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CHRIS HONDROS'S IRAQ PHOTOGRAPHY

FICTIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE NOVEL

PUBLIC MEDIA AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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SNAPSHOT

SOCIETY FOR PHOTOGRAPHIC EDUCATION NATIONAL CONFERENCE
DENVER, COLORADO
MARCH 13-16, 2008

AIPAD: THE PHOTOGRAPHY SHOW
NEW YORK CITY
APRIL 10-13, 2008

HOUSTON FOTOFEST
HOUSTON, TEXAS
MARCH 7-APRIL 20, 2008

photographers pay to have their portfolios reviewed by professionals from around the world, is the heart of the festival. The show of the “Discoveries of the Meeting Place” brought together ten photographers from the previous festival whose work was judged especially interesting, powerful, and ripe for take-off. There were also countless exhibitions—local, national, and international—often grouped around a theme. Water and the environment were explored in depth, for example. This year the Olympics are in Beijing, there are demonstrations about Tibet, and there are concerns about the growing political and economic power of China, and FotoFest deemed it appropriate to take a look at photography through Chinese eyes.

The exhibitions at FotoFest under the rubric of “Photography from China 1934–2008” traced a history from early documentary propaganda photography from the Chinese Civil War and World War II used to consolidate Communist power under Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, to the incredible transformation in recent years, begun under Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s, and today’s hottest photographers now receiving record prices on the international art market. Several bodies of work stood out foremost for their historical importance: Zhuang Xuchen’s ethnographic surveys of western China (1934–39); Fei Sha’s work on the Anti-Japanese War (1937–46); Weng Naiqiang’s, Xiao Zhuang’s, and Wang Shilong’s amazing work during the Cultural Revolution (1965–75); and Lu Nan’s incendiary work from mental hospitals in Tianjing Province in the mid-1980s. Until recently, none of this work has been seen outside China and rarely within China itself.

The annual convention of the Society for Photographic Education (SPE) addressed the theme: “Agents of Change: Art and Advocacy” and took up, among other things, issues of environmental pollution; the uses of the imagery of torture from the prisons of Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and Abu Ghraib, Iraq; and the transformation of the urban landscape. Lawyer Susan L. Burke’s intense keynote presentation, “Averting Our Gaze: The Imagery of Torture,” was a mighty indictment of the culture of abuse and repression embedded in the American military, as well as the civil functionaries of the Bush Administration as it has chosen to fight the so-called “Global War on Terror” in the prisons and the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the “extrajudicial” territory of the American military base at Guantánamo.

Beyond the speeches and presentations, SPE’s version of the “meeting place” represents an interesting space to take the pulse of photography within the American academy. SPE has a tendency to be somewhat self-selecting and more concerned with the documentary landscape and gender issues than other venues such as FotoFest. That said, works by Jason Reblando from Chicago’s South Side housing projects, Susan Ressler’s documentation from the mid-1970s of an Algonquin community in northern Québec, and Shannon Beninc’s portrait of her hometown of West Hope, North Dakota, as it deals with economic change and the ramifications of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, demonstrated the quality and breadth of work from students and teachers alike.

ABOVE

Chairman MAO at Tiananmen Square, Beijing (1966) by Weng Naiqiang; courtesy of 798 Photo Gallery, Beijing. Exhibited at FotoFest.

Every other year, a unique arrangement of photography events takes place in the United States that presents an opportunity to take the pulse of photography at large in the gallery world, schools and universities, and in general. This year’s constellation of events was even more interesting because the Houston FotoFest presented the first historical survey of Chinese photography, from 1930s documentary work to the cutting-edge work booming through today’s art markets. It provided a useful context to understand where photography is in China today, and, in conjunction with last year’s Lianzhou International Photography Festival [Ed. note: see sidebar], points out the importance of such festivals in promoting cross-cultural exchange between artists from China and “the West.”

For more than twenty years, FotoFest has been the premier discovery platform for new photographic talent. The “Meeting Place,” where

