

XING DANWEN'S CHINESE FANTASY

STATE OF THE ART

by Andrew Maerke

FEW NATIONS HAVE WITNESSED RADICAL transformation as has China in recent decades. Urban China under Chairman Mao, particularly the capital Beijing, was already a jarring blend of structures alternately quartered by broad, monumental avenues into winding *hutong* backstreets—vestiges of imperial urban planning—and utilitarian work communes—drab, low-rise blocks dedicated to idealized, if not always productive, industry. For many, megalopolises such as New York or Tokyo, with luxury high-rises and ubiquitous traffic jams, could only be glimpsed through small cracks in the totalitarian media monolith. However, since the economic opening launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China's cities have been reconfigured as shimmering, glass and steel landscapes evoking, in the suddenness and breadth of their transformation, the ephemerality of a desert mirage. A new urban form takes hold, a monument to the transient, trend-driven age of global capitalism.

Conceptual photographer Xing Danwen, whose recent series, such as "DUPLICATION" (2003) and "disCONNEXION" (2002-03), explore the underbelly of Chinese industry, from mass-manufactured doll parts to electrical goods junkyards, addresses the very crux of this architectural evolution in her ongoing "Urban Fiction" series, originated in 2004. Using a medium format camera to shoot maquettes of leading Beijing development projects such as SOHO China, Park Avenue and IT Utopia, she creates massive prints that suck viewers into a pristine world devoid of locally-defined characteristics. Using only available light, the series embodies at once the striking sameness of each developer's vision as well as the unique approaches they take in presenting their products. *Urban Fiction image 0* depicts a bright multi-use complex, while the rows of apartments in *Urban Fiction image 8*, complete with interior lighting, suggest a city at dusk.

From her giant perspective, Xing, the photographer, is the ultimate voyeur. Often framed as aerial views, her photographs achieve cinematic effect, speaking to present day paranoia worldwide about government surveillance and film technology's ability to render even the most private spaces public. Through digital manipulation, she inserts portraits of herself and other human figures participating in various scenarios, some of them macabre—discovering a dead body—and others tender—riding a bike with a lover or watering a plant. Represented in scale to the maquettes, the miniscule actors emphasize the lack of humanity in the surroundings, the tension-laden still of simulacra and their precarious balance between the inanimate and the occult. It is a powerfully nuanced critique of utopia, both appreciative of its aesthetic possibilities and yet, through the distance of the camera, quietly suspending judgment.

Xing shot "Urban Fiction" with the cooperation of the real estate developers themselves, who at first suspected she was an industry spy. Having done extensive research on Beijing's housing market, dominated by "villas," pre-planned gated communities selling

Western sophistication and bourgeois comforts, Xing describes the effect of walking into a life-size showroom as transformative, immediately warping the self-perception of casual visitors, to say nothing of serious buyers. These are package deals, one-shot buys into all the accoutrements required for prosperous living insulated from the bother of those left behind by China's breakneck development. In such a competitive arena, it becomes apparent that need and spontaneity—conditional aesthetics—have been replaced by art-directed, wholesale luxury and status symbols.

The miniature dramas that play out in the "Urban Fiction" series, often capturing people at the point of losing control as in *Urban Fiction image 13*, showing a couple's clandestine rooftop rendezvous, suggest that what is also at stake here is the question of agency. Who is in control? Is it the developers, manipulating an



■ Xing Danwen — *Urban Fiction image 13* from the "Urban Fiction" series (2004-05) C-print photograph, 221.7 x 170 cm. Courtesy SCALO, Kiang Gallery.

■ Xing Danwen — Detail of *Urban Fiction image 13* from the "Urban Fiction" series (2004-05) C-print photograph, 221.7 x 170 cm. Courtesy SCALO, Kiang Gallery.



unsuspecting market, or the consumers, demanding their personal share of new capitalism? Are the officials in charge of urban planning entirely unconcerned with the arbitrariness and incongruity of styles and concepts, or are they merely anaesthetized by their own extra-official stakes in these ventures? While microeconomics plays out in any number of fields, from food to fashion, what happens when it occurs on a scale that reconstructs our living environment, transforming the landscape not only of daily life, but of humanity, or humanness, itself? Architecture and urban planning's historic role in shaping polity, both within China and without, provides a poignant counterpoint. Urbanity itself has always been a fiction, a construct of imperial or, in some cases, bureaucratic wills to power. The traffic of daily life—public squares, commemorative roundabouts and grand parks—reminds us that we are not who we think we are, or that we are not who we should be.

The post-Mao period has taken longer to crystallize than one might expect. Generations of successors have had to pay lip-service to his legacy in the government and, by extension, in the media. As that political necessity fades and the emotional burden of the cult of Mao evaporates, China is left with a mental and moral vacuum, an open frontier where the constructs of fantasy, personal and national, are inchoate. Real estate developers, in tandem with municipal governments, are doing their best to provide a model for Chinese aspirations, complicating the relationship between reality and its fabrication. Xing recalls that her childhood fantasies included



visions of how a major metropolis must look, commenting that “Now I’m living entirely in my fantasy from the past—it is very surreal.”

On hand to document this process in real time, as China’s blank slate adapts to forces that are, perhaps, beyond anybody’s control, Xing Danwen sends us glimpses of an urban fiction that will soon become part of lived terrain, and then, of history.

■ Xing Danwen — *Urban Fiction image 5* from the “Urban Fiction” series (2004-05) C-print photograph, 221.7 x 170 cm. Courtesy SCALO, Kiang Gallery.

■ Xing Danwen — Detail of *Urban Fiction image 5* from the “Urban Fiction” series (2004-05) C-print photograph, 221.7 x 170 cm. Courtesy SCALO, Kiang Gallery.