
Zhang Deli 张德丽

Emergent artist **Zhang Deli** intends to provoke audiences with insightful and meditative creations incorporating found archival negatives, photographic plates and diverse visual applications. Through these alternative techniques she displays an intelligent examination of the role of the image, the psychological connotations of the veracity of past and present photographic imagery and processes and our reliance on the visual message while deliberating the "truth" of the medium. Zhang's experimental approach yields complexity rather than simplification and pushes frontiers instead of succumbing to nostalgia and the romanticization of antiquity.

In *Where the Beauty Stays* (2006), the artist presents us with the rediscovery of the pinhole camera, perhaps the most primitive instrument since the advent of photography. Elderly women are frozen in time dressed in only their underwear: the question of time, preconceptions of beauty, the portrayal of feminine gender and the development and growth of the photographic medium itself are therein challenged. In an age of visual culture and in an urban sphere where at any moment we are consciously or subconsciously bombarded with the extreme beauty of young female models celebrating our consumerist youth culture and fascination with aesthetic and sexually charged imagery, Zhang confronts us with the polar opposite.

Grain, opaque and obscure details and the female form are subjected to multiple layering techniques, "Where the beauty stays" is how Barthes in his associative logic of the photographic moment reflected on photography versus death. Time's passage demands the fading of beauty, history influences our changing perceptions of what constitutes the beauty myth, and once heraldic technological advent and innovation appears defunct, the irrelevant and ridiculous aspect of our past generation's vanity is exposed. Fascination and voyeurism, doubtlessly aspects of the human condition, are amplified as the artist turns the tables in this series. One asks not what is beauty, but where is beauty? In what instance, what moment of change or observation is it found? For Barthes, this suggests that photography creates the conditions for a profound loss of meaning, an absence in which referentiality is removed although we still understand what we see.

In contrast, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories on photography explain a moment of perception that exceeds the normal boundaries of the everyday. This excess is simultaneously an encounter with the self and with history. It moves the activity of viewing from a transparent relationship of meaning and expression to a level in which meaning seems to be there without the presence of subjectivity. It is as if the photograph brings out the unconscious, a representation of the unconscious and at the same time denies both of these relations of meaning.

Zhang has undoubtedly redoubled the examination of these two contrastive theories, the loss of meaning is observed in a relational sense, yet, by the incorporation of more sublime elements rather than a clearly defined "studium" and "punctum", she delivers a visual experience which is highly evocative, more akin to a Lacanian analysis of the medium.

As a precept to later experiments where she has sought to redefine and reexamine the parameters of the photographic medium, she once again employs the pinhole

technique, yet this time to display the hollowness of an 8 sqm room. Emptiness is where we had sought to find an evolution upon the myth of beauty.

Zhang has an evident neo-Dadaist inspiration and her work breathes life into her countless found negatives and footage from across China. In collaboration with the **island6Lab** she was able to further develop and intuit the importance of experimentation with electronic media and her personal quest in photography. The random and found were recreated as original experiments in new technology, computer graphics, animation and video relay and have brought an additional dimension for the artist to consider in her address of the movement of photographic practice, technology and time.

In an era of immediacy, urgency and digital predominance of the photographic milieu, her work is a stimulating and refreshing recreation of the old, the disused and rather poignant address of our obsession with visual mediums and the hyper-acceleration of our society and cultural fabric.

R A Suri - 08.04.2008