



# CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHERS COME OUT OF *THE DARK ROOM*

While contemporary Chinese art now often sells at record breaking auction prices, modern Chinese photography has yet to gain such recognition. But an intriguing exhibit of the works of a dozen mainland photographers suggests that artistic expression through photography is flourishing in the country.

WORDS MERCY LO





COURTESY OF AI WEI WEI AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY

## CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY SEEMS TO BE A MODEST PLAYER IN THE SINO ART BOOM, HIDING IN THE CORNER, WAITING TO BE NOTICED.



Ai Wei Wei  
*Dropping*  
a Han Dynasty Urn  
1995

In recent years Chinese contemporary art has made an immense leap forward to gain ever growing recognition on the global art stage. Since the late 1990s, China's art scene it has been stealing the limelight from other art genres at international biennials and festivals. Chinese art has now become popular among both critics and experts, often selling at record-breaking auction prices. Contemporary Chinese photography, however, seems to be a modest player in the Sino art boom, hiding out in the corner, waiting to be noticed.

"Compared to the development of other forms of Chinese contemporary art, Chinese photography is a few decades behind," says Rong Rong, a pioneer in Chinese experimental photography. While China's art scene is now celebrating a certain level of maturity, the revolution of Chinese photography has only just begun.

When Chairman Mao came to power in 1949, photography quickly

became a means of powerful political propaganda for the government. Ordinary people were not allowed to own a camera. Exclusive privileges were only granted to government photojournalists who were photographing for a specific news topic. What had once been a rich man's exotic toy had then become a political tool to express government policy.

It wasn't until the 1980s that the country was finally re-opened to the outside world economically and socially. The society enjoyed the brief freedom of openly discussing about different ideologies, capitalism and many other topics that were forbidden before this time. Zhang Haier, Mo Yi and Han Lei are some of the active photographers of that era who forth to offer their photography as an alternative and artistic voice society.

"All of these creative and dynamic cultural activities came to a sudden halt in 1989. The Tiananmen Square incident had brought everything back to its starting point. Chinese society

went back to how it used to be before the 1980s," says Rong Rong.

It was also the students' protests at Tiananmen which gave rise to a new generation of young photographers, who was yearning for freedom and new inspiration, something entirely different from what they had been exposed to in the society. These were also the pioneering group that started the Yuanmingyuan art village and 798 art zone in Beijing. These photographers were hoping to insert new motivation and fresh energy into the society.

In 1996, Rong Rong and his journalist friend, Liu Zheng, founded the New Photo magazine. "It was a private collection of works that, we agreed, were different from the mainstream productions. Something real, innovative, and liberating," says Rong Rong. "Deep down we had this relentless thirst to emancipate ourselves from restrictions of the system, to express our true feelings and thoughts from our works."



Though New Photo only published four issues from 1996 to 1998, the magazine marked the creation of a new era for Chinese photography. And artistic expression through photography began to flourish in the country.

Photographers are often literally eye-witnesses to history. Each click of their shutter immortalizes the captured moment. History becomes tangible. Photographs published in New Photo magazine both reflected and recorded the rapid transformation of Chinese society in the past two decades.

Collaborating with The Blindspot Gallery, Rong Rong has selected a diverse collection of avant-garde photographic works from twelve Chinese artists working from the 1980s and 1990s for a special exhibition called "New Framework: Chinese Avant-garde Photography 1980s - 90s". The exhibit, which runs until June 22, displays more than 80 photographs at the Blindspot Annex in Wong Chuk Hang and the Blindspot Gallery in Central.

"At that time, these works were really pushing the envelope. Different from the mainstream, these new generation of photographers were able to influence those who were still living under China's traditional social system. Our new ways of expression might have been hard for them to accept at first, but it was this very difference between us, which brought them to doubt themselves and begin to search for new possibilities," says Rong Rong.

When he was young in Beijing, he subscribed to every single photography magazine he could source in the country. But he found that most of the photography in those publications was dull, and lacked any unique attitude or independence. And even now, decades later, when he looks back at these photography publications again, he still saw the same staleness.



Qiu Zhijie  
Fine  
1997  
Digital inkjet print  
50 x 60cm  
Edition of 10

He believes it is time for these photographers to break out of their old practices and seek their own personal styles, to photograph with their own unique voices.

From the breakthrough in photographic topics to the experimentation of different staging and presentations, this exhibition allows you to look into this remarkable period of Chinese photographic history, which uses photography to document China's social history.

Zhang Haier from Guangdong was among the first few photographers to develop an independent approach to documentary photography with provocative subjects including half-dressed prostitutes. Mo Yi's conceptual

photography captures the sense of insecurity of the Chinese people under the country's sweeping social and political changes.

Henan Province's Han Lei encapsulates the memory of a period through his documentation of urban life in China since 1980s, whereas Qiu Zhijie from Fujian questions the false objectivity of so-called documentary photography with his painstakingly staged photography.

IF YOU GO: The main venue for this exhibition is Blindspot Annex, 15th Floor, Po Chai Industrial Building, 28 Wong Chuk Hang Road. Blindspot Gallery is located on 24-26A Aberdeen Street, Central. Hours 11am - 7pm. Admission to both is free. ▲



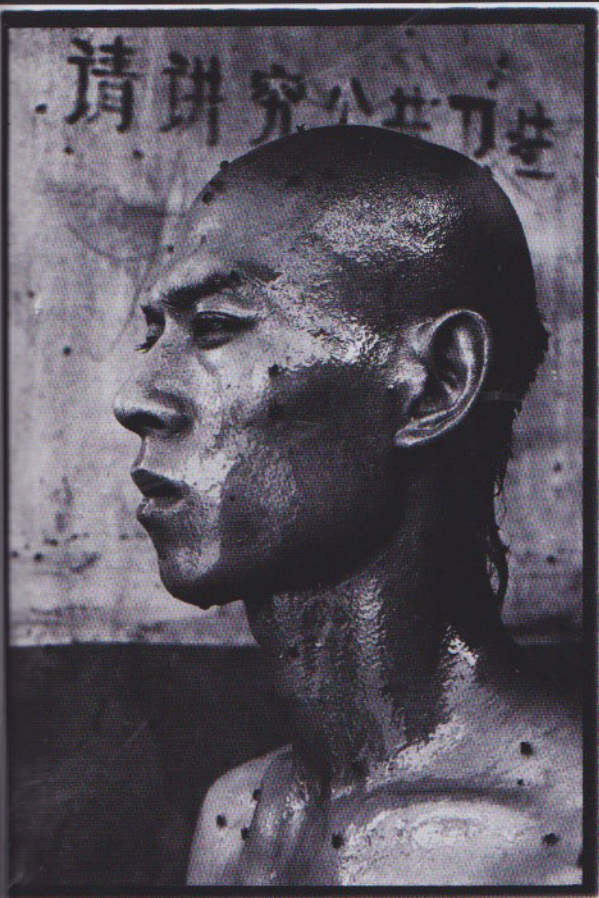
COURTESY OF QIU ZHIJIE AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY

COURTESY OF QIU ZHIJIE AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY





COURTESY OF MO YI AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY



COURTESY OF RONGRONG AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY



COURTESY OF HAN LEI AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY



Above:  
Mo Yi  
*My Illusory City*  
No.4 (Tianjin, 1987)  
1987  
Gelatin silver print  
50.8 x 61cm  
Edition of 15

Left:  
RongRong  
*East Village* 1994  
No.19  
1994  
Gelatin silver print  
150 x 100cm  
Edition of 15+ 2APs

Right:  
Han Lei  
*Luochuan, Shanbei,*  
1989  
1989  
Gelatin 61 x 50.8cm  
(Edition of 20)