

THE NEW YORKER

PHOTO BOOTH

The view from The New Yorker's photo department.

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Postcard from China: Mike Osborne's "Enter the Dragon"
Posted by Whitney Johnson



This week in the magazine, alongside Evan Osnos's story about China's economic boom, is a photograph of an oversized advertisement, featuring the hosts of China Central Television, looming over an otherwise desolate sidewalk in Beijing's Central Business District and masking the construction of the company's new headquarters. This image, like others from Mike Osborne's series "Enter the Dragon," explores radical modernization in cities across China. But they do more than provide a fleeting glimpse of China today; exaggerated colors and tight cropping that emphasizes the distorted scale of urban environments encourages us to look closely at and try to understand our surroundings.

You can find an extended slide show on the iPad edition of the current issue, including the image above, which shows the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, in the Pudong section of Shanghai. Here's an excerpt from my interview with Osborne.

How did you begin this project?

My projects often revolve around different facets of the city. Maybe because photography is inherently static, I also tend to be very attracted to things that are in flux. I visited and shot in a number of Chinese cities—Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Xiamen—but I was most immediately fascinated by Beijing. I was stunned by the scale of its self-reinvention and very interested in the role of its emerging architectural icons in this process. I began working there in late 2006 and returned to photograph five times over the next two years.

For a long time, I've been interested in the idea of trying to use photography to communicate a sense of futurity. This is, of course, a hopelessly impossible task, since photographers are stuck in the present, making pictures that become descriptions of the past. In any case, one can try.

Most of the pictures you've selected were shot in the areas surrounding certain architectural icons that were being built in Beijing at the time: OMA's CCTV Headquarters, Herzog & de Mueron's National Stadium, Steve Holl's Linked Hybrid, and several others. As is often the case with truly contemporary architecture, these projects tend to look slightly ahead of their time. They are also essentially indices of the flow of capital, so their locations tend to be epicenters of creative destruction. My intention was not to document specific centerpiece projects—in fact, they rarely appear in my pictures—but to use them as a way of defining a physical and conceptual territory to explore. The resulting pictures are neither a preservationist's lament nor a celebration of the new, but rather an exploration of the sensations of disorientation and limbo that accompany such upheaval.

Tell me about the title.

The work's admittedly absurd title, "Enter the Dragon," is borrowed from a classic Bruce Lee film of the early nineteen-seventies. The movie itself has no special significance for me, but I liked the idea that by using this title I could conflate two very different worlds: the movie's ludicrous martial arts fantasy and my take on extreme urban renewal and architectural spectacle. It's a way of acknowledging the understated humor and absurdity that runs through the work. I also liked that "Enter the Dragon" sounds like stage directions—like Philip Roth's title "Exit Ghost," which I think he took from Hamlet. I don't engage in the kind of staging that a lot of contemporary photographers employ, but my intense color palette and proscenium-like framing give the pictures a certain theatricality.

Which image was most challenging to make?

Photographing in China was generally very pleasant. I experienced very little of the hostility and suspicion that I face regularly when shooting in the U.S. (I was summoned for a meeting with the F.B.I. earlier this year for taking some photographs on public property in Houston, Texas.) None of the China work was challenging in this regard.

As for specific images, I was very happy that the "Olympic Park Portrait" turned out as it did. All of these images were shot with a tripod-bound view camera. Working this way has its benefits but makes it difficult to capture gesture and movement with the fluidity that a handheld camera allows. To have frozen those four figures as I did was fortunate.

What did you see change the most during your time in China?

The main constant was the perpetual sense of flux. I'm sure that this continues to be the case, though perhaps things are slowing down in light of the widespread concerns about a bubble in the Chinese real estate market.

More specifically, it was a great pleasure to watch OMA's CCTV Headquarters being realized over time. It's an astonishing building. It's an expression of enormous power, but it also looks extremely vulnerable, like it shouldn't quite be able to stand up. This gives it a hallucinatory quality. I'm actually sorry that it had to be completed. It looked so good before they clad the exterior in glass, when the internal structure was still visible.

What are you working on now, and does it relate to your work in China?

For the last year and a half, I've been working on a project in Houston. It's a different world, but there are some commonalities. Both Houston and Beijing are vast, sprawling places with enormous concentrations of power and wealth. Beijing is home to the central government and a manic economy; Houston is one of the world's major energy centers, and its economy is buoyant at a time when much of the country is suffering. These kinds of issues are beyond the descriptive capacity of photography, but they provide interesting backdrops against which to go about my work. In both contexts, my pictures are the result of an exploration of public space and an effort to describe the texture of the city.

After a year in China, did you still feel like an outsider?

I've spent about a year of my life in Taiwan and China, and I have a basic, functional knowledge of Mandarin Chinese. But it would take much, much more than this to feel as if I had some sort of special insight or access.

My position as an outsider is something that I was always aware of but that I tended to embrace rather than regarding as a liability. The pictures eschew any false sense of intimacy, focusing instead on that which could be gleaned by looking closely at what was going on in specific kinds of public space.

In college, I stumbled across a very memorable poem called "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home," by Craig Raine. The speaker's interpretations of what he has seen on earth are mostly incorrect, but they're potent observations nonetheless. This idea has always stuck with me as a kind of metaphor for the photographer's activity, which entails a certain degree of misunderstanding and distance, regardless of where one photographs.

Keywords

- * China;
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