

Searching For Identity

SBMA's *BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE:*

NEW PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM CHINA REFLECTS A CULTURE IN FLUX by Victoria Charters

Looking at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*, it's hard to believe that for a period in China's recent history, no art was permitted to leave the country.



Above: Li Wei, *Mirroring: On Coal Hill*, 2000. Chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Right: Zhang Dali, *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998. Chromogenic print. Image courtesy Collection of Andrew Lewin.



My guide through the exhibit, SBMA curator Karen Sinsheimer, reminds me, “You will not see anything overtly political in these images. It’s all subterranean—because it’s not allowed.” For her, *Between Past and Future* is “a glimpse into this complex culture which is being catapulted in to the 21st Century at an unimaginable rate. China is in a state of cultural flux, as it transforms from a rural agrarian society to one which is racing to embrace cars, cell phones, cyberspace and even stem cell research.”

This collection of photographs, video and installation pieces features 130 works by 60 Chinese artists, all produced since the mid-1990’s, and all done by artists believed to be under 40. The exhibition is a testament to the ability of photography as a medium to show “who people are, not just what they look like,” Sinsheimer explains.

Looking at Gao Brothers’ *An Installation on Tiananmen*, 1995, Sinsheimer informs me that no images that appear disrespectful of Mao are permitted to leave China. And yet, this photo of Mao’s



portrait in Tiananmen Square is “taken from extreme angle, (a subtle way) to show that everyone has been forced to look up and to idolize this image.”

Elevating self mutilation to a form of personal memorial, Sheng Qi’s *Me, 2000* depicts the artist after cutting off his finger “in remembrance of Tiananmen Square, so that he would have a constant reminder of that event.” In the triptych, he holds in his mutilated hand a picture of himself, a picture of his mother and lastly, a picture of Mao.

Artists like Zhang Dali respond to what they see happening in China’s transforming cities. In *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing, 1998*, the artist has cut out a head in a partially demolished wall; through this “window” we see a representation of old China, the gilded roof of a beautiful old building. In Karen’s words, we glimpse an “overtaking of the past with the rubble of the present.”

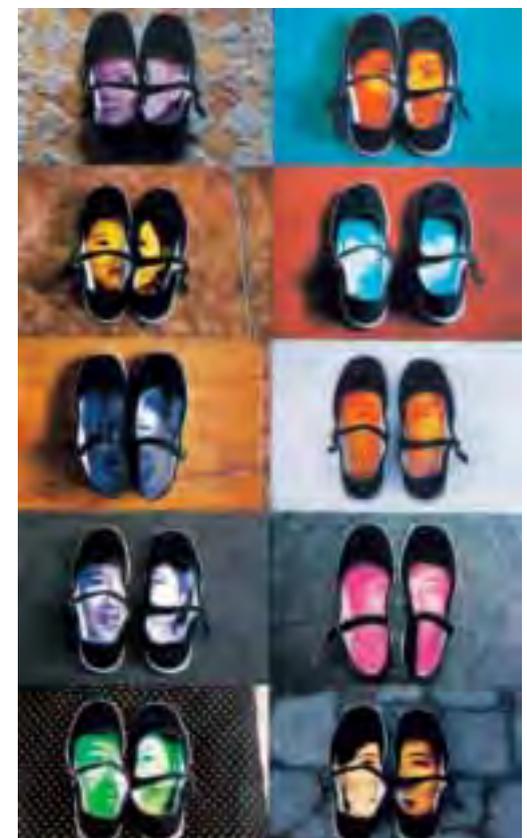
One of the more whimsical pieces comes from female artist Yin Xiuzhen. Entitled *Yin Xiuzhen, 1998*, this mixed-media installation provides a commentary on the age-old, walking-a-mile-in-someone-else’s-shoe adage. The piece shows ten disassociated portraits of Xiuzhen’s face as she “grows up” inside the soles of ten pairs of self-worn shoes. “All the shoes are made of the same black cloth-simple, inexpensive and pristine,” the artist notes. “I rarely had the opportunity to purchase new shoes.” Through the presentation, we see that what changes with the passage of time is not the style of shoe, but rather the person.

Sinsheimer turns to me, a contemplative look in her eye. “This exhibition is very reflective of how these people are reacting to finding their place in this new Chinese order,” she surmises.

Between Past and Future is organized by the University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art and the International Center of Photography, New York. ■

Above: Gao Brothers, *An Installation on Tiananmen, 1995*. Chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artists.

Below: Yin Xiuzhen, *Yin Xiuzhen, 1998*. Mixed-medium installation; ten pair shoes, ten chromogenic prints. Image courtesy of the artist and CourtYard Gallery, Beijing.



Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China. Santa Barbara Museum of Art. July 1 – Sept 17. 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara. 805.963.4364. www.sbma.net.