

Xing Danwen  
Interview

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## Interview

### Xing Danwen

The Chinese photographer tells **Bourree Lam** why, in the city, pain is so close to pleasure

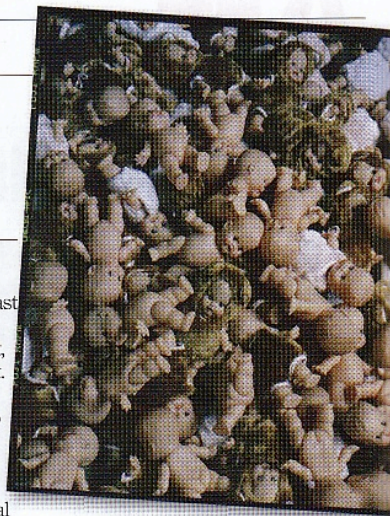
Xing Danwen's photography should be pretty relatable to city-slicker Hongkongers. She captures the contrast between her concept of reality and the often cold city urban environment, finding subjects to reflect this conflict. For her first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, she will show two of her photo series: *DUPLICATION*, a series of doll heads, and *Urban Fiction*, tiny model homes made to look real. Both criticise the homogenous modern ideal aesthetic through photography.

#### Why did you choose photography as a medium?

It's really a coincidence, but for me I think the moment was when I saw a picture from a photo magazine published in China a long time ago. I like the language of the medium, it's very different from what I was doing – painting. Mechanically, photography is about how you create images through a lens, and somehow it's reflecting reality. But then after [you take the picture], what is reality is not a question.

#### How did the three series – *disCONNEXION*, *DUPLICATION*, and *Urban Fiction*, start?

I did *DUPLICATION* in 2003, at that time I had just returned from New York and lived in Beijing again. The three works reflect my interest into the change of the society and the contemporary urban environment [in China]. I have been very attracted to the difference of what I feel about the urban living environment for human beings. Because I started to travel abroad quite early compared with my generation – the beginning of the 1990s – everything changed in front of me. I face so many questions every day created by the reality and myself – that's how I came to what I'm doing now. In 2002, when I returned to Beijing, it was an intense time of change. I see all this changing inside this country, and it's really based on Western practice. People are looking forward to the future and struggling with tradition. For *DUPLICATION*, I was really talking about mass production and the dominance



**Dead dolls** The dark side of development

of the Western aesthetic. I was in this poor factory using their toy parts to create a big mountain of repetitive images.

#### "I want to show the helplessness and sadness in this happiness"

#### Is your work purposefully critical of these changes?

I want to show the helplessness and sadness in this happiness. We all move into a better apartment, but how do you feel living in your better life? This is always a question and I feel that the modern society has its common disease everywhere, especially in cities. Beijing is not that different from New York, and all the major cities have the problem of isolation.

#### Do you like living in the city despite all these things?

Honestly, I think I'm really a city person. I like nature, landscapes – it makes me feel at ease and relaxed, but it doesn't stimulate my mind. I like this kind of pain [in the city].

#### Yet your work is also visually beautiful.

I'm interested to find the conflict in the fact and the illusion. It's very much like me – every day I'm stuck between reality and imagination. That's how us human beings work, between mind and matter.

In a Perfect World... opens at Ooi Botos Gallery Fri 27. 5 Gresson St, Wan Chai, 2527 9733, [www.ooibotos.com](http://www.ooibotos.com).

