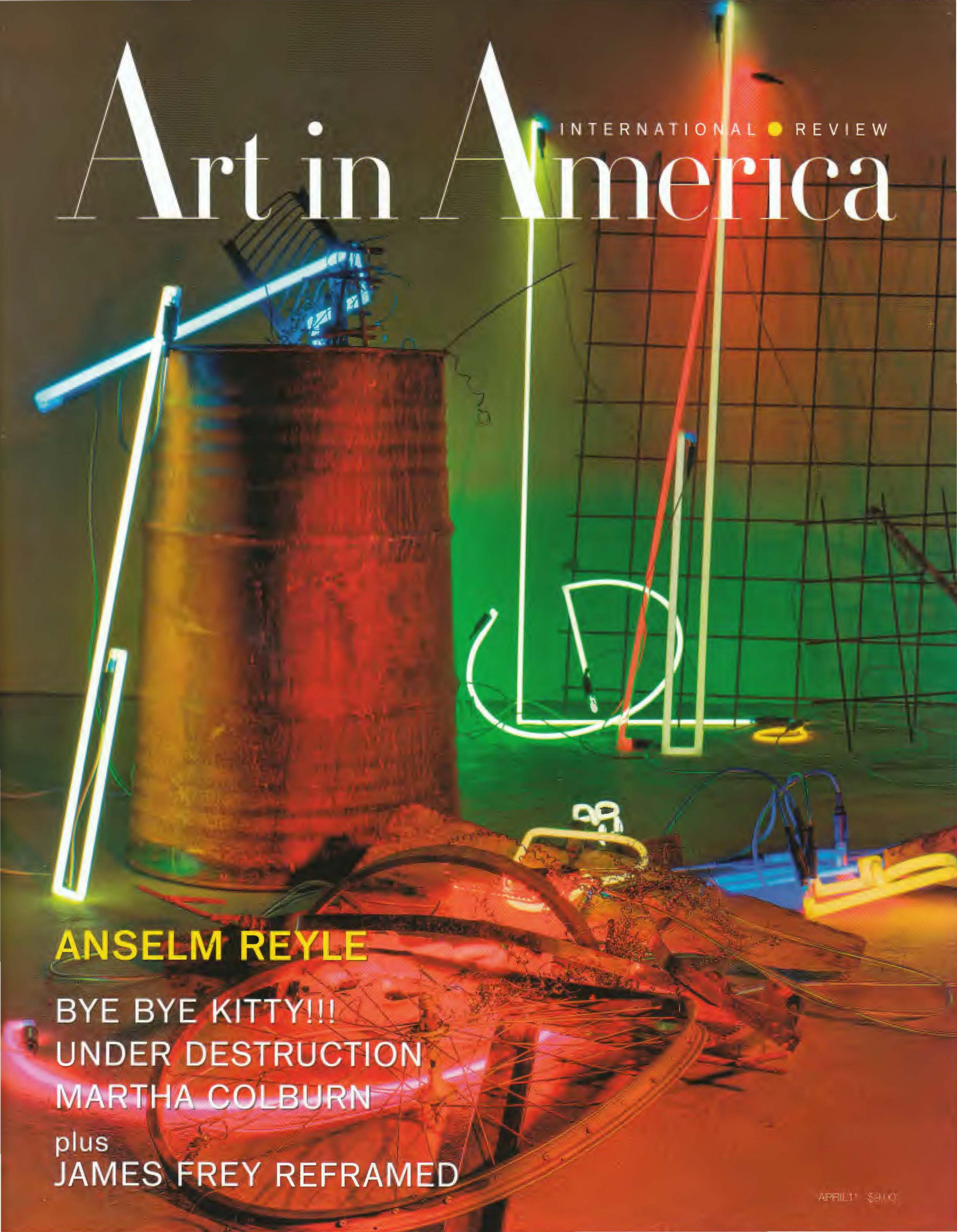

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

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POST-MAO PHOTO LESSONS

BY RICHARD VINE

Wang Qingsong: *Follow Me*, 2003, chromogenic print, 47¼ by 118⅛ inches. Courtesy the artist.

In four U.S. shows, Chinese photographers have combined the devices of old-style propaganda and new-era advertising to create previously undreamed of visions.

WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH in the People's Republic of China? Perhaps nowhere on earth has the naive belief that the camera provides an indexical transcript of the visual world been more consistently subverted. The medium was introduced into imperial China in the mid-19th century largely by exoticizing and/or taxonomy-minded Westerners who prompted some of the same approaches in local practitioners. And just as the Pictorialists imposed "painterly" effects on early photography in the West, many Chinese artists like

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Photography from the New China," at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, through Apr. 24; "Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide," at the International Center of Photography, New York, through May 8; "Me, Myself and I: Chi Peng, Photoworks 2003-2010," at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands, through Sept. 25; and the Chaochangdi PhotoSpring festival, Beijing, Apr. 23-May 31.

Lang Jingshan (1892-1995) brought the sensibility and formal conventions of Eastern brush-and-ink composition to their mechanical picture-taking.

Relatively "straight" photojournalism also emerged, of course, but only to be utterly compromised for three decades by propaganda-making under the 1949-76 Maoist regime. (Artist Zhang Dali, b. 1964, has shown how news photos were politically "corrected" in his 2005-06 installation *A Second History*, which matches scores of published images with their undoctored originals.) After China reopened following the death of Mao, some art photographers adopted a documentary method, starkly recording social conditions such as—in the case of Yuan Dongping (b. 1956)—the treatment of mental patients in China's asylums. But following the great onslaught of advertising and pop imagery that swept into China during the 1980s, many artists began to look for ways to make photographs that not only reflect the sudden, wrenching changes the country is undergoing but also disclose the nature of their own pictorial methods. Having, in a sense, never been exposed to imagery that was not rhetorical, they turned with increasing frequency to the techniques of scene-staging and digital manipulation—in effect, being honest (as no Party official or crony-capitalist can) by freely revealing the artifice of their inventions.

This post-Mao arc can be traced in the selections for "Photography from the New China," now at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The 46 works by eight well-established names, presented by senior curator Judith Keller, range from devastating studies by Song Yongping (b. 1961) capturing the last years of his aging parents to bold performance images by Zhang Huang (b. 1965) to elaborate nude tableaux vivants, based on mythology and Peking opera, by Liu Zheng (b. 1969). Together the images, though too obviously a safe roundup of "must have" works (half of them newly acquired by the Getty), reinforce the implications of the much more adventuresome—and still critically unsurpassed—"Between Past and Future," the traveling 60-artist survey organized in 2004 by University of Chicago professor Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, curator of the International Center of Photography, New York. Indeed, any informed overview of contemporary Chinese photography will confirm that work in the PRC, both collectively and individually, has come to exemplify one of the major critical principles of postmodern thought: that all truth is interpretive.

AMONG THE CHINESE photographers showing in New York this season, the most representative of this shift from documentation to artifice is Cui Xiuwen. Born in the notoriously frigid northeastern city of Harbin in 1970, she attained an MFA in oil painting at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in 1996 and first came to prominence in 2000 with the video *Ladies' Room*. Shot surreptitiously in the women's bathroom of a swank Beijing nightclub, the

Above, Liu Zheng: *The Web Cave*, 1997, printed 2005, gelatin silver print, 14⅝ inches square. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Right, Song Yongping: *Passage 5*, from the series "My Parents," 1998-2001, gelatin silver print, 15⅞ by 11⅞ inches. Getty Museum.

Opposite, Cui Xiuwen: *Existential Emptiness No. 4*, 2009, C-print, 69⅜ by 118⅛ inches. Courtesy Eli Klein Fine Art.

FORMALLY INCOMPATIBLE APPROACHES ABOUND WITHIN CHINA, RANGING FROM I-AM-A-CAMERA DOCUMENTATION TO ELABORATE TABLEAUX VIVANTS AND ELECTRONICALLY ALTERED IMAGES.

piece captures young women (some of them sex workers) trading comments and fixing their hair, makeup and clothing in a large wall mirror. Included in Cui's recent show at Eli Klein Fine Art, New York, was *Underground* (2002), an oblique spy video centered on a female subway rider who, oblivious in her compulsion, repeatedly licks, bites and tears small bits of skin from her lips.

That kind of subtle anxiety has also pervaded Cui's more stylized photographic work, from her 2001 series showing a pair of nude, roughly five-year-old children (he horsing around boyishly, she assuming startlingly provocative poses) to her many digitally manipulated images of uniformed schoolgirls, blank-faced and miniskirted young ladies and, in 2006, a lone pregnant woman—all recalling the artist's youthful clothing and hairstyles and all visually overwhelming their environs through either their group numbers or their disproportionate individual size. (In one instance, a girl lying in the foreground dwarfs the entrance to the Forbidden City behind her.) Since 2000, no men have appeared in Cui's photographic world: a pointedly ironic scenario, given the ongoing dominance of males in China's business, political and artistic circles.

In "Existential Emptiness" (2009), the new series shown at Eli Klein, the artist's customary alter ego (as the gallery sheet dubs her) is accompanied by a life-size twin doll, derived from the jointed Bunraku theater puppets Cui saw in Japan. (For Western viewers, the device recalls the eerie fetish *poupées* of Oskar Kokoschka and Hans Bellmer.) Cui's surrogate self now has a surrogate self. The two female figures, placed digitally in the snowy fields of northern China, variously stare eye-to-eye across distances, walk toward or away from each other, engage in dragging or back-carrying or crawling. Burdened though she is by the doll, the live figure (herself a clone of the artist) seems unable to live without it. The series is a homecoming, both to a geographical place and to the bleak psychic domain that lies at the core of Cui's art.

In conversation, the artist is remarkably articulate about her current theme. Western existential emptiness, she explains, is a void to be dreaded, a personal abyss to be filled, however possible, in a bid to generate meaning where none otherwise exists. But in many Eastern spiritual traditions, emptiness is, ideally, something that one passes through—journeying from a mindless immersion in the physical world to a meditative detachment and finally back to a full acknowledgment of the mundane, viewed now from a higher plane of consciousness.[1] As the '60s troubadour Donovan sang, borrowing a venerable Buddhist adage: "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." Thus, in "Existential Emptiness," Cui's

HAVING NEVER BEEN EXPOSED TO IMAGERY THAT WAS NOT RHETORICAL, POST-MAO PHOTOGRAPHERS TURNED WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY TO THE TECHNIQUES OF SCENE-STAGING AND DIGITAL MANIPULATION.

eye has returned to particulars—trees, snowdrifts, a girl's necktie, the pleats of a skirt—each simultaneously itself and an emblem of something beyond.

PACE/MACGILL RECENTLY featured nine new large-scale works by Hai Bo (b. 1962), who made his reputation a decade ago by reconstituting portraits from the Cultural Revolution era. He photographed the same individuals, or the same group configurations, some 30 years later and juxtaposed the two images so as to highlight not simply the social changes signaled by differences in attire and comportment but, more poignantly, the ravages of aging and death (its presence evoked by empty chairs or blank intervals in the ranks of the survivors). Five such pieces are in the Getty show. But the images shown at Pace, all printed on subtly textured paper, are distinctly different in both technique and effect. Far from documentary, they have the compositional balance and Berensonian "tactile values" of Western portraiture—perhaps a vestige of Hai's MFA studies in printmaking at CAFA.

To create the pictures (the show's accompanying brochure informs us), Hai returned to his native city of Changchun in the remote northeastern province of Jilin. There and in the surrounding countryside, he caught residents milling in the courtyard of a public shelter for the aged (*Smoke*, 2009) or, in the other eight images on view, photographed various deftly posed individuals. In *Old Man* (2009), an 80-year-old neighbor stands in a woods with his forehead pressed against a tree, as though at once resisting and wordlessly absorbing the fatal message of nature. *Passing Traveler* (2008) features a lone man walking on a dirt road through wintry fields, the pathway seeming to rise behind him like a gradual ramp between heaven and earth. Clearly we are in the realm of memento mori, as made explicit in a pair of "Shadow" pho-