

CRITIC'S PICK

In Chinese Photography, Political Anguish Made Physical

In an exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, conceptual Chinese photographers of the tumultuous '90s use the human body to document their pain.



Rong Rong's "Twelve Square Meters," which depicts Zhang Huan, his body smeared with honey and fish oil, sitting naked in a fly-infested latrine. Credit...via Rong Rong

By Arthur Lubow

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WASHINGTON — Chinese photography erupted with creative energy in the early 1990s, only to subside about a decade later. It was a period of anxious uncertainty. The encouragement of capitalist practices and the partial easing of restrictions on political and artistic expression of the '80s had ended abruptly and tragically with the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989. By 1992, it was apparent that economic reforms would continue full throttle, but the political relaxation of the '80s would not.

In that troubled time, there was an outpouring of artistic expression that utilized the camera but was as far as you can get from street photography or photojournalism. Poised and pointed, many of the most celebrated photographic images document a performance. In the shabby district on the eastern outskirts of Beijing that was called the East Village by the free-spirited artists who flocked there, the photographer Rong Rong depicted Zhang Huan, his naked body smeared with honey and fish oil, sitting naked for an hour in a torrid, fly-infested latrine, and the androgynous Ma Liuming inhabiting his feminine alter ego and sauntering gracefully in the nude through a courtyard. The political became very personal.

Like a hornet trapped in amber, the tumult of those days can be viewed in the exhibition “A Window Suddenly Opens: Contemporary Photography in China,” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, through Jan. 7. (After May 7, it will be displayed in a slightly abridged version.) The 186 works in the show — from this era, with a handful of more recent exceptions — are mostly drawn from the collection of Larry Warsh, who has promised 141 of them to the museum.

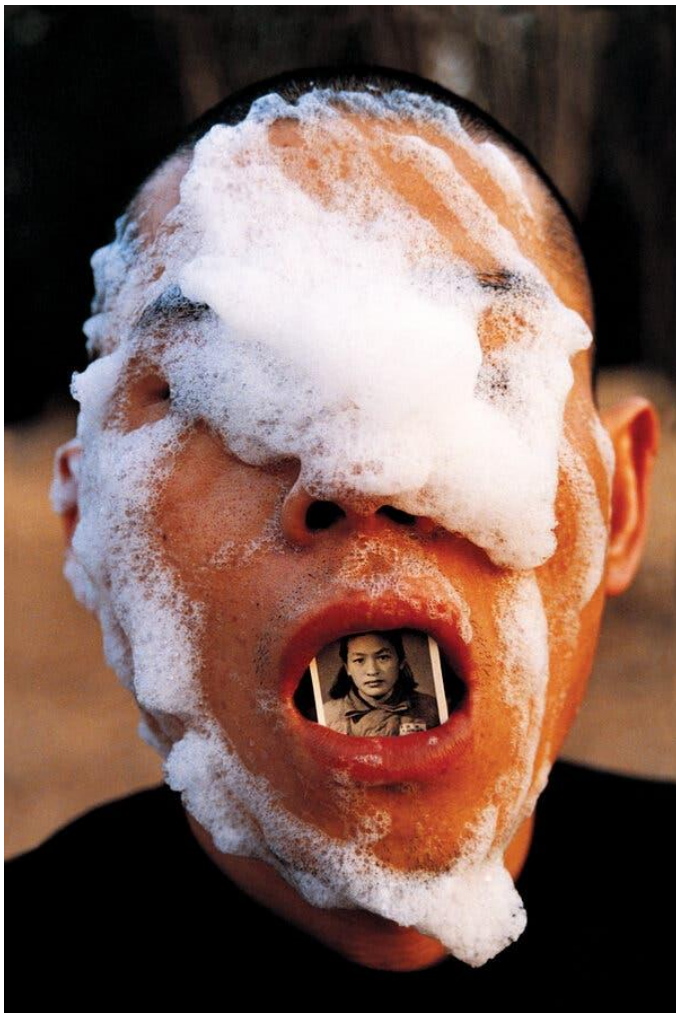


Installation view of “A Window Suddenly Opens: Contemporary Photography in China,” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Credit...Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Photo by Ron Blunt

In the short-lived but influential photography magazine “New Photo,” inaugurated in 1996 by Rong Rong with Liu Zheng, the editors declared, in a statement that provides the exhibition’s title: “When *concept* enters Chinese photography, it is as if a window suddenly opens in a room that has been sealed for years. We can now breathe comfortably, and we now reach a new meaning of ‘new photography.’”

But the feeling you get as you walk through “A Window Suddenly Opens” is that these artists are hyperventilating and gasping, not breathing comfortably. They are reckoning with the weight of Chinese history, both recent and ancient, and with the cataclysmic changes that are transforming their culture with discombobulating speed.

The centrality of the human body in their images is striking. Still reeling from the Tiananmen crackdown and the squelching of free expression that followed, some artists, like Zhang Huan in his outhouse performance, expressed their mental anguish through self-inflicted physical pain. Before departing his homeland for exile in Europe, Sheng Qi amputated a little finger and left it behind in a flowerpot in Beijing. After he returned to China in 1998, he began a series of photographs in which he cradles a family photo in his maimed left hand.



“Foam 7” (1998) by Zhang Huan, who posed with a family member’s portrait in his mouth. Credit...via Zhang Huan Studio and Pace Gallery

Sheng’s “My Left Hand (Mother),” from 2004, resonates eerily with “Meat” (1997) — a record of Gu Dexin’s daily practice of rubbing a piece of raw pork between his fingers until it becomes dry — and with the 1998 “Foam” series of 15 photographs, in which

Zhang Huan (arguably the pivotal Chinese conceptual artist of the period), his face coated with soap suds, posed with a family member's portrait jammed into his open mouth. In the "Communication" series of 54 color photographs of 1999, Cang Xin demonstrated his own visceral engagement with his heritage by licking, among other things, a bank note, a Luo Pan compass used in feng shui, the ground by the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, and portraits of the Dowager Empress and Mao.

The refined tradition of the literati, who used ink and brush in calligraphy and landscape painting, was denounced as elitist by the Chinese Communist Party, especially during the Cultural Revolution. In the relaxation after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, this artistic legacy could be openly acknowledged as both a blessing and a burden. In "Chinese Landscape — Tattoo Series" (1999), Huang Yan photographed his bare torso, which his wife, the artist Zhang Tiemei, had painted with a traditional landscape scene. Qiu Zhijie, who was trained in calligraphy, conveyed a similar sense of submersion in historic culture in "Tattoo Series," 1997, by painting symbols that extended over his bare-chested body onto the wall behind him. Zhang Huan went one step further. In "Family Tree," from 2000, a sequence of nine color photographs, his face and shaved head are painted with a calligrapher's ink that covers the skin more and more, until by the end only his eyes shine out of a blackened mask.



Huang Yan's "Chinese Landscape Series No. 3," (1999). The traditional landscape scene on his chest and arms were painted by his wife, the artist Zhang Tiemei. Credit...via Huang Yan

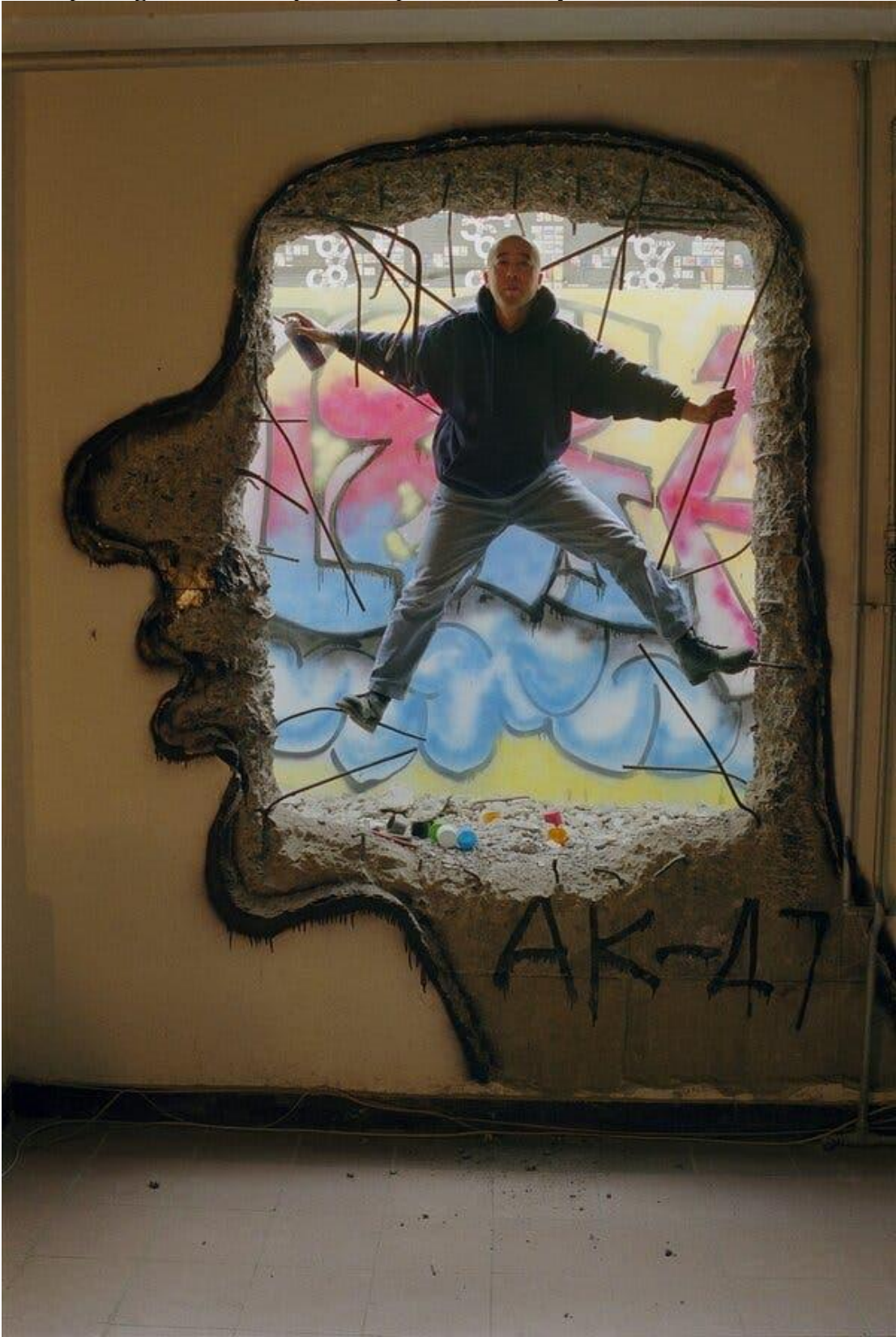


Hai Bo's "I Am Chairman Mao's Red Guard," 1999-2000, in which a young girl in a Red Guard uniform is paired with a contemporary photograph of her. Credit...via Hai Bo

If anything, the recent past weighed even more heavily on these artists. In "Standard Family," (1996), Wang Jinsong photographed 200 one-child families, who conformed to the population control edict that was instituted in 1980 and only repealed in 2016; he then assembled the portraits into a tableau of mind-numbing sameness. In another portrayal of state-imposed conformity, Hai Bo — in "They," from 2000, and "I Am Chairman Mao's Red Guard," 1999-2000 — found portraits of indoctrinated young zealots taken during the Cultural Revolution and tracked down the subjects, finding them to be older, obviously, but also far more individual. Zhang Peili's "Continuous Reproduction" (1993), is a sequence of 25 photographs that begins with a propaganda portrait of smiling peasant girls and gradually decomposes into illegibility. Clearly, the old order was disintegrating. Far less clear is what would take its place.

The demolition of historic neighborhoods raised that question with unsettling intensity. In 1999, Wang Jinsong photographed buildings marked with the Chinese character "chai," which means demolish, for a series he titled "One Hundred Signs of the Demolition." The next stage of the upheaval was explored by Zhang Dali. Beginning in 1995, he spray-painted abandoned and partially torn-down buildings in Beijing with his graffiti trademark, a distinctive profile of a bald man. Often, you could see venerable

structures in the background, just beyond the rubble. And in some, he has embellished a wall opening with the shape of his personal Kilroy.



Zhang Dali's "1999 31" (1999), in which he has embellished a wall opening with the shape of his personal Kilroy. Credit...via Zhang Dali

Registering the past and present with acuity, photographs when they look toward the future necessarily become less documentary and veer into the imaginary. The young video artist Cao Fei began by lampooning the culture of Chinese-style capitalism in "Rabid Dogs," 2002, a single-channel video that depicts office workers as run-amok canines, in the madcap style of Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy. Two years later, she moved away from present-day reality and embarked on the "Cosplayers Series," 2004, in which young people dress up as characters from video games and anime, and wander through the huge southern metropolis of Guangzhou. (The videos are represented here as inkjet prints.) Beginning in 2007, her ambitious project, "RMB City: A Second Life City Planning," left behind Guangzhou for a virtual city (its name refers to Chinese currency) that she constructed to shuck off the constraints of history within an imaginary digital world. Her contemporary LuYang also dwells in virtual reality. By creating a nonbinary avatar, Doku, LuYang leaves behind gender, nationality and even human identity. Rather than grapple with history, these artists are trying to escape it.

Image



From left, Cao Fei's "RMB City: A Second Life City Planning No. 7," (2007); selections from Fei's "Cosplayer Series" (2004); "Rabid Dogs" (2002), single-channel video. Credit...Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Photo by Ron Blunt



Installation view of Song Dong, “Stamping the Water (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996),” 1996. Credit...Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Photo by Ron Blunt

Already, the decade of the '90s feels like a heroically quixotic time for Chinese artists working in photography. The exhibition opens with a wall mural of 36 color photographs by Song Dong, “Stamping the Water (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet),” 1996, in which (at a time of political tension between Chinese authorities and Tibetan protesters) he repeatedly pressed a large wooden seal, marked with the Chinese character for water, into the river. Of course, his effort left no trace.

The necessity and futility of action in the face of a monolithic state was lyrically expressed in one of the lasting achievements of the East Village: “To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain,” 1995. Once again, it was an idea dreamed up by Zhang Huan, employing the human body as his instrument. With nine other East Village artists, he traveled to Mount Miaofeng, outside Beijing. There they stripped naked and arranged themselves (heaviest below, lightest on top) until they measured precisely a meter. Forming a hummock that echoes the hills in the background, they posed for photographers (the print exhibited here is by Cang Xin) as a living embodiment of a landscape painting. They were photographed, they dressed, they departed. The mountain remained unchanged.

A Window Suddenly Opens: Contemporary Photography in China

Through Jan. 7, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue and Seventh Street, Washington, D.C.; 202-633-1000, hirshhorn.si.edu.