

frieze

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Mike Kelley's 'Day Is Done'
Guy Maddin and Robert Enright in Winnipeg
plus Tomma Abts, Daria Martin, Omer Fast and Richard Hawkins



Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

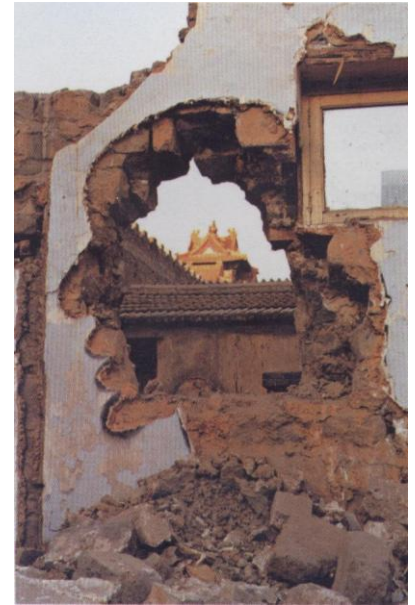
The raw material of Japanese social experience and the abstract formal patterns of Western novel construction cannot always be welded together seamlessly.' If there is an analogy to be drawn between the global popularity of the novel in the 19th and 20th centuries and the rise of video art at the turn of the rest, Fredric Jameson's observation may be of some relevance. Of course, social experience has become more homogenized since the last century, while the 'abstract formal patterns' of video look, at first sight at least, far looser and more adaptable than those of the realist novel. Nevertheless, the analogy offers the best explanation for many of the peculiarly consistent failures to be found in 'Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China'.

Too often the meaning of the works in this survey exhibition seems to have been lost or distorted through gaps in their artistic 'welding'. No amount of 'sleeve notes' (and the curators supply a good deal) can compensate for this, since what is being lost is aesthetic effect itself the best a Western visitor can do is imagine what the effect in question was intended to be. This isn't always easy, given that the first thing you are likely to notice about many of these pieces is precisely their Western influences - Jeff Wall, for example, in Wang Qingsong's *Night Revels of Lao Li* (2000) or Diane Arbus in Liu Zheng's photographs of drag queens and drunken businessmen (*The Chinese*, 1994-2001) - but not to make the effort will ultimately mean dismissing most of what is here as simply derivative.

Although it won't make you like the works, imaginative reconstruction will at least give a sense of what you might be missing.

Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall* (1998) is a video of the artist - an androgynous, long-haired young man - applying make-up, taking off his clothes and then walking along sections of the Great Wall in the guise of his 'female alter ego'. At first sight this seems like a rehash of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's 1988 performance *The Great Wall Walk*, notably lacking the latter's elements of epic scale and endurance, but this is to ignore the Wall's significance in China as a symbol of national identity. What for Abramovic served really only as a backdrop is here central to the work: the point is that this national monument is being clambered over by a naked transvestite. Thus what seems like a quiet, rather wistful piece is actually a calculated act of provocation.

Elsewhere one senses that what is getting lost is more straightforwardly a case of artistic failure. Sheng Qi's *Memories* (2000) consists of three large photographs of the artist's mutilated hand holding in its palm tiny photographs of his childhood self, his mother and Mao Zedong - evidently a personal meditation on the Cultural Revolution in the light of all that has happened since. What is immediately striking, however, is the contrast between the profound seriousness of the artist's subject matter and the banality of the means he has used to convey it; his missing finger, which he cut off following the suppression of the student protests in Tiananmen Square, speaks far more directly of the trauma of this event than the



Zhiang Dali
Demolition:
Forbidden City
1998
Colour photograph

image in which he has made it appear. It is as if the work has become the opposite of what he intended it to be: a metaphor for the absolute incommunicability of his experience.

There are, however, two works that transcend these difficulties, speaking immediately and directly to the viewer, and it is notable that both employ an extreme economy of means. Jiang Zhi's *Fly Fly* (1997) is a grainy black and white video of the artist's hand floating round his cramped and untidy flat in time to the strains of a late Romantic symphony; with no more than this he has produced a piece that is simultaneously absurd, elegiac and unaccountably joyful. Cui Xiuwen's repulsive but compelling *Lady's* (sic) (2000) consists simply of footage taken by a camera hidden in the ladies' toilet of a Beijing club much frequented by prostitutes and shows us the women unselfconsciously putting on make-up, adjusting their clothes, striking deals with clients over the phone and counting money. Some critics have seen this as recording a moment of reprieve in these women's lives, catching them 'off-stage' when they are briefly 'able to breathe and be themselves'. In fact it is a cold-eyed study in human exploitation and alienation - both subjects of enormous relevance in modern China - which reveals not how these processes go on 'beneath' a veneer of normality but how they actually constitute that normality. That it should so easily be misinterpreted, therefore, is an indication not of its failure but of its effectiveness.

Nathaniel McBride



Rong Rong
East Village, Bating,
No.20
1994
Black and white
photograph

Between Past and Future