

The Visualization of Destruction: About Jiang Pengyi's Photography

by Gu Zheng

It would not be a stretch to say that Jiang Pengyi nurses a deep fear about the modern city and pessimism about modern living. His *All Back to Dust* (2006-2007) series foretells the inevitable and irreversible fate of the city crumbling into ruins. Through the creation of this series, he looked for random piles of junk in everyday life and captured them in digital images. With digital manipulation, he imposed images of urban architectures (like rows of windows and air-conditioners on the exterior walls of buildings) onto piles of junk. In various shapes and sizes, these piles of junk are transformed into urban architectures (mostly skyscrapers). However, these architectures do not stand tall as the skyscrapers do in different cities around the world, but collapse onto one another in ruins that lay beyond redemption. In Jiang's meticulous digital patchwork, these original images of junk are transfigured into final images of ruins. Apparently, this series of images also reminds one of tombstones surrounded by weed. With this creative method, Jiang is trying to say that all human efforts in advancing their lives and civilization will eventually end in ruins and return to dust. On this level, the work embodies a nihilistic interpretation that is implied in its title. However, we can only see the true form of the "return to dust" in these tangible images. The skyscrapers symbolize the craze for eminence and extravagance, which takes on the form of mindless pursuit of height and expansion. This is what Jiang seeks to remind us through the notion of "all back to dust", and it reflects his underlying sense of helplessness or even nihilism towards human survival and civilization. He could only sit in his studio to create these digital, final images of ruins that are their own requiems.

Jiang takes his reflections on modern city and city life to another level in *Unregistered City* (2008-2010). The word "unregistered" may be interpreted as unprecedented, or it may refer to a birth without registration. The "unregistered city" is a result of the unison of daily life and fantasy, and yet it makes a more truthful prophecy of the ultimate course of civilization. For the creation of this series, Jiang searched around demolition sites and shot images of ruins, some of which were indoor or partial glimpses. He then digitally imposed images of urban architectures onto the top of and amid the ruins. The urban architectures are surrounded by ruins and junk (such as an abandoned bathtub), becoming part of the ruins. While they remain distinguishable in appearance from the surrounding ruins, they will undoubtedly be merged with the ruins in the future. Besides placing urban skyscrapers amid the ruins, Jiang uses the aerial view to guide his audience to examine the relationship between ruins and

skyscrapers, highways and other architectures. He places these fundamental infrastructures to human activity at a blind corner, where they become companions to all kinds of garbage. In the midst of wastelands, these infrastructures seem to have morphed into secretion in their new existence. All this depicts the doomsday when all vitality and resources are depleted; it portrays the exhaustion of urban energy and the annihilation of the city. We cannot help but come to a certain conclusion that ruins are the fate of the city. Of course, this is a utopia on another level, though it is one that does not stir our nostalgia for our homeland. Jiang creates an image of the city that has never existed and merges it with ruins that comes from reality. It presents a new image of the modern city and civilization. This image of ruins is the final picture of urban civilization, as it points to the reflection on urban civilization.

These two related series by Jiang foretell the ending of the civilization of skyscrapers. As the final picture of civilization, the image of ruins signifies the future of the city and modern civilization, and it denotes Jiang's critical stance on urbanization. On a certain level, it is beyond human will how the city and civilization will end. Each of the major civilizations had its glorious eras of urban civilization, and each was buried in itself in the end.

Some of the fruits of human activity and social realization, as well as mental and material endeavors will always emerge in the form of archaeological sites, artifacts and historic sites. They are proof and testimony to past human activity and social realization, while they become subjects of remembrance and memorials. For creating *The Private Goods Belonged to Somebody* (2008), Jiang retrieved abandoned objects of former residents at demolition sites. He delineated the objects with the use of still photography, giving them a distinctive image that is both gloomy and bright. These photos appear to unearth and expose private objects that could never be seen in the past, and the photographic act reveals the viewer's curiosity. Such curiosity is often fulfilled through unearthing, which means exposure. The act of "covering" is opposite to that of "discovering". In this context, the act of unearthing or exposure is contrary to that of covering: it is a necessary process in viewing another, as it is an excuse for the involvement of photography. Such delineation of remains is also a way of imagining humanity and human activity, while the anonymity of objects ensures an unbounded imagination. The concern or even passion for useless objects compels us to take an interest in the objects, and in the stories about human and fate that are embodied in these objects.

To an extent, *The Private Goods Belonged to Somebody* reveals Jiang's curiosity about human life. What I think is more important here is that it shows his affirmation of the relationship between material and memory. As objects are carriers of human memory, they naturally become subjects of remembrance and memorials. Through his photographic perspective, Jiang affirms the existence of these micro installations of ruins, which are involuntary creations of the power-crazed and capitalist development. Jiang delineates them as still objects, whose final image remains that of destruction.

In *Everything Illuminates* (2012), Jiang furthers the creative method established in *The Private Goods Belonged to Somebody*, where the mystique of autonomous objects is revealed in delicate depiction. He poured liquid wax mixed with fluorescent powder onto different objects, and let the faint fluorescence trace the objects' forms on film over time. Through the passage of time, these objects slowly take on their new forms on film. Covered in fluorescent powder, these objects emit individual signals from their uncommon glow, as they emerge in a bewitching existence. Set against a dim backdrop, the existence of these objects seems especially peculiar as it is illumined by their glow. These objects light up the surroundings with their glow, which segregates their presence from the surroundings. This highlights the autonomous existence of the objects.

The chandelier may be the most important object for Jiang in this series. Beyond the grandeur of its form, the chandelier may be a metaphor for Jiang. While hanging is a normal state for the chandelier, the object is burdened by its own potential energy, an innate force that causes its fall. Jiang creates this sense of unease and anxiety from hanging through grandeur and splendor. Finally, he creates and conveys the inevitability of destruction with the image of a broken chandelier on the floor. When one looks at the photo of the hanging chandelier and that of the broken chandelier side by side, one sees the greater allure of the latter form. The chandelier lies on the floor like a skirt of glitters, as its image shimmers with beauty. From symmetrical grace to asymmetrical elegance, we witness a transformation that is not only aesthetic but also mental and spiritual. What is intriguing here is that the chandelier retains its endless glow despite being broken. This may be a visual clue that calls for deeper reflection. While destruction is often linked to darkness, the faint yet insistent glow of the chandelier may symbolize rebirth rather than destruction. Physics cannot take away this strong sense of existence and will. This may be what Jiang wants to share with his audience.

For his latest series, *The Suspended Moment* (2013), Jiang photographed the cracks that had been caused by strikes against the surface of ice, and the reflection of light and shadow that produced complex and dazzling visuals. Ice is the solid form of water. It is also a transmission medium of light, as it turns any light passing through the medium of ice (water) into a visible substance. Illumined through the photographer's lens, this splendored reflection comes from the submersion and cohesion of some kind of spiritual light. It is also the shimmer and glory from fragmentation, fracture and crumbling (disintegration). It is the light that is frozen twice: first in ice, then again on Jiang's film. Jiang pursues a visual sublimation that is personal and spiritual; he realizes it by giving visibility to the existence, trails and traces of light, and to the scripts of light through his own depiction of light.

Jiang, who was born in 1977, has mainly worked in photography and video. In terms of techniques and materials, he has actively explored the different charms and possibilities of digital photography and film

photography in his practice. As digital photography is ever blooming today, it is hard to predict what kind of choices Jiang will make between the two kinds of photography in the future. A return to film photography is not out of question. Be it digital photography or film photography, I think the question comes down to techniques and materials for Jiang, as he considers the appropriate texture for conveying his feeling and mental state. A seemingly omnipotent medium, digital photography offers a kind of possibility for one to structure an image to fit one's imagination. With traditional photography, the question is how to overcome the limits of the medium to realize one's mental picture, while taking the characteristics of the subject and the medium into consideration. Perhaps the constant shift between these two options will bring greater reward for Jiang in his photographic practice.

Coming back to the aforementioned series, we see how everything in Jiang's works alludes to destruction, ruination and disintegration. Can we believe that Jiang has a certain desire to visualize destruction? Maybe this is the subject in Jiang's mind that he wants to explore the most?

About Gu Zheng

Born in Shanghai in 1959, he lives and works in Shanghai. He is currently a Professor of Journalism at Fudan University. He is a scholar of the history of photography, photography critic and curator.