

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition Xing Danwen: *Urban Fiction*  
May 6 to June 10, 2006

**Gallery TPW** photobasedart.ca

## Interview with Xing Danwen to Talk about Urban Fiction

By Britta Erickson

*Interview conducted by e-mail between February 27 and March 10, 2006.*

**Britta Erickson:** *You have said that the idea for your Urban Fiction series came to you in 2003. You had been travelling for a while, and realized that cities everywhere had a certain sameness due to the forces of globalization. This sameness is amplified in locations that cater to global travellers – such as airports and hotels – as well as being strongly manifested in other large-scale real estate developments. How did you happen upon the concept of expressing your thinking about sameness of place through photographs of real estate development maquettes, as you do in Urban Fiction?*

**Xing Danwen:** My interest in urban landscape has been growing in my mind for a very long time, especially after I started to travel around the world, living in New York for years and making frequent trips in Europe. It made me understand the modern city, how it looks, and how it functions in relation to people's lives and desires.

Actually, my earlier works *Scroll* and *Sleep Walking*, which I made during my New York period [August 1998 – March 2002], were about the city – between reality and memory, presence and past. Since I returned to China in 2002, I have been very excited and stimulated by the great changes happening in my own country. In 2002 and 2003, I created *disCONNEXION* and *DUPLICATION*, which both talk about our modernized life and society, including the negative aspects of these developments.

In the past few years, I have seen many photo-artists working on the subject of urbanization. Some of them have expressed their concepts well about how modernization and globalization have made cities similar everywhere, but mostly their work is based on straight shots of real cities, of very similar places. It makes me very conscious and alert that I should definitely not repeat the same, but instead create something new, fresh, different and original in my own way. It is very important. For a long time I was not ready, not finding my own language on this urban subject. Then, in late 2003, when I was travelling by train in Europe, suddenly a clear idea jumped into my mind: I wanted to do the complete opposite, starting from a fake landscape to talk about its reality. So that's the first stage of *Urban Fiction*, and I was extremely sure and excited with this breakthrough, as if I finally saw the bright blue sky after a heavy fog. My initial step was to devise an effective way to be able to use the actual real estate maquette. I realized that the city has changed and developed so much because living environments, individual spaces and quality of life are getting to be more within reach, meeting the standard human desire for happiness. Finally, from going to look at the maquettes, I also realized that the commercial world is controlling this fact: the real estate developers are cleverly leading people to find their desires in a dream space.

There always have been two pictures in my head: the past and the present. Given the circumstances of when and how I grew up, I could only imagine the modern city and its high-rises through film clips or magazine photographs – everything



Urban Fiction, image 4 from the series, 2004-2005, 84 X 67 inches



Urban Fiction, (detail) image 4 from the series, 2004-2005, 84 X 67 inches

seemed unreachable, distant, the image of the West. But suddenly I realized that today I am completely living my teenage dream of what life should be. The old picture of China is always lying behind the present as a background in my head. It makes a big contrast, and there's always the positive part and the negative side. When people who live in old, very crowded courtyard houses suddenly have to move to high-rise buildings, they feel happy to have a toilet, a kitchen and all the basic conveniences. At the same time, they are no longer living as a big family with their neighbours. In the new, massive residential buildings, people might never even bump into their neighbours in the elevator. People might have a bigger space to themselves – and yet feel very isolated and lonely in their heavenly cubes.

**BE:** *I am interested in the logistics of human relationships involved in photographing the maquettes. Do you tell the real estate developers why you wish to photograph their models? Are they generally cooperative? Are they intrigued by your project?*

**XD:** At the beginning, I did have some difficult times getting access to photograph the maquettes. The basic problems were two: First, if you are a member of the press, the real estate developer will be very skeptical about your intentions. This is because maquettes are designed to be very attractive and make you fantasize about your future life there, but they might not be accurate in terms of the final construction. So if I am a reporter they will worry about the possibility of trouble arising from the difference between the maquette and the final building. Second, if you approach them as a normal person, they might suspect you are engaged in industrial espionage to steal their ideas and strategies – competition is fierce. As I have had both the experience of being a journalist and the experience of being an “art student,” I know that I have to tailor my approach to the subject.

In order to get straight to the point, I decided to start with the most famous project, SOHO. With the help of an introduction letter from a friend who is well connected to the project's head, I got access: he explained my true intention, of wanting

to photograph their maquette for artistic purposes only. Since it was the first maquette, I did need the time and the freedom to experiment and shoot it as long as I needed in order to reach my goal through the camera. I didn't really know how it would work out because there are numerous possible aspects and visual results, etc. The first maquette was the key, and it took me about two months to photograph back and forth. The process is quite complicated because often a good shot doesn't mean a useful picture. The maquette shot is only a piece of footage, which has to suit my further idea developing within it. After two months, I got it. Since then, I just worked on getting access to more maquettes by showing them the SOHO shots and my artwork portfolio. In this way I succeeded with the first three maquettes. Gradually, it became increasingly easy as I only carried small prints of the completed maquette shots with me as I continued searching for more maquettes. As long as I didn't disturb their business, I always got the shots.

At the beginning, with the difficulty of access to the real estate maquette, I even thought maybe I should build a maquette by myself. After succeeding with more shots, I no longer continued with this thought because the real estate maquette is completely different from the maquette I would have built by myself. It has an essential difference. The real estate project is the real. A maquette built by me would be totally a personal design and fantasy of buildings and urban architecture landscape. At the same time, I realized that using the real estate maquette to represent reality perfectly matches my interest in playing with the space between fiction and reality, and between truth and illusion.

**BE:** *Technical aspects also interest me. What kind of camera do you use?*

**XD:** I am using a medium-format camera because I knew from the beginning that the final photographs would have to be big. Medium format gives me both flexibility and quality in consideration of the post-production in Urban Fiction. I choose fine-grain, low-speed film for shots of the maquette and its city environment. For the human figures I use a digital



Urban Fiction, *image 8 from the series*, 2004-2005, 84 X 67 inches



Urban Fiction, (*detail*) *image 8 from the series*, 2004-2005, 84 X 67 inches



camera, because it is more efficient to decide the action and the gesture. After digitizing the film and inserting the digital shots, I manipulate the many images and layers into a final piece using Photoshop effects and techniques.

**BE:** *Of course, real estate developers hope that potential buyers will project their fantasies onto the maquettes: if people cannot imagine living or working in the building, they will not commit to buying or renting space before the buildings are complete. To you, these miniature spaces invite all kinds of fantasy, which you enact and then insert into the sterile maquette photographs. At what stage in the process of creating each work in the Urban Fiction series do you determine which fantasy to enact within it?*

**XD:** I knew from the start that the maquette had to be more than just an architectural model, otherwise it would be boring and meaningless, not able to serve my concept. This is pure camera work but an essential step. I need to find the right way to demonstrate serious issues using a fake object.

Advertising functions to create fantasy and dreams. In order to track down the market, the real estate companies have a smart strategy and clear theme before they start building their projects. They also carefully choose the names which link to the target buyers for their projects, such as SOHO, Manhattan Garden, Australia Condo, IT Utopia and so on. These names are already full of fantasies, which easily lead your dreams and desires into the imaginative lifestyles within a second of your instinctive reaction.

Besides the maquettes, the real estate sales offices provide showrooms, so people can experience the apartment layouts for real. I have visited many showrooms because of *Urban Fiction*. Every time I would surprisingly discover that my imagination for life immediately got infected physically and emotionally by their designed spaces. Wandering around

inside a simple one-bedroom apartment, regular two- to three-bedroom flat, or 400-square-metre luxury suite with a giant 100-square-metre master bedroom, I almost can see what kind of person will live in this kind of space and what kind of life will be happening here. I also can guess the character's category and aesthetic surrounded by certain interior design and furniture styles. I am really amazed how your desire and imagination for life gets expanded when you find your favourite space; or completely the opposite. People believe better living conditions will bring more happiness and joy, but often they find more isolation and loneliness than ever inside the luxury cubes. All of these make me fantasize the reality, lead me into creating different characters and inventing their lives inside the spaces.

**BE:** *I think you must enjoy enacting the little dramas, which range from such mundane activities as shopping with a girlfriend or standing at the office window to more dramatic scenes like a murder or a car accident. Can you tell us a little bit about the process? Are you at all surprised that you can do this so well?*

**XD:** I find if I use myself instead of other people in the photographs, it can be more playful and interesting, and more convenient as well. Also, somehow it becomes more personal. I did paint many self-portraits in the past but I had never posed myself in my photographs. After the first time, I realized I am quite good at it, and it is a lot of fun and full of surprises, discovering my acting talent. But it is really not about me. I think of what could happen in normal daily life and whatever fantasies I can imagine according to the architectural space. Somehow I think our life is really like a soap opera. It can be very normal, repetitive and dull, but it also can be dramatic. Actions like accidentally killing a lover, or going to jump off the building to commit suicide or being in car accidents are rare, but at the same time still very possible. Actually I found that the little dramas add another layer to the playful method of the



Urban Fiction, *image 13 from the series*, 2004-2005, 86.4 X 67 inches



Urban Fiction, (*detail*) *image 13 from the series*, 2004-2005, 86.4 X 67 inches

work. They are a reverse play of the real to the fake, compared to the fake-to-real relationship of the maquette to actual architecture.

**BE:** *Your early photographic career is about people. I Am a Woman (1994–96), Born with the Cultural Revolution (1995) and Wo-men: A Personal Diary (1993–98), as well as your earlier work as a photojournalist, all succeed because you work well with people and are sensitive to emotional nuance. It seems that from the time you went to New York to work on your MFA at the School of Visual Arts (1998–2000), you turned away from representations of people. Does Urban Fiction indicate a resurgent interest in directly portraying the human factor?*

**XD:** It is true that all of my works in the past were about people, and directly captured people/figurative images. When I went to New York my work seems like it completely changed. Actually, I think I am very good at portraying people, but to continue my work in the same way I had before 1998 was a bit boring for me. I decided to change, but I have never changed my interest in people. Regarding the works I produced in New York, like *Scroll* and *Sleep Walking*, perhaps you almost don't see the figures visually but they are about people. To talk about the human subject indirectly without using the human figure is quite interesting, and also gives the viewer more space for imagination, and for interpreting the idea inside the work. With *Urban Fiction* I don't think I am returning to an interest in directly portraying people. Actually, at the beginning I thought that to shoot the architectural maquette alone was sufficient in terms of the concept between real and fake. Only later did I realize how human desire is related to the aesthetics and designed space, and I could see that *Urban Fiction* requires human dramas inside which adds one more layer about the game between the fake and the real. The way this work is portraying people is completely different from my work in the past. It really depends on the subject and its requirements.

**BE:** *Urban Fiction relates to your other recent series, disCONNEXION (2002–03) and DUPLICATION (2003), in that it connects the overwhelming economic growth of China with the human factor. disCONNEXION, for example,*

*beguiles the viewer through its close-up depictions of strangely beautiful piles of electronic waste awaiting recycling in south China, but then repels when the viewer stops to contemplate the human costs associated with low-tech e-waste recycling. Urban Fiction seemingly presents the cold face of urban development, but the tiny dramas surprise the viewer. In both, we are reminded that although globalization and urbanization are forces that dwarf the individual, it is the human factor that is important. Do you agree with this interpretation of your work?*

**XD:** I totally agree with your interpretation of my works. The dramatic change and development in China is very stimulating to me, and all my work is talking about people and urban life. I believe I will continue creating more projects in this wide range, but in different forms and media with different presentations of each idea. It is important being an artist to have fun, to be playful with creation and production, and to make the work challenging, different and fresh. In recent years almost all my work is produced in photography. It is a conscious decision because the special features of the photography medium make it the best choice for my recent projects, such as *disCONNEXION*, *DUPLICATION* and *Urban Fiction*. Choosing a medium really depends on what will best serve your idea. In fact, I don't mind at all the idea of using other media or multimedia if the project requires it. I will be happy to keep myself open and experimental.

#### About the Writer

Britta Erickson is an independent scholar and curator who has been focusing on contemporary Chinese art for over 15 years. She lives in California, where she has taught at Stanford University and UC Berkeley. Her recent exhibition, *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West*, includes Xing Danwen's work. She is on the board of advisors for *Yishu* magazine, *ART AsiaPacific*, the Ink Society, and Asia Art Archive.

## Gallery TPW photobasedart.ca

80 Spadina Avenue, Suite 310 Toronto, ON M5V 2J3

T 416.504.4242 F 416.504.6510 E gallerytpw@photobasedart.ca

Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 12:00 to 5:00 p.m.

**torontodartscouncil**  
An arm's length body of the City of Toronto



THE ONTARIO TRILLIUM FOUNDATION LA FONDATION TRILLIUM DE L'ONTARIO



Canada Council for the Arts Conseil des Arts du Canada