

particular community without serving the rest. It is not about establishing clear demarcations of the arts, but an amalgamation, a crossing, the formation of hybrid models that will keep culture alive and thriving.

In the conceptual plans we should look for the proposal which has the ability to sustain the conversation, to coordinate and carry out the project to its logical conclusion. Although all three proposals have outlined a clear plan for the project, but we should question who is most able to intelligently adapt to changing conditions. We need a long-term "Conceptual Consultant" who has the stamina, commitment and agility to succeed against multiple differences of opinion and interest groups. There needs to be a deep devotion to the project, not a skimming of the surface.

One of the greatest concerns is the current feedback mechanism in place, for it is not conducive to acquiring adequate feedback on the proposals. In the current round of Public Engagement Exercises there are 78 presentations each lasting under 20 minutes per Conceptual Consultant. How deep can one go? If the world of advertising has taught architects anything when presenting to the general public it is to make it straightforward, keep it concise and stick to the party line at all costs. But this format only produces easily digestible one-liners repeated ad infinitum. It is a highly repetitive as well as highly reductive process. Perhaps, as a public, we should advocate not just to be able to provide feedback on the designs, but to continue the fine tradition of providing input into the entire process. ▣

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VISUAL ARTS

By Koon Yee-wan

Otherworldly images 創造現實

Photographers take a tip from the theater of the absurd

On the stage of the absurd, logic takes a step back. Instead, meaningless babble and arbitrary starts and stops create a strange relationship between time and space and we are left suspended in non-reality. Strangely, the theatrics of nonsense have found a ready home in photography, and in particular among Mainland Chinese artists who use juxtapositions to create static dream worlds where there is no clear beginning or ending.

At Blindspot, one of a growing number of Hong Kong galleries dedicated to photography, the last of a three-part exhibition, 《與現實的背離之〔三〕：微妙的真相》 (*Departure from Reality: A Tender Truth*), is currently on display at their Soho space and in their larger warehouse in Aberdeen. The two photographers, 馬良 (Maleonn) and 蔣鵬奕 (Jiang Pengyi), are

Mainland Chinese photography – high production conceptual works that play with Chinese history, both past and present. The kitsch factor, which is often exploited as a form of response to China's growing capitalism, is here too.

Maleonn, with a background in theater and film, creates almost cinematic surrealist shots based on narrative memories. The dreamlike quality of his images suggests the impossibility of perfect memory, and instead he presents unreality as a burlesque stage where roles are reversed and sensibilities overturned. It is not surprising that Maleonn is a fan of Pedro Almodovar, the flamboyant Spanish director, whose melodramas offer wacky characters seeking love in strange places and with strange people.

That offbeat wackiness is exploited in Maleonn's works as he juxtaposes

藝術，可以是一道逃生門，讓我們撤離水深火熱的現實

established artists and have a popular following in Europe as well as Asia. As the title suggests, the exhibition is about leaving reality behind. The two photographers have chosen two very different ways of walking away. Maleonn uses intense colors and stage sets to recreate non-reality in an almost literal way. Jiang Pengyi miniaturizes cityscapes and turns them into still-life props to stage his collapsed dystopia.

Works by both artists bear all the trademarks of a certain type of

strange things that almost tell a story, but never quite get to the point. Instead, his images leave impressions that prompt your own reading. For example, Maleonn's 《愛是甚麼》 (*What is Love*) series is centered on a stage with red velvet curtains, plastic toy figures and a large scary wax-like head. The colors are overly saturated and sweeping white lines manipulated during post-production add to the drama of love. The large white wax-like face reminds me of when Dorothy

reaches the Emerald City and Toto discovers that behind the floating green wizard's head is a little old man working the machines. *What is love?* Apparently, it is about illusion, enchantment and the intensity of emotion. I cannot help thinking that there is a teenager inside Maleonn (or at least in his works), who still believes in love, and still composes poems, maybe while listening to punk rock. There is a self-possession in his works, and a confidence about his insights into the grand questions of love, which he sees in large abstract terms that smack of innocence.

My favorite images are from his 《郵差》 (*The Postman*), which was inspired by a visit to his old neighborhood where his childhood house was being demolished. The postman is the superhero in this series, the man who brings and maintains a network of communication between people and delivers (if kept) memories of former days. In this dying neighborhood, the postman is a modern-day hero, and Maleonn's postman can walk through walls. Like I said, there is an inner teenager in Maleonn's works who keeps coming out with promises of the "what ifs." Some of the postman images look like high-end fashion shoots: engaging manipulations of form and color. Maleonn's work is accessible, and none more so than this one. That's what makes these images honest and fun.

One series that I struggle with is 《二手唐詩》 (*Second-hand Tang Poem*). Using black and white, fantastical masquerades of famous Tang poems, imperfectly remembered, Maleonn has created surreal worlds mediated through, again, his own memories. Something in it almost evokes early surrealist photography, and while I understand the conceptual appeal behind this set of work, I cannot help but think that it is China in drag, taking pop-surrealism into the realms of kitsch with its over-performance. I should add that I am in the minority; a lot of people are charmed by his Tang landscapes of self.

At the other side of the exhibition

is Jiang Pengyi, whose photographic images are at the opposite end from Maleonn's work. Using a largely gray palette, Jiang manipulates the size of tall high-rise buildings and turns this miniaturized portion of the urban landscape into a still-life subject against a backdrop of old crumbling walls. The works form part of a larger critique of China's rapid building projects that have been tackled by many photographers including 黃炳培 (Stanley Wong) of Hong Kong. This is unsurprising because China's economic boom and urban growth are headline news.

How do you differentiate yourself in a sea of many artists, including photographers, who are posing all the same questions? You do it through technique, mastering your manipulation so that it looks almost real. It is Jiang's still-life approach that makes his images interesting. When we think of still-life paintings we think of the 17th century Dutch masters who produced table scenes of decadent commodities ready to be consumed. Here, Jiang plays with our expectations of the still-life genre, turning luxury commodities into crumbling landscapes. In so doing, he examines the cost of our desire to possess properties. Unlike Maleonn's self-conscious displays of loss or the pain of love, which also act as façades for our egos (think drag-queen), Jiang's works are more introspective because they evoke death.

Jiang likes to play with contrasts to catch our attention, and succeeds in doing so through compositions. His other project 《發光體》 (*Luminant*) continues with the theme of buildings and uses color, or rather light, as the contrasting agent. He captures scenes of underexposed foreground against overexposed skyscrapers. The otherworldly aura of the skyscraper acts as a threatening beacon of contemporary capitalism and globalization. Resistance is futile.

These are evocative works, but in some ways they fail. They fail in not being big enough – just as the miniature worlds of collapsed cement

needed a palette of grays to bring an aura of beauty to death, *Luminant* needs the physical presence of the works to be equal to the awe inspired by the threat of our brave new world.

Departure from Reality III: The Tender Truth offers the optimistic energy of a young artist who charms with kitsch and whose works are almost always hopeful and happy even when they are about hurt and violence. At the other end is a different kind of artist, one who is more subdued and serious. Both use dream tropes to create alternative worlds, inviting us to their stage of the absurd and the fantastic.

Departure from Reality is one of many exhibitions that kick-start the autumn season of art. This week alone, there is an opening every night and several on the same day. What is interesting about the crop of exhibitions is how culturally diverse they are: Grotto's *Dimension of Line* continues to showcase and support local Hong Kong artists; Para/Site has a show on Thai art curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija – a name familiar to many not only for his own art work but also for his contribution as a curator; and the Hong Kong Art Centre has an exhibition, *Popping Up*, looking at the relationship between 2D and 3D which includes Toyo Ito, a renowned Japanese architect, on its heady list of exhibitors. This autumn, the cultural diversity of Asia is well represented with a healthy mix of established and young artists. I hope this is a sign not of departures, but of the reality to come. ☐

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