

Jonathan Goodman

Mo Yi at Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing

July 3–August 20, 2010



Opening reception of Mo Yi: Me and My Surroundings—80, 90, 2000, June 19, 2010 (artist second to right). Courtesy of Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

Mo Yi, a mid-career artist living in Beijing, has taken that city as the centre of his focus for thirty years now. His show at the Three Shadows Photography Centre, entitled *Me in My Surroundings—80, 90, 2000*, looks at both Beijing and Tianjian from an engaged point of view. Consisting of black-and-white photographs, the images are installed on the walls in the Three Shadows space as well on tables and beds. The overall effect is somewhat museum-like, as if the artist had decided to preserve for us the physical artifacts, however simple they may be, of city culture itself. Mo Yi knows full well that he is recording the remnants of continuity in urban conditions that are changing with a rapidity that boggles the mind. As he says,

In nearly thirty years of creation, I have always confronted the big city. I definitely have an emotional tie to the city because there is not another example of such a large and varied body of work created over such a long period in Chinese photography.¹

Like other artists of his generation, Mo Yi has seen the physical changes of a great metropolis utterly transform his experience of the urban. His images not only record the demolition and reconstruction of Tianjin and Beijing, they also express one individual's unwavering affection for these two cities during a time when, as he says, he focused on "the moment that China began to reform its political system and to urbanize."

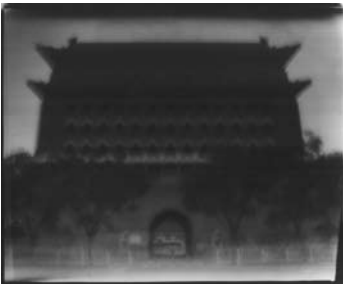
China's urban transformation has not been subtle, and more than a few artists' recently built studios have been destroyed by government decree. The *hutong* are mostly gone; those that remain are kept for tourists as quaint reminders of China's past. Even so, Mo Yi has kept his finger on the pulse of his chosen cities and understands that their alterations reflect change in the politics of the country. Looking at the show, with its highly similar bed frames, sequentially numbered by the manufacturer's that made them, one has the sense that Mo Yi is pointing to the conventions of a formerly communal China. At the same time, the bed frames signify the time during which Mo Yi came of age, both as a person and as an artist. They lend historical specificity to the installation. In regard to stylistic integrity, the roughness of the prints' imagery and, to some extent, their print quality declares that he prefers honesty over finish. Many of the images include Mo Yi himself, and the consistency of his presence suggests that it is he and not the city that is stable. His generation, which includes such celebrated artists as Xu Bing, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Zhang Huan, has demonstrated a technical and imaginative prowess fully in keeping with its outsized ambition. But Mo Yi has taken a different path, one that is more aligned with a subtle critique of Chinese society rather than an attempt to mythologize its culture. His project is vast and demands that viewers contemplate a vision of change in China's major urban centres.



Mo Yi, *Street Face No. 1*, 1988–1990, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

It is an undertaking, then, of unusual breadth and insight, and, in spite of Mo Yi's modesty as a person, it does not lack its own brand of ambition. As I moved in and around the images, I sensed a resonance of Robert Frank, who also unflinchingly documented society in his famous project *The Americans*. Although Mo Yi is far removed both in time and geography from the Beat generation, his photographs look as if he could have been part of it. Long-haired and bearded, he has a place among his generation

of disaffected intellectuals, many of whom have been intent on witnessing and recording the troubling inequalities of their society. His series from the late 1980s entitled *Street Face* focused on capturing groups of people, unposed, as they make their way through city streets. The mood of these photographs, similar to the mood in his later works, is heavy with a solemnity born of idiosyncratic witness. One might argue that the *gravitas* of Mo Yi's imagery stems from the roots of his own personality; however, the pictures do in fact demonstrate the anomie of living in an authoritarian, one-party system.



Mo Yi never describes his photographs as criticizing the social limitations within which he lives. Instead, the images speak for themselves: there is a recent view from 2008 of the entrance to Beijing's Forbidden City, *My Illusory Beijing No. 6, Qianmen*, shot in soft focus. The small passageway

Mo Yi, *My Illusory Beijing No. 6, Qianmen*, 2008, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

leading through to a monumental court building emphasizes the vastness of the court in dynastic times, as well as its impersonal grandeur. But the atmosphere is particularly inhospitable, with the soft focus conveying an air of unidentifiable but palpable menace. Mo Yi is excellent at communicating a mood, but he refuses to particularize it in a political sense. Yet it is difficult for viewers to ignore the photographer's suggestion of alienation. There is another picture of him from 1997 standing in a narrow corridor between two buildings in Tianjin, *Me in My Surroundings (Tianjin) No. 4*, that projects a sense of the claustrophobic; the walls are dark with shadow, while behind his figure the corridor opens to light. He looks unperturbed, despite the narrow enclosure and dark surroundings. There is just enough light to reveal his forehead, cheeks, and nose; his grave demeanor matches the atmosphere of the photo. Mo Yi himself seems fixated on a point behind the viewer, as if witnessing something beyond the reach of the audience. In this image it is, I think, not too far-fetched to imagine the artist in a kind of prison, caught up by a vision of society that suspects creative idiosyncrasy to be a mask for social deviance.



Mo Yi, *Me in My Surroundings (Tianjin) No. 4*, 1997, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

Perhaps it makes most sense to see Mo Yi's career as an extended study in integrity—he has brilliantly investigated both the image and the circumstances that surround it. Idiosyncrasy of manner and vision remains a powerful way of evading the depredations of the state. Whether or not China is totalitarian is almost beside the point; Mo Yi's imagery shows us that the problems of individual existence remain tied to one's surroundings and that political ideology remains a topic best investigated in ways that express the integrity of the individual. We know that Mo Yi is old enough to have experienced the Cultural Revolution and the tragedy of Tian'anmen Square. Those experiences politicize his art even though he has made no work that overtly comments on the two events. While it is mistaken to see politics alone underscoring Mo Yi's photos, there remains a charged undercurrent that ties together his work from different decades and suggests that the outward cohesiveness of Chinese society is more complex, and more troubled, than it at first appears. Mo Yi's achievement is his portrayal of the vulnerabilities of personal life through the seemingly objective recording by his camera lens. His pictures of the urban landscape evoke loss without directly doing so. Art isn't the only means for dissent, but it is an important outlet for truths that many would prefer to keep hidden away.

The relationship of art to politics in totalitarian societies has always been difficult—it is hard to make convincing art that supports an abstract, yet all powerful state. It is perhaps easier, although far more dangerous, to criticize the government directly. Mo Yi evades the thorny problems of direct rebelliousness by preferring to *imply* his dissent. This of course makes good practical sense in a country where criticism of the government is often harshly punished. The strength of Mo Yi's art derives from his willingness to see things as they are, rather than as they should be. Indeed, the prints, which are sometimes hard to read because of their visual complexity, proclaim the artist's political and creative independence by emphasizing a dissident view that maintains its integrity through an unrefined presentation. The unusual installation of the prints—on chairs and beds—underscores the independence of his vision in this show. Even so, it proves hard to say just exactly how he conveys his critical perspective on the social processes he captures on film. Calling his photos allegorical or symbolic doesn't work. Instead of symbolizing experience, his photos *embody* experience—hence their uncanny ability to affect an audience by emphasizing the experience the images convey as much as their formal expressiveness.

In a way, Mo Yi's art represents a triumph of pure content. By refusing the deliberately beautiful in favour of the rawness of the real, he shows us how to navigate a path of independence at a time when the government is cracking down on protests or demonstrations of dissidence. The idea of witnessing has always been a strength of courageous artists—in photography especially. Mo Yi's particular achievement has been to resist cultural uniformity in ways that escape the state's scrutiny. The depth of experience his images suggest turns on the notion that even celebrated icons like the Forbidden City carry with them a weight that is culturally clichéd, creating a false experience about life in China. Mo Yi pushes in favour of honesty when conveying cultural icons; he overemphasizes very little. For example, the image of the CCTV television building is curiously out of focus,

with other images imposed upon it that prove difficult to visually register—surely this is an ironic (if unconscious) comment on the vague truisms of government media.



Mo Yi, *My Illusory Beijing* No. 4, 2008, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.



The series *Images Through a Dog's Mind* (1995) portrays a city filled with bicycles before Tianjin transformed itself into the modern city it has become. No. 8 of this series shows a man, dressed in a hat and coat, directing traffic. In front of him stand more than a few people on

Mo Yi, *Images Through a Dog's Mind* No. 8, 1995, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

bicycles, still the main means of transportation at the time. The overall look of the image is grim; it is hard not to read it as a comment on the more or less inevitable alienation of urban life. The lack of colour in the photograph intensifies the feeling that it portrays the internal uncertainty one often feels while experiencing a city's social terrain. The intensity of Mo Yi's art results from the intensity of Tianjin itself, at a time when the gloss of capitalism had not yet set in. Perhaps a reason one is melancholically affected by his art is that the pictures are all in black and white, a format usually employed for documentary work. To document reality in China is to record its quality of life, both physical and spiritual. Mo Yi does this extremely well.

Mo Yi, *My Illusory City No. 11*, 1987, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.



Street Face No. 1 (1989), another photograph taken in Tianjin, shows three young men wearing winter overcoats as they stand in the middle of a street. The faces of two of the men can be seen; the third one looks off to the side. The man in the middle seems

particularly disaffected; his hip haircut frames a face that looks bored or frustrated. Once again, the image slyly eludes direct political commentary, yet one senses that not all is right. It proves that the job of the critic is to open up the implied communication of the photographer; one reason criticism remains weak in China is because it is difficult to be truthful about the artist's alienation from the state. Because Mo Yi's documentation of society does not include images specifically associated with the Chinese government, it isn't easy to make the case for a deliberate witnessing of repression. The viewer has to rely on intuition to perceive it as that.

Mo Yi, *Dancing Streets No. 1*, 1989, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.



Some of the artist's most powerful images regarding the rebuilding of Tianjin occur in scenes that overlap each other within individual photos resulting in a kind of visual confusion. Technically, the images are accomplished notwithstanding their rough treatment; they feel coherent despite the multiple perspectives and reflections from glass within separate images. *My Illusory City No. 11* is a composite of four separate scenes: that of a glass ceiling, an outdoor shot of a crowd, a picture of the front of a building, and a blank image in white that is very hard to visually discern. The

blank image takes up the lower right quadrant, cutting into and obscuring the other three images that comprise the photo. The word "illusory" in the title seems key to the photograph. This particular photograph by Mo Yi is both real and surreal, and the illusion created by the artist reflects the reality of the city itself (one is reminded of T. S. Eliot's phrase "unreal city" in *The Wasteland*). Mo Yi is not so much a flâneur as he is a stalker of meaning, finding truth in the depths of the city's transformed architecture and urban debris. A later image, from 2008, shows a man, likely the artist himself, standing in front of what looks like an office building. The man appears to be transparent—one can see the building through his body—and the windows once more create numerous reflected surfaces. It is a melancholic and poetic transmission of the quality of city life, intuitive but correct in its anonymity and isolation.

The city of Tianjin is not without its erotic charms. *Dancing Streets No. 1* (1998) takes a close look at the shapely legs of a young woman in stockings; the view continues up to her mid-thigh before her skirt stops the probing eye of the camera (and audience). As a picture, it is both lyrical and sexual, and



somehow symbolizes the new China that was emerging at the time. Usually, Mo Yi's photographs are only suggestive of an attitude towards Chinese mores; but this image is direct, it is erotic without being crass. Another photograph, harsher in its realism, is *Tossing Bus China No. 6* (1989). Two people are standing in a bus and facing the camera; one has partially covered his eyes with his hands, while the other, wearing sunglasses, looks back at Mo Yi. The image is dark, even though there is light coming in through the windows of the bus. Like many of Mo Yi's images, this work shows us a gritty urban scenario, one without charm or beauty. The movement back and forth between the city's infrequent moments of transcendence and its more frequent rough reality remains central to Mo Yi's methodology. Indeed, he finds inspiration in communicating the complicated architecture and social structure of major cities and, in turn, of China.

Mo Yi, *Tossing Bus China 1989 No. 6*, 1989, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

Mo Yi's images demand serious consideration. His work shows us that while Beijing and Tianjin may well lack hope in a political sense, the act of capturing their realities demonstrates courage. Mo Yi is both passive witness and active participant in these two cities whose size, ambition, and energies are well on their way to becoming epic—if they are not so already. In the stark lyricism of his imagery, we find a realism that is affecting because it is true to the city and the spirit of the time. If he needs to, Mo Yi can effectively deny that his art is a treatise on politics; as with all art, interpretations of it can be varied. In a time when political fundamentalism on both the left and the right seems to be taking over much of the world, the artist's photographs argue for a realism that is based on actual observations. To see Mo Yi's art as a critique of China's sociopolitical certainties requires an imagination that can be read by his intuitive signs of distress, a stance that is different from interpreting according to an explicit agenda. Mo Yi's photographs make a strong case for individual independence and integrity. One can't ask for more in art.

Notes

¹ All quotes are from the artist's statement in the exhibition press release.