



The Poetics of Mockery

Acclaimed Chinese photographers Maleonn and Jiang Pengyi transform the classical into a surreal present of fantasy and loss in *A Departure From Reality III: The Tender Truth*. Nicolette Wong speaks to the two artists about the fusion of classical Chinese culture and its new guises, contemporary art in China and the transcendence of selves in their art.

Nicolette Wong: In both of your works there is often a bizarre mix of traditional Chinese culture and its present landscape, as if you are inviting the audience to lament of the loss of the classical in today's China. For Jiang Pengyi, there is a Zen feeling in some of your works like *All Back To Dust*. Do you intend to create this chemistry for the audience to experience, when you are creating your art?

Jiang Pengyi: What a question! No journalist has asked me this before, not even in China.

Nicolette Wong: That is because most audience may feel the Zen streak in your work without being able to articulate their impression.

Jiang Pengyi: It is indeed something I have in mind when I am working on my art. From 'All Back to Dust' to 'Unregistered City', my idea was very simple: to put classical Chinese motifs and icons such as Guan Yin, which express the essence of humanity at hidden corners of the cityscape. The representation itself is an opening for the audience to discover—in the end, both the question and answer come from them.

Nicolette Wong: What a Zen answer. What about Maleonn?

Maleonn: My use of classical Chinese motifs, especially those from literature, is very deliberate because they were an essential part of my growing up. In today's China, our younger generations have a very shallow understanding ▶

of traditions. The society is growing increasingly absurd; young people have little exposure to the classics and the spirit—the purity—is very hard for them to grasp.

Nicolette Wong: But there is an inevitable gap between the real and the mimic in your work too, like 'Second Hand Tang Poems'.

Maleonn: That is where the joke is. As an artist I can only create second-hand interpretation of the real. It is not an attempt to inspire any answer, but rather mockery of the loss or an entry point to the subject.

Nicolette Wong: Janet Fong (curator of the exhibition) and I had a conversation about contemporary Chinese art, a term that sometimes carries a Westernised and limited perspective on what defines today's Chinese artists, in terms of popularity and auction prices. Do you worry about being labeled in this light, as your works are getting wider recognition in the West?

Maleonn: It is hard not to be labeled and I have made conscious efforts to stay away from it. In my early days as an artist, I was aware that the Western audience might pay more attention to certain important icons of Chinese culture and it affected our artists' creative expression. My subjects are China and her culture too, but my choice of motifs and treatment is different. I am resistant to the outsider's perception.

Nicolette Wong: Because contemporary art in China is not exactly the same thing as contemporary Chinese art.

Jiang Pengyi: It is not, but even in China the debate is not so clear-cut. In Beijing where I am based now, audience, critics and even artists can be caught up in confusion and misinterpretation—the perspectives can be quite clouded. As for me, I simply do not think about how oth-

ers see my work. I do not care what the local or foreign audience says.

Nicolette Wong: What about your relationship with your work? You said your earlier photos of skyscrapers stemmed from an unnamable fear of the city, and you have moved away from shooting skyscrapers. Does it mean you have overcome your fear?

Jiang Pengyi: In a way, yes. I understand that fear now that I have re-created it, time and again, over the years. I have switched to shooting other subjects for my new work while my relationship with buildings is still revealing itself. I have been using model buildings as a different mode of exploration of my feelings, and it has not yielded itself to complete clarity yet. I see it as a question that will get more difficult in the days to come.



Unregistered City 2 (detail) by Jiang Pengyi, Courtesy Blindspot Gallery

Nicolette Wong: Both of your works are expressions of your selves in rather polarized manners. For Maleonn, your persona has



What Love Is, No. 3 by Maleonn, Inkjet print, 90 x 135 cm, edition of 8, 2009, Courtesy Blindspot Gallery

metamorphosed throughout your staged photography. Has it not reached its peak by now?

Maleonn: No, because the persona never stops changing as the creator goes on his quest. As I mature as a person and an artist, I am still discovering new ways to channel my thoughts and feelings. I think it is the same with the audience too; they never experience the same chemistry twice as they chance upon an artwork. Art is mirrors and windows: you see yourself in it, and you see yourself in relation to the outside world.

Jiang Pengyi: And you must know what my answer is.

Nicolette Wong: You are going for nothingness.

Jiang Pengyi: Yes, I am trying to obliterate any sense of self in my work.

Nicolette Wong: That is a tough task. Even as you try to cast your self away from the pictures,

the audience will naturally get a feeling of your temperament or mindset from your work.

Jiang Pengyi: That is true, but the absence of self has been at the heart of my work for quite some time now and I am developing along that direction. For my upcoming work I am shooting totally random or irrelevant subjects and I will see where it takes me. It is not the same as objectivism in photography because works of that genre carry specific goals or purpose. Mine is going to have no purpose. It is a long and difficult process but I will get there. ■

A Departure From Reality III: The Tender Truth runs until October 30 at Blindspot Gallery & Annex.

Exhibition details on page 21.

www.blindspotgallery.com