

Hazy Vision

In depicting moments in the lives of 'ordinary people doing ordinary work' in Shenzhen, photographer Yang Yong creates statements of a China growing estranged from history

By Yenni Kwok



Anonymous Still (2004). Photo: Yang Yong

Photography artist Yang Yong likes to joke why he chose to leave his hometown in Sichuan for Shenzhen. “I initially wanted to go to Beijing, but I got on the wrong plane.”

Shenzhen is indeed a curious base for an artist. One of the wealthiest parts of China, the special economic zone is also infamous for being a cultural desert. It attracts pragmatists and opportunists, not idealists. It lures young men and women with promises of quick bucks and shortcuts to fortune.

Yet somehow Yang’s artistic expression seems to flourish against this barren backdrop. His photography has been described by critics as “stationary film noir”, with shots frequently depicting young women posing in the artificial lights of the urban jungle or gritty underground tunnels. Others show rough-looking labourers standing amidst construction sites that characterise the manic spirit of Shenzhen. Indeed, such images can only be captured in a frontier town with a gold rush mentality like Shenzhen, not in established centres like Beijing or Shanghai.

“I have been to different cities, and for me, Shenzhen is a very unique and special place,” the 31-year-old artist agrees. He does not consider Shenzhen as a mere giant factory zone or cultural wasteland. “In fact it is very multi-dimensional,” he adds. “It is a reflection of modern China, a place where people would go and become very different.”

Yang is using amateur models, mostly friends who like him are trying their luck in the boomtown. Interesting enough, foreign critics and audiences frequently think the women depicted in Yang’s photography are prostitutes. (They are not, he says, they are simply ordinary people doing ordinary work). “People like to look for controversies, and women standing on the streets are quickly seen as prostitutes,” he laughs.

Born in 1975, Yang initially studied oil painting. He moved to Shenzhen in 1995 when he was merely 20 years old. In the new place, he decided to try his hand on a new medium. He chose photography because “it was the best way to express how globalisation has changed China.”

Yang – one of the most promising young Chinese artists – belongs to a generation with no memory of Mao’s tumultuous China, just like the twentysomething women portrayed in his photographs. They are estranged from history, without any telltale signs of place, time or culture. Their identity is rather linked with the context of accelerated modernity and vast social change.

Dominique Perregaux, of Art Statements Gallery, which exhibited the artist’s works recently, observes: “Yang Yong gives you what you see. His art is very raw, and there is a certain sense of vanity.”

The artist does not deny this, saying: “I am using my friends to convey what I feel about the world.” Photography for him is a personal endeavor with a wide vision. “I am interested in a bigger picture,” he adds. “My photography is not only to document, but also to see the world through.”

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