

Chen Wei's best photograph: a Chinese nightclub fantasy

'People in China go out clubbing to chase their dreams, but they can't escape what's happening outside'



Temporary fix ... a detail from Chen Wei's *In the Waves*. [Click to enlarge](#)

Interview by Karin Andreasson

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In China, nightclubs are the only places where large numbers of people are allowed to get together. Gatherings of people all doing the same thing would never be permitted anywhere else - certainly not on the street. It would make the government nervous. This was taken in Beijing, where I live, last year. It's about dreams and reality: people in China go out clubbing to chase their dreams, but they can't escape from what's happening outside. I didn't take it in a real nightclub, though, as I wouldn't have been able to convey the dream-like state clubbers are trying to achieve.

I needed a really big space, so I found a movie studio for hire. I spent about six weeks carefully planning the image since, when it finally came to the shoot, I would only have a few hours. Hiring a studio and helpers was very expensive; I had 13 people working on lighting alone. There was no music playing: I just asked my dancers to pose as if they were completely intoxicated, totally in the moment. Whenever I noticed someone actually enjoying themselves, I told them to stop and make it look like they were faking it. I asked them to exaggerate their poses, to draw attention to the fact that clubbers are just getting a temporary fix. They use

drink and drugs to trick themselves into feeling free, but the next morning they still have to go out to work.

Although it's a depressing situation, sad stories can be beautiful, and I wanted to reflect this. It's deliberate that you can't tell what the space is like: nightclubs are often like that, space and time becoming a blur under the intoxicating lights. In fact, the lighting is as much a subject as the people.

I recall watching a music competition on TV and hearing a competitor sing the line "in the waves". He was immersed in his performance, swaying from side to side. I thought the phrase was the perfect title for this work because, when you're in the sea, waves can either kill you or carry you away - but you can never control them. The same thing happens in a club: the music and atmosphere carry the dancers as they search for their dream. But in the end, the club makes everyone the same. You can't go against the crowd.

It's an idea that also relates to my life. In this country, I can't just make whatever I want. I know the politics, so I keep myself in check, aware of what I can and can't do. But I believe there are elements of that in all societies. Things happen that you can't explain or do anything about. Someone might suddenly disappear: it could be political, maybe the government is involved. You just don't know. My life in Beijing is, I think, like being in the wave. I am part of something so big I can neither control it nor step away from it. My friends and I have talked about moving away, but I know I never will, however bad it gets. Because this is my country.

CV

Born: Zhejiang Province, China, 1980.

Studied: TV camera operation, Zhejiang University of Media and Communications.

Influences: Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka, John Cage, Pierre Bourdieu.

Top tip: "Shoot a lot."

● Chen Wei: Slumber Song is at Ben Brown Fine Arts, London W1, until 5 June.

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