



MATERIAL  
DREAMING

Photography



BY SHELLEY RICE

In 2004, Xing Danwen began an ongoing series of color photographs titled *Urban Fiction*. Using showroom models of large apartment complexes created by real estate developers in Beijing as her primary subjects, she digitally inserts a few small figures (often including her own) into windows or onto terraces, roofs, or surrounding sidewalks. These barely visible, anonymous figures are engaged in acts of love, sport, or murder; they are active or melancholy, exhibitionist or self-absorbed. Swallowed up by the vastness of the skyscrapers within which their minuscule lives unfold, Xing's urban dwellers pursue private dramas, personalizing and actualizing the blankness of the space, creating small narratives of love and loss, loneliness and connection, within structures that represent the urban dreams of a new China.

These photographs are hardly documentary reports about real estate development in Xing's native land. China's recent skyscrapers may be Made in China, but the mental model for their construction was the Western dream of an international style. A young artist trained in Beijing and New York and well established in Europe, Xing has commented: "After being in so many cities in the world, I realized that globalization had made urban landscapes everywhere similar and blurred the boundaries between them. So often, 'here' can be anywhere."<sup>1</sup> Sensitive to the fact that urban space is itself a fantasy made flesh in the physical world, she also understands that the perfect, clean, international apartments springing up in China will be stage sets framing the narrative future for her and her compatriots.

What is obvious from this analysis is that the relationship between photography and sculpture has become extremely complex in our current globalized art world. No longer focused on the dichotomy between "reality" and its "transcription," our discourse must engage issues more immediately relevant than the difference between a "documentary" photograph and a "directorial" one. Young Chinese artists like Xing and Cao Fei, who re-creates Thomas the Tank Engine trucks and documents reactions of Chinese bystanders as they see a Western animated character come alive on their highways, are underlining the complex international relationships binding originals and simulacra in contemporary life. In 1970, when Peter Bunnell curated the groundbreaking "Photography Into Sculpture" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he was trying to make a case for "photography as a material medium."<sup>2</sup> He was interested in "embracing concerns

## and Sculpture

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
HAINES GALLERY

Opposite and detail: Xing Danwen,  
*Urban Fiction 26*, 2004–ongoing.  
C-print and paper, 33 x 42 in.



beyond those of the traditional print, or what may be termed ‘flat’ work, and in so doing seeking to engender a heightened realization that art in photography has to do with interpretation and craftsmanship rather than mere record-making.”<sup>3</sup> Such a focus seems almost nostalgic today, when photography is an accepted expressive medium increasingly involved in the communication of diverse cultural experiences. Nowadays, issues involving reproductions, re-creations, representations, and the like are both more abstract and more concrete, since they are inextricable from the increasingly virtual image landscape that often serves as the primary creative environment for mobile artists. Xing, after all, is trying to tell us that even our “material” media are concretized dreams linking the global past and future.

It is useful to begin with Bunnell’s exhibition in order to trace the evolution in attitudes toward the relationship of photography to the “material” world. Two of the stars of “Photography into Sculpture” were Robert Heinecken and Bea Nettles. Heinecken was an especially important figure in this movement; he had already shown at MoMA by 1970, and many of the artists in the show had studied with him at UCLA. Deeply opposed to the critically dominant ideas of medium-specificity and purity then current in New York, he and his colleagues breached boundaries between media and also between art and life. Heinecken incorporated real-world objects and appropriated images into his constructions; reaching out into three-dimensionality with constructions involving wood, film, and plastic blocks, he also chose subjects that intersected with major social issues like the sexual revolution and the Vietnam War. Nettles, on the other hand, a major proponent of non-silver photographic processes in the 1970s, used stuffed and stitched photosensitive linen, velvet, wood, and hand-tinting to make points about environmental and feminist subjects: farming, domestic life, and family. Both of these artists, as well as their followers, rejected curatorial insistence on straight photography and subjects pre-defined by forefathers like Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. Their push



Above: Cao Fei, *East Wind* (still), 2011. Single-channel color video with sound, 10 minutes. Below: Sandy Skoglund, *Fresh Hybrid*, 2008. Pipe cleaners, hand-felted wool and wool roving, tree branches, mannequin parts, and live models, approximately 15 x 30 x 15 ft.



into material space (often with new technological materials like Plexiglas and Lucite), their references to Minimalist sculptural styles, and their forays into new subjects like sex and war signaled an awareness that it was time for photography to move off the museum wall and interface with the world beyond. Though these works are a far cry from those created today by artists like Xing and Cao Fei, the seeds of contemporary art were being sown by innovative image-makers and curators of the 1970s.

The next generation of artists working in the interstices between photography and sculpture includes several who were accepted into mainstream New York galleries like Castelli and Pace. Both Sandy Skoglund and Joel-Peter Witkin create and then photograph complex installations including sculptural materials. Skoglund in particular works as a sculptor; her labor-intensive environments, filled with radioactive cats, out-of-control hangers, cranky babies, and purple dogs, contain both live people and handmade objects. Like Nettles, Skoglund focuses on domestic issues brought to the fore by feminist artists. Funny, scary, and surprising, her installations are nightmarish renditions of banality gone wild, and they are wildly popular with the public.

Early on, in the 1980s, she showed only the large color photographs that documented her three-dimensional tableaux. Later, the installations (minus people) were exhibited

and sold, alongside their photographic interpretations. Witkin, on the other hand, uses sculptural forms as structures to house mythological and gruesome subjects (severed heads and limbs, taxidermied animals, and deformed people living or dead). His large black and white photographs — of crucified Christs, mythic Mexican icons, and amputee Venuses — are printed with gauze and radically hand-worked for effect, giving them a painterly, precious, and antique look. Celebrated as a pictorial photographer for a number of years, Witkin only chose to create and exhibit sculptures as primary expressive statements later in his career, despite the fact that much of his original artistic training had been in this medium.

The Brazilian artist Vik Muniz also began his artistic career with sculptures, making small and humorous objects like *Pre-Columbian Coffee Maker* and *Clown Skull*. After documenting these works with a camera, his creative emphasis began to shift. “Once you photograph something you make,” he told Peter Galassi, “you not only document it but also idealize it. You take the most stupid snapshot, and it will still be something that started in your mind. You make it look more like that image in your mind that led you to create that object. That somehow brings a sense of closure; an idea going full circle, a way to evidence how your own imagination survives being digested by the material world.”<sup>4</sup> Soon, he began discarding the objects and retaining only their traces, their two-dimensional records. “The moment I photographed a sculpture, I didn’t care about the sculpture anymore. I realized I liked the picture better, so I started making things exclusively to be photographed.”<sup>5</sup> Known for his temporary representations — portraits of children, clouds, art reproductions, and celebrity icons crafted with diamonds, cotton balls, sugar crystals, garbage, dust, or (currently) huge pieces of furniture, urban detritus, and discarded vehicles assembled in an airplane hangar in Rio de Janeiro — Muniz has traded the site-specificity and heaviness of objects for the lightness, malleability, and mobility of images. He often transcribes well-known icons — Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, Medusa’s head, Ava



Above: James Casebere, *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8*, 2010. Framed digital chromogenic print mounted to Dibond, 188.3 x 230.5 x 7.6 cm. Below: James Casebere, *Mosque (After Sinan) #2*, 2006. Digital chromogenic print mounted to Plexiglas, 183 x 233 cm.



Gardner — with chocolate, thread, or even spaghetti and sauce. He appropriates famous images in order to create what he calls “the worst possible illusion,” allowing viewers to understand and celebrate the mechanisms of their own pictorial perception.<sup>6</sup>

Another, very different, postmodern artist, the German Thomas Demand, also bases his works on pre-existing images. Born around the same time as Muniz, Demand grew up in a country rebuilding — physically and spiritually — after the devastation of World War II. Obsessed with media imagery, especially pictures of sites where violent crimes or momentous historical events once occurred, Demand chooses an iconic picture, re-creates





Left: Mayumi Terada, *Eggs on Glass Table 070301*, 2008. Gelatin silver print, 73.7 x 100 cm. Right: Mayumi Terada, *Curtain 010401*, 2001. Gelatin silver print, 61 x 51 cm.



the space out of cardboard and paper, and photographs the result. Pristine, often colorful, his large-scale photographs seem like realistic renditions of neutral environments, completely stripped of evidence of the murders (*Bathroom*), murderers (*Corridor*), or political disasters attached to them.

*Archive*, filled with boxes, is based on the workspace of Hitler's favorite filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl; *Poll* is a colorful transcription of the Florida polling place where "hanging chads" selected a U.S. president in 2000, thereby setting a fateful course for the nation's future. Demand "whitewashes" these spaces—first, by his colorful constructions, cleansed of detail, and second, by his decision to assign only minimal titles and information to the pictures, which are loosed from their moorings in historical events. Removed from their problematic political connotations, his large and colorful pictures look great in a boardroom, or on museum walls.

Demand uses "real" photographic documents in order to abstract them from their origins in history. By the time a print is ready for exhibition, the indexical record of a space or event has been transformed into a simulacrum that has been photographed again, and this transmutation (with progressive losses) of information is the meaning of the work. James Casebere, on the other hand, has spent his career creating symbolic spaces, architectural metaphors (most of them table-size) that deal with social and political issues like social control, globalization, slavery, terrorism, and religion. Unlike Demand's "real" sources, Casebere's models are evocative. He uses arches and doorways, blank walls and domes, to connote both geography and culture.

Without details or specificity, his constructed spaces display a profound knowledge not only of global architectural forms, but also of the meanings inherent in the built environment. Pared down to their essentials, devoid of people, his suburban houses, sewers, prisons, and Mediterranean arches connote historical themes of oppression, homogenization, isolation, and sometimes catastrophe. *Flooded Hallways* and *Four Flooded Arches*, for instance, refer respectively to the bunker under the Reichstag

and a slave factory in West Africa; both of these sites of horror are inundated with water (which could cleanse and/or destroy them).

Casebere focuses on public life by evoking the social implications of architectural metaphors. The Japanese artist Mayumi Terada also creates symbolic spaces, but hers are domestic environments: interiors that house not history but the home and the heart. Terada's black and white pictures depict sparsely furnished domestic chambers, devoid of people and suffused with bright light. Her prints transcribe miniature sculptures that she calls "dollhouses," which she fabricates out of wood, Styrofoam, clay, and fabric. Personal spaces, her set designs are filled with chairs and curtains, bowls and bathtubs.

But her private chambers reveal details that disrupt a seamless reading of the empty rooms: puddles may be too big, stitches overwhelming in scale, seams and surfaces not quite right. In other words, Terada's constructed chambers are built for adventures in Wonderland; they suggest, in subtle ways, that they are illusions, experienced by the artist as stage sets for dreams. Her light-suffused rooms, filled with grace and solitude, are meeting places



Above: Didier Massard, *Mangrove*, 2003. Chromogenic print, 16 x 20 in. Below: Didier Massard, diorama for *The Monkey*, 2011. Styrofoam, aluminum foil, synthetic moss, plastic vegetation, dried plants, cardboard, epoxy resin, wool cord, aluminum wire, glass eyes, and acrylic paint, 80 x 58 x 157 in.



to India and China, and most recently, lush natural scenes inhabited by wild animals. *The Monkey* (2011) is a close encounter with a constructed primate, who stares out of the picture from what appears to be the greenery of a tropical rain forest.

Once photographed, Massard's jungle diorama becomes a landscape of the mind, what Xing would call "another of the fantasies that govern our contemporary life." With this comparison, we have come full circle. Xing's pictures are evidence of the Chinese dream, and nightmare, of modernization; Massard's pay homage to the enduring voice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the desire for a primal or exotic *vie antérieure* that may only exist in the imagination. Living on the same planet, at the same time, these two gifted artists describe their reactions to the terrifying and exhilarating experience of contemporaneity. Their works create a complex picture of the yearnings and desires of the 21st century: our pull toward the future and our simultaneous yearning for a simpler past. Photography has come of age, and its mandate is a weighty one, for it anchors us to light and form, to time and space.

All of these artists, working in the interstices between dimensions, are helping us to negotiate the ecologies and temporalities of a new millennium, to create the mental maps that we need to guide us through the interconnected byways of a brave new world.

*Shelley Rice, a critic and historian who specializes in writing about photography and multi-media art, teaches at New York University. She is the author of Parisian Views, the editor of Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman and has published articles in Art in America, Art Journal, The New Republic, The Village Voice, and Artforum.*

for the conscious and the unconscious, the inside and outside of our minds. Terada's chambers sometimes look out on natural "vistas" that are, in fact, pictures on a tiny wall.

These imaginary vistas link her works to those of French artist Didier Massard, another artist/dreamer who works in the interstices between two and three dimensions. "There were many places in the world I wished to photograph and visit," Massard has said, "and I realized that they wouldn't be as I imagined them."<sup>7</sup> So, like Terada, he decided to build his dreamscapes as dioramas in the studio, small souvenirs of imaginative travels

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Artist statement in *Xing Danwen*, exhibition catalogue, (Hong Kong: Ooi Botos Gallery, 2009), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Bunnell, wall label from "Photography into Sculpture," Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 8–July 5, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Bunnell, press release from "Photography into Sculpture," p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Vik Muniz, in *Vik Muniz*, exhibition catalogue, (Paris: Centre National de la Photographie, 1999); quoted in Shelley Rice, "The Unbearable Likeness of Being Vik Muniz," in *Vik Muniz: Incomplete Works* (Brazil: National Library, 2001), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Muniz, quoted in Rice, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> This line from Muniz is also the title of a film about the artist by Anne-Marie Russell and produced by Mixed Greens, New York, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Didier Massard, quoted in Carol Kino, "A Peephole Perspective on Tiny Worlds," *The New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, Sunday, June 12, 2011, p. 20.