

XING DANWEN

Story Paul Flynn

XING DANWEN IS one of China's best-known photographers and has been exploring the development of urban Chinese society from the early days of the experimental artist colony in Beijing's East Village. Artist Profile spoke to her in Beijing, where she lives and has her studio.

You were born in 1967 in central China when the country was going through enormous political upheaval and an avant-garde art scene was unimaginable. What was it that drew you to becoming an artist?

I was born in Xian in the second year of the Cultural Revolution and my parents were electrical engineers so I didn't have an art environment at all. I liked to paint, draw, and everything like that and was encouraged by teachers in middle school. One day at lunchtime, I read a newspaper and saw an ad for a school taking new students — Xian Academy of Fine Arts — and suddenly I had such romantic ideas to go to an art school. I applied and was accepted as one of 30 from thousands of students, which was actually very lucky because I'd never had any training, unlike others who had all had family training or after school tuition.

Did you have a sense of what you wanted to do other than just an idea to be an artist?

Not at all. I didn't know that much about art. I hadn't had the chance to read anything, to get any information. All I knew was classical painting and sculpture. For me, to be a painter was the highest art form, so that decision was simple and I studied painting.

So when did your notion of what an artist could be expand from that strict classical training?

I moved from the Xian academy to Beijing to be exposed to more influences. I had no direction or any idea what I wanted to be so I realised I needed to go to the big city and I wanted to go to the best art school. But then even in the Beijing Central Academy of Arts it was quite a classical way of teaching. The only other influence I'd had was from my Masters area, which was in Soviet art! After I came to Beijing, I was suddenly drawn to photography — I started teaching myself and was taking pictures everywhere. Then after I finished studying I really started to break out. I was too nice in school — a nice Chinese girl — I didn't hook up with all these crazy men, these artists ... until I graduated!

Many of those early photographs were portraits from the East Village, which was one of the original artist colonies in Beijing after the country began to open up. How did that 'nice girl' from Xian fit in? What kind of scene were you exposed to?

At first, I was still just an observer: thinking, looking. One day I was introduced to the East Village and after a while [performance artist] Ma Liuming came to me and said, "I'd like you to take a picture of me". So I thought, well, I like people who are very strange, weird, different, not normal. For me at the time Ma Liuming was very strange, taking off his

clothes and other funny things — he was very kind and sweet looking but was doing things I would never do! So I think that attracted me to be close to that scene. Also because the people in the scene were so photogenic, it increased my excitement at making good photographs.

At that time, my life was very unstable — no money, moving all the time. I felt like painting was too difficult and needed too much stuff. So finally I just realised it's easier to have a camera with me so why don't I take pictures? At that time, I really didn't feel like photography could be art — nobody rejected the idea that photography was visual creation but also nobody really accepted photography as art. The only master I'd seen was Henri Cartier-Bresson — I love his photography and even now I can look at it over and over, it's so tasty, but at that time instinct told me this type of photography was difficult. You are too artistic to be a journalist and not arty enough to be in a gallery.

But you actually built a very successful career as a photojournalist for a number of years after that.

Yes I became a photojournalist at that time because all the magazines thought I had a great eye and the pictures were provocative — but I wanted to be in gallery shows and I wanted to explore how I could move this media into art format. I really knew nothing and I had no indication of whether I could succeed — but I did have a very pure motivation. A friend gave me a book of work by Wolfgang Tillmans and the photos looked like a magazine, all the shots of bad young people, and I really understood what he was doing. That's why the East Village pictures,





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working with performance artists, became the very first attempt for me to really be close to art.

I had a lot of questions about myself too because I was in my 20s. My generation is quite special — our growing up is parallel to the whole country changing, the whole system changing. Everything was moving without understanding what was the destination. I had a lot of questions about myself, about being a woman — that's why I made the big body of work, *I am a Woman*. I wanted to explore the generation born in the 60s. I knew I was rebellious but I didn't know what to do and I saw people who really could act but I couldn't act, like the performance artists at the East Village. I felt very encouraged by them, to be with them, to see them, to understand my own questions.

So your rebellion was carried out by recording others being rebellious, rather than acting out yourself?

Yes, either I was too shy or I was too locked by the 'good girl' concept. On the inside I felt rebellious but on the outside I was a good Chinese lady. That is the drama and tragedy of being a Chinese woman. To be a good Chinese girl is to be accepted by society and by men.

The *Urban Fiction* series really captures something of the massive changes in the Beijing landscape and how that impacts on the local psyche. How did that series come about?

Urban Fiction really started with an idea that I wanted to use 'fake-

ness' to talk about reality. A lot of specialty artists photograph the city as something anonymous — after globalisation, the cities all look similar to each other. For a long time I was fascinated by all these same airports, hotels, highways, but an artist has to be aware of finding your own perspective, to be different, to create your own language.

The click happened when I considered trying to use something fake to describe reality. The idea came to me when I was travelling and I was so excited sitting there on a train in Europe thinking it over and over for hours and trying to work out what that meant! And then it came to me to use the real estate maquette.

So a very broad idea of describing reality by using something unreal came before you'd even thought of using the property developer models?

Yes. I'd never even seen a proper maquette before. I had to find an introduction with a developer so I spoke to someone I knew who

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worked for an architecture magazine — I needed to prove that I was interested purely for artistic reasons. When I was given access to my first maquette by the property developers SOHO, I suddenly didn't know what to shoot. It took me a few months back and forth, taking shots and thinking about them before the ideas started to take shape.

How did you come at populating them with superimposed figures — many of which are actually you playing out different roles?

The maquettes already had the elements of fiction and reality. You have a feeling in these showrooms — they have such a personality, even if you don't like them. There was one called IT Utopia — apartments for young couples or singles who work in the IT industry. They built the kitchen in the Western way because I think they were expecting the buyers to be like the Western clerk in the office and not cook at home. My immediate reaction was this kitchen is impossible to cook like Chinese — so straight away I was thinking about what kind of lifestyle you have to live in this sort of planned space. The more they make detail into the space, the more detail you imagine who is going live there. The commercial is a trap — how the commercial is trying to create dreams for people and how people are looking for dreams in the commercial. So that's how I started to see the people inside the maquette.

So the maquette inspires the story?

Yes. I try not to create a story beforehand. Little individuals are so helpless in this huge city — I always feel this inside me emotionally — that's why I show very little people in situations, often with no connection in these large spaces. Of course, a murder scene like I've set up is not happening often in reality but that sort of imaginative thought comes from the maquette.

Much of your work looks at these changes to city life. What has China's rapid change meant to you?

I've always been interested in urban change. The actual life I'm living now is like pictures we used to see only in a magazine — that was always our idea of the West, not true for us. One side of that is very exciting; the other side is isolating and lonely. When I first came back from studying in New York, streets had changed from two lanes to eight lanes and were filled with traffic. Even crossing the street with your bicycle became a very big decision and I would always think about how my parents were coping. It's a big effort to live in such a big city — you have to be very tough. In

Chinese with *Yin* and *Yang*, we say need a lot of strong *Yang* to cope with the city.

We've had to change our values and ideas of time, distance and comfort. And our connection with other people is now a mix of virtual and actual. I always carry the past so it's more difficult for me to make the transition but for the younger generation born in the city, they think it's natural.

How do you see the way your generation of artist is handling the money that's flowed into Chinese contemporary art? Do you think some measure their creative worth by business success? A few local artists seem content to send new work straight to auction.

They feel that to be in a big brand auction is a very important chance to show their face. And in general, they think an auction is promotion. So that is a very different way of looking at things. Because I have lived overseas, I speak the language and I know a lot of Western artists of my age, I see the very different vision of looking at the market.

I've been through this different early period when there was no market at all. I had no commercial motivation in becoming an artist and would have never dreamed of selling work to support my life, so actually I feel much better now during this crisis because it goes back to before — you don't have all the constant stress of opportunities coming and passing away. I think, 'oh, I can really concentrate on just what I want to do'.

For more on Xing Danwen:
www.danwen.com
www.gbk.com.au

- 01 Image 6 from *I am a Woman*, 1994-96
- 02 Image 0 from *Urban Fiction*, 2004-09
C-type photograph, 227 x 160cm.
- 03 Image 0 (detail) from *Urban Fiction*, 2004-09
C-type photograph, 227 x 160cm
- 04 Image 23 from *Urban Fiction*, 2004-09
C-type photograph, 227 x 160cm
- 05 Image 23 (detail) from *Urban Fiction*, 2004-09
C-type photograph, 227 x 160cm
- 06 Image 2 from *Wall House*, 2007
C-type photograph, 100 x 80cm
- 07 *Born with Cultural Revolution*, 1995, triptych
50.8 x 75.6cm (centre), 50.8 x 34.2cm (left, right)