the most populous in the world, and the fastest growing economy. It seemed that the most interesting pieces in the exhibition were the artists that both addressed Shanghai as a city but went beyond its sheer urban-ness. Notable in this sense was the collaborative, five-channel video installation 40+4: Art is not Enough! Not Enough! The Making of the Arts in Shanghai '80-2008 the interviewers asked forty questions to forty artists about artmaking issues, conducted over a twenty-year span. These questions ranged from general practice questions ("Have you ever been doubtful of you being an artist?") to questions more specific to China, like the relationship between art and politics or art and morality. The editing was made obvious through fast cuts between responses, indicating that a certain view was being shown but the conversation was still very engaging. Hearing forty artists normalize on the last twenty years of practice in China was fascinating and revealed diverse opinions and artistic approaches.

Made on the literal other side of the world, disappointingly some of the work fell into familiar artistic devices. Olivo Barbieri's Shanghai consists of multiple color images of a highway overpass. I was immediately reminded of any number of highway overpass images, from the images of the famous East Los Angeles freeway interchange, to an image of a Chicago's freeway shown last year in the Chicago Cultural Center exhibition "Made in Chicago." Barbieri's work is different in that the freeways have blue accent lights, but otherwise it blends into a host of freeway images. Liu Gang's Paper Dreams series presents actual advertisements put up around construction sites to promote the new housing units. These have momentary interest as they are from Shanghai yet closely resemble the advertisements of the U.S., but don't go much deeper.

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Reversed Images:
Representations of Shanghai and Its Contemporary Material Culture
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Yang Fuzong, Honey J. courtesy of Shanghai, Shanghai

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Chicago galleries: Shanghai then, now and beyond - chicagotribune.com

Art reviews

Chicago galleries: Shanghai then, now and beyond

LeeAnne Waxman

Special to the Tribune

November 20, 2009

Shanghai is an unbelievably discriminating city, bursting with human and motor traffic, traversed by glowing infrastructure, punctuated by Space Age skyscrapers and shimmering with the ruins of old neighborhoods.

Not that I've been. But if the works on display in a pair of related exhibitions of contemporary art from Shanghai are to be believed, this city of 18 million is the epitome of today's rapidly changing urban landscape. In the blink of an eye, a high-rise replaces an old alley of brick town houses. With the flash of a cellphone, silky furs supplant communist fashions.

"Reversed Images: Representations of Shanghai and Its Contemporary Material Culture" at the Museum of Contemporary Photography is the more extensive of the two shows here, featuring a dynamic mixture of animation, documentary video, sculpture and photography. The supplementary "Shanghype!?" at the Hyde Park Art Center offers a looped screening of short works of video art, with some of the same artists (and artwork) as at the MoCP.

But back to being discriminating. Or not. One stunning point of orientation is offered immediately as you enter the MoCP galleries: Shi Guoqin's mural-size porcelain of the Shanghai skyline, frozen in dreamy, honey black and white. On one side of the broad, still Huangpu River lies the Bund, the city's stretch of historic, green-side buildings. On the other rise the sharp, jutting peaks of the new Pudong district. But orientation can be a fiction, even here. The otherworldly calm and eerie content of the image are the result of the camera obscura method used to create it -- a technique that demands extremely long exposure times and produces a reversed negative.

The reality probably looks more like Oliver Barbench's multipanel picture of a freeway junction at night, with pedestrians, walkways, highways and roads overlapping in a dizzying tangle of concrete pillars, streaks of light and fuzzy greenery. But even here, artistic technique colors actually so that it feels more true than it really looks. Everything is tinged in shimmering hyperreal turquoise and greenish-yellow. The scene is empty -- only two vehicles give a hint of life. To find warm human presence, one must look elsewhere.

But the warmest presence also is the most complicated, the story of what gets left behind in the relentless push toward structural and economic progress. Some of the most moving work in "Reversed Images" tackles this theme by recording the disappearance of residential areas and their inhabitants. She Hunchen's aptly titled documentary "Nostalgias" intimately revisits the traditional Shikumen houses and Longtang alleys where the filmmaker grew up, surrounded by a dense community of family and neighbors. So Chang painstakingly crafts a model of one such town house, a building torn down like so many others to make way for new construction. The artist due December presents a hefty, encompassous photo book picturing its neighborhood, Xin Can, and its total rising to make way for the World Expo 2010 site.

Zhou Xinuo takes a less sentimental approach with a digitally constructed panorama of a devastated quarter, whose real interest for the artist is as a site for a temporary sculpture -- a tenuous, fluid assembly of bricks, spray paint, piping and 2 by 300cm-tall white streaks, but only if seen from the angle of the camera. In the face of Zhou's invention stands the neutrality of Xu Xiyan and Xu Jiangyu's painted photographs of Shanghai. The father took his in the 1970s and 80s. The son revisited those locations 20 years later, producing an astonishing set of "after" images. Each picture measures but a single marker from "before" -- a building, a bridge, a roller coaster -- while all else is radically changed and density built up.

Against all such seriousness and reality is Zhang Qiang's hilarities "603 Football Field," in which a cramped Shanghai apartment turns soccer playground for a match between two teenagers. The middlefield straddles the living room; the blue team scores in the kitchenette and the white team in the sun room. Somewhere midway the bed sheets are destained, the couch converted and the couch trampled. It's a critique of tiny living spaces and lack of parkland, but also a tongue-in-cheek nod to the creativity of necessity.

A provocative epilogue for the story of Shanghai is provided by two very different works that appear in both venues. A computer animation by Cas-Fei depicts the whirlwind construction of Romantic City, an art community on a dense urban island in the virtual world of Second Life. Part creative sanctuary, part capitalist experiment (REB stands for Earns Money, the Chinese currency), the "city" will partner with international art institutions to host online cultural exhibitions amid its fantastical conglomeration of postmodern architecture, hydroelectric station, giant Mao monument, floating panda balloons and spinning Ferris wheel.

Meanwhile, Mathieu Burycevich offers a short, surreal film about an American man (the artist) who searches Shanghai for his Chinese wife hours before she gives birth to their baby. Speaking Shanghai freely, the local dialect, he asks neighbors and vendors if they've seen his wife recently. They haven't, but his explorations allow him to economize on his daily life. Meanwhile, his wife wanders the vastness of the metropolis in belly-baring vanguard clothing, looking like a fabulous visitor from outer space. The couple's baby, born in the final moments of the film, takes on the imprint...
Infiltrating Chicago gallery spaces with their full-fledged, cutting-edge work that constitutes a genuine avant-garde and blows away domestic products, Chinese photographers now bid fair to take over the city. In this show in which a battalion of shooters presents the manifold perspectives that mix and match in the metropolis of Shanghai. Grappling with the destruction of old Shanghai and the disappearance of traditional lifestyles, and the eruption of a postmodern cityscape and its accompanying consumer culture, the contributors are uniformly visual social critics, probing into the glibly decadence of middle-class high-rise existence, commenting mordantly on the lives of those still trying to cling to the past, and spoofing real estate ads, among any number of other skeptical moves. These artists are not political activists, and one suspects that their cultural approach is deeply rooted in their psyches rather than being a result of a dictatorial regime’s censorship. The banner image in the show is young Fudong’s large-format staged color portrait of the “First Intellectual,” a man with wildly tousled hair who stands in the middle of a wide avenue dressed in a business suit and holding a briefcase in one hand and a large brick in other; blood drips from his face and his eyes and he is agape with bewildered astonishment, indeed panic. A consummate conceptual artist, Fudong explains the image best—the First Intellectual has been wounded, but he cannot decide whether to throw his brick at society or smash it in his own face. Would that the West were so deep and sophisticated, but perhaps senility has set in and ambivalence has taken flight. (Michael Weinstein)

Through December 23 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan.
Focus: China

Art from the People’s Republic dominates a series of exhibitions and lectures at Columbia College this fall.

The Chinese government must not realize how awesomely subversive printmakers can be, because it doesn’t stop Tibet’s Derge Parkhang—a “printing temple” founded in 1729—from disseminating Buddhist texts made with its collection of 300,000 printing blocks. Prints, books, photographs and videos from the temple are on view in this exhibition. “This photo shows a block cutter at the Derge Parkhang doing the first, rough cut on a double-sided printing block,” explains cocurator Patrick Dowdey, who spent three summers doing research at the Derge Parkhang with the show’s other cocurator, Columbia College prof Clifton Meador.

WHAT “Pearl of the Snowlands: Buddhist Printing at the Derge Parkhang” WHEN Sept 11–Dec 5 WHERE Center for Book and Paper Arts (1104 S Wabash Ave, second floor, 312-389-6633, bookandpaper.org)

Zhang Qing’s 603 Football Field (2006, pictured) proves you can hold a soccer game in your apartment. “I wanted to show a playful and ironic ‘inside’ situation,” says curator Davide Quadrio. “Zhang Qing’s work is always light, surreal and unpredictable, and I thought 603 Football Field could help the show to have a moment of lightness.”

Art & Design

Fall Preview 2009

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Tao Huang wants you to stop associating Chinese design with knockoffs. “There’s still a lot of copycats,” the Columbia College prof acknowledges, “but there’s a lot of innovation and creative effort going on, too.” She curated this exhibition to introduce 14 Chinese designers’ and studios’ work to an American audience. Huang says she’s including Jianye Li’s Flexibin (pictured) because the award-winning design is a brilliant concept; Li, who works for Philips Design Hong Kong, created the trash can out of a single piece of stainless-steel wire.

WHAT “Found: Contemporary China Design” WHEN Oct 1–Nov 7 WHERE Leviton A+D Gallery (619 S Wabash Ave, 312-344-8687, www2.colum.edu/adgallery)