

FotoFest 2008: China

story by Victoria Ludwin



Houston's FotoFest 2008, focusing on China, offers not only the opportunity to see some tremendous art but also gives viewer a chance to learn about this until recently quite closed country rich in culture, history and beauty. China is in the middle of tremendous change as it slowly opens itself up to the global economy, and artists and photographers have been documenting the change in the culture and landscape. FotoFest and Houston's participating galleries offer a perspective dating from 1934 to now.

Throughout Houston, FotoFest curators have put up an extensive series of shows. Several installations address different time periods in recent Chinese history and serve to provide images for events in China's past as well as illuminating the transformations currently happening in the country. The FotoFest exhibitions are grouped into three time periods: 1934-1975 (*Ethnography, Photojournalism and Propaganda*), 1985-2000 (*Independent Documentary Photography*) and 1994-2008 (*Contemporary Conceptual and Staged Photography*). Many of the works on exhibition have never been shown outside of China before, especially those from 1934-1975, during the Communist regime. In addition, several galleries have mounted their own shows of Chinese photography to add to this incredible festival of art.

Ethnography, Photojournalism and Propaganda are the subheads for the shows grouped around the time period 1934-1975, a period in Chinese history fraught with conflict, war and political upheaval. One Allen Center and Two Allen Center are exhibiting three shows together: *Ethnography in Western China 1934-1939*, photographs by Zhuang Xueben; *The Northern Front, The Anti-Japanese War, 1937-1946 in China*,

photographs by Sha Fei; and *The Cultural Revolution, 1965-1975 in China*, photographs Weng Naiqiang; Xiao Zhuang; Wang Shilong, curated by Chen Guangjun and Xu Weiyang. The first show focuses on the farthest western regions of China, near Tibet, and the ethnic and cultural identities of those who lived there. Sha Fei, the featured artist of the second show, photographed the war for the Chinese Communist Party, and later helped organize a mass media organization system for disseminating propaganda for the party. In 1950, he was executed and his work was blacklisted; only in the last twenty five years has his work been shown again, thanks to the work of family and colleagues. The work of three of Sha Fei's colleagues, those he trained, makes up the third exhibition. These photographers also worked for the Communist party during the Cultural Revolution and their photographs show the effort to promote the idea of collective solidarity. All three photographers worked for news publications during the Cultural Revolution.

In a similar vein, Elder Street Gallery is presenting the photojournalist Jiang Shaowu and Xie June for a past and present view of China. The photographs of Jiang Shaowu (74 yrs old) show his experiences during the "Great Leap Forward" while working for newspapers in Communist China. He captured images from the countryside as well as political upheavals, and hid his photographs under his bed. Xie June (35 yrs old) focuses his work on the current changes in life in China, as the country becomes more industrial.

Several shows focus on contemporary work from the late 1980s to 2008. These are united by their explorations of societal issues in contemporary China: religion, ethnicity, gender, urban transformation, identity, globalization, and

the how past Chinese art and history come to bear on contemporary works. All the exhibitions are by Chinese artists working in mainland China. As part of the FotoFest series, Bering & James features two Chinese photographers, Xing Danwen and Zeng Han, exploring issues evolving from the newly affluent in urban China. Winter Street Studios is also hosting a FotoFest exhibition of artists Li Lang, Lu Nan and Wu Jialin, who shoot independent documentary photography. Vine Street Studios, home to the FotoFest headquarters, has mounted an extensive show of photographs focusing on 1994-1997 in China. The Houston Center for Photography is also hosting a large group show of Chinese artists who turn their lenses toward the coal mining industry of China and its effects on the landscape and the people around it.

Art League Houston is showing three contemporary artists as a set of individual shows: Sun Guojuan's *Sweetness Forever*, Chen Lingyang's *Twelve Flower Months* and Liu Lijie's *Another Episode*. The work is strikingly personal, often using the body as subject matter, implying the importance of the individual in a country that until recently eschewed that idea in favor of the group.

G Gallery presents China's Pok Chi Lau, a photographer educated in the US and teaching at Kansas State University. He documents the lives of Chinese immigrants in the US, as well as creates mixed media work addressing life after the Cultural Revolution in China.

De Santos Gallery is exhibiting photographs of one of China's most well-known landmarks: the Chen Changfen's photographs of the Great Wall of China are striking: taken over the course of forty years, the images speak to the power of the wall and the connotations it naturally bears. The lack of people in the photographs all but accentuates the force the wall has had on the people of China throughout history.

Two photographers from the MFAH's *Red Hot* show last August are being shown at McClain Gallery. Zhang Dali, who shoots his own graffiti on construction sites (as buildings go both up and down), highlights the rapid change in the Chinese urban environment, inserting the figure of a human head into an otherwise desolate landscape. Interestingly paired with Dali is Huang Yan, who instead applies landscape onto the human form. The photographs of these beautiful and painterly landscapes, done in a traditional Chinese style, bring to the forefront the idea of humanity in the past and human life living amid a natural landscape.

Deborah Colton Gallery reprises her August show entitled *China Under Construction*, which was the unparalleled best of the gallery shows of Asian art last summer. Curated by Maya Kovskaya, a Beijing-based art critic, the show gives a much closer-to-the-ground experience of contemporary Chinese photography. Again, it's not a show to miss.

While the shows certainly provide a window into the past and present worlds spinning in China, the photography itself, independent of its country of origin, is spectacular. We can only wish FotoFest ran annually!

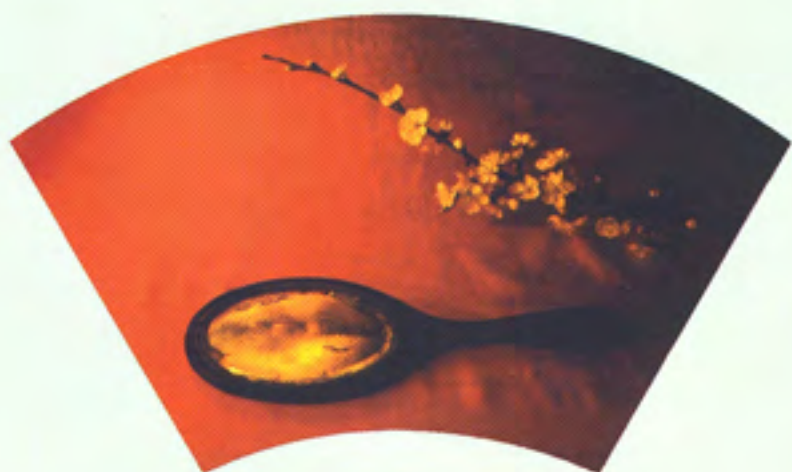
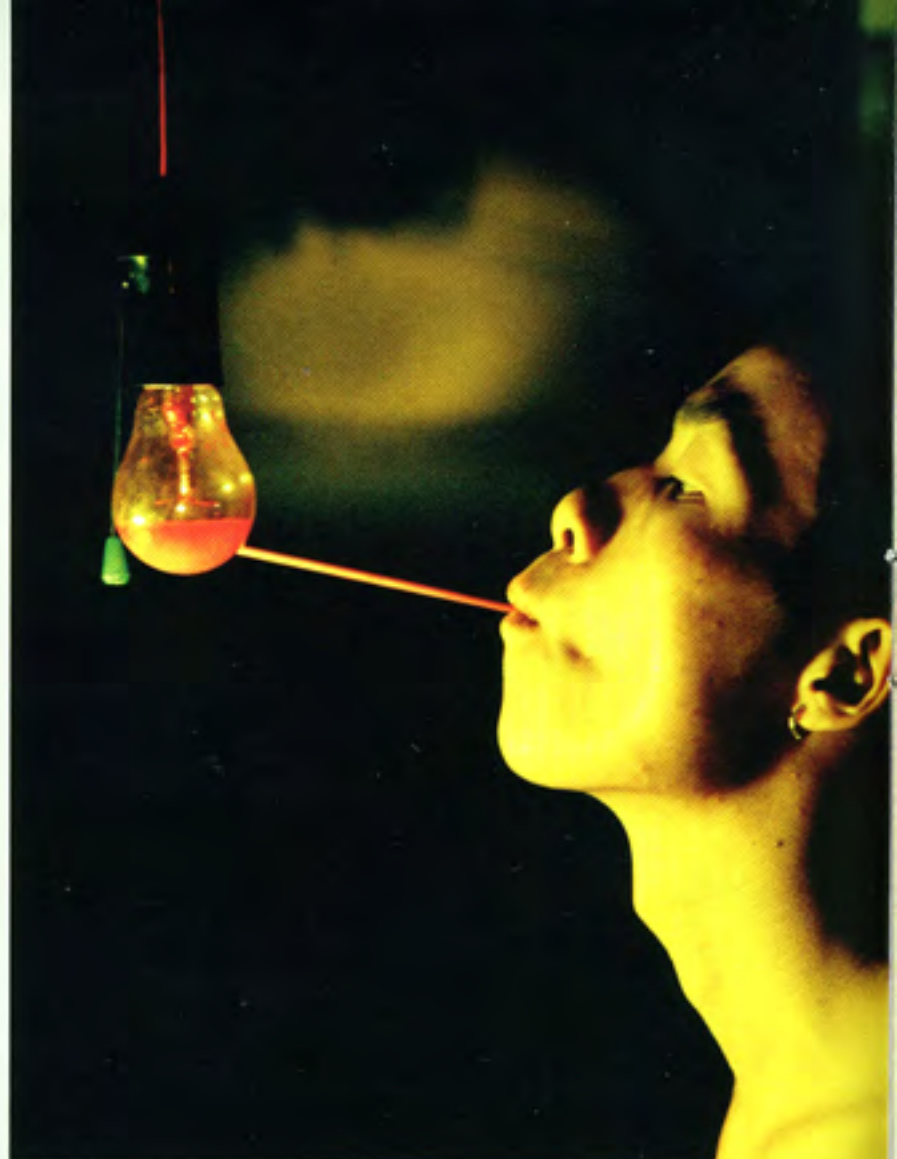


Clockwise from page 20:

Cang Xin, *Energy no.2*, from the series *Man and Sky as One*, 2007

Weng Naiqiang, *Red Guards on Tiananmen Square, Beijing*, 1966;
Courtesy of 798 Photo Gallery, Beijing

Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984), *Tibetan Boy, Xia He County, Gansu Province*, 1936.
Courtesy of Zhuang Wenjun





Clockwise from top left:

Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984), *Tibetan Minority Girl in Jiareng Li County, Sichuan Province, 1934*,
Courtesy of Zhuang Wenjun

Jiang Zhi, *Sucker no. 3, 1997-1998*;
Courtesy Three Shadows Photography
Center, Beijing

Liu Zheng, *Quelling The White Bone Demon, 1997*; Courtesy Three Shadows
Photography Center, Beijing

Sha Fei (1912-1950), *Children Shoulder-
ing Wooden Guns, 1938*;
Courtesy of Wang Yan

Han Bing, *Love in the Age of Big Con-
struction II-1, 2006*

Zhao Liang, *Relationships-Making a
Telephone Call, 1998*
Courtesy Three Shadows Photography
Centre, Beijing

Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months
#4, 2000*

Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months
#2, 2000*



'China Under Construction II'

Deborah Colton

Among the 100 or so exhibitions organized for Houston's biennial FotoFest, this group show offered one of the more provocative takes on this year's theme—China. The tightly edited exhibition emphasized photographs and videos that deal literally and metaphorically with the country's breakneck transformation.

Maya Kóvskaya, an American curator and critic based in Beijing, presented 28 artists spanning several generations; most were internationally recognized figures, such as the performance artists the Gao Brothers and videomaker Cui Xiuwen.

Standouts among the documentary



Xu Yong and Yu Na, *Solution Scheme (D3)*, 2007, performance photograph, 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

Deborah Colton.

works included Zhao Liang's 2005 video filmed on the outskirts of Beijing, where the city abruptly terminates in a messy countryside. Photographer Hong Lei presented an exquisite panoramic image of the Yangtze River: what at first appears to be early-morning mist is in fact pollution enveloping the Three Gorges Dam.

Photographs from performance works offered more idiosyncratic responses. Han Bing's *Love in the Age of Big Construction II-1* (2006), for example, portrays a fragile-looking figure seductively collapsed atop the giant shovel of an earthmover, amid piles of debris, with safety cones in the foreground. The work is a poignant depiction of the individual sacrificed to modernization. Xu Yong and Yu Na collaborated on *Solution Scheme (D3)*, 2007, which shows the former prostitute Yu nude at the center of a contingent of men in suits, who are triumphantly raising a pink flag in a formation that resembles the GIs on Iwo Jima. There is unresolved tension in the conflated symbols of war and business, conquest and objectification.

—Catherine D. Ansporn

THE LOOP ART

BY JODY SCHMAL

ASIAN INVASION!

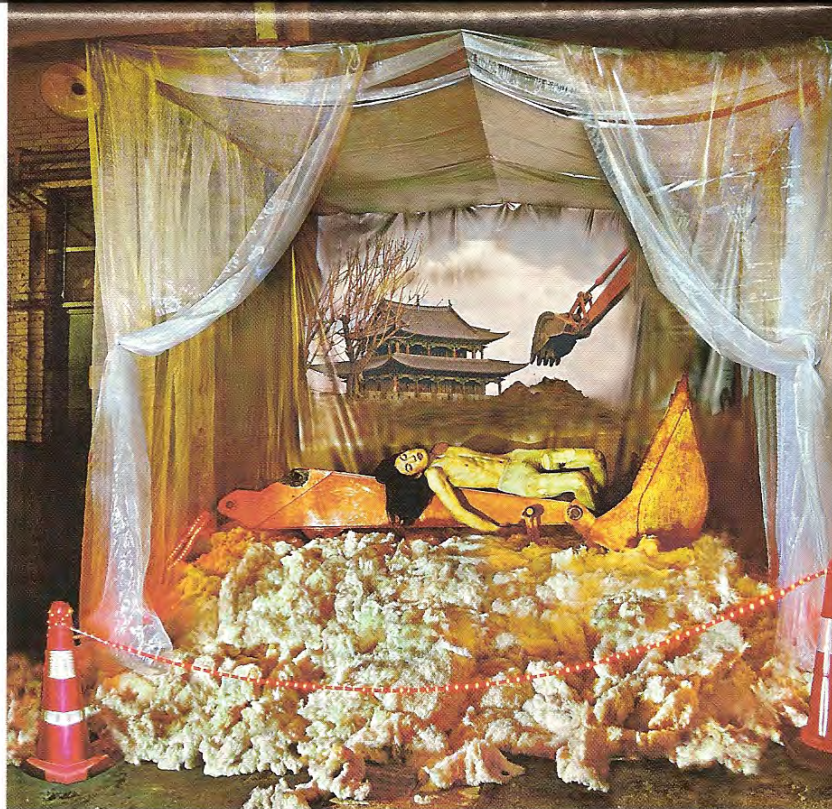
As China's arts scene explodes, H-Town is seeing red

China is the talk of the globe, as it grows in quantum leaps and takes its place as an economic superpower. Its economy has quadrupled since the late '70s, and by some estimates will double again over the next decade. And the Asian nation's artists are keeping pace, evolving so fast that the Houston art world had to take note.

Interest in the scene—rife with vibrant whimsy and stark realism—multiplies with this month's China-themed FotoFest, the production of a film about a Houston Ballet alum from China, and the construction of the Asia Society headquarters. "China has gone out of its way to excel in the arts," understates Asia Society Chair Charles Foster, who's intimately involved in the boom. He's married to a Chinese film star, and the society is a FotoFest sponsor. Plus, he'll be portrayed as a key character in the ballet movie.

Last year's successful *Red Hot* show at the Museum of Fine Arts was Houston's first big look at contemporary art from China. It borrowed from Houston's Chaney family, who began accumulating Asian art 10 years ago, when it became clear to Robert Chaney that Asia—specifically China—was undergoing a historic growth spurt. In an interview with MFA, he likened China's 21st-century rise to that of America's domination and industrialization in the 20th century. "We could see that China was really breaking out with a burst of really cutting-edge new art," he said.

The family's collection of both optimistic pop art and cynical realism pieces in photography, painting, sculpture and digital media came from a movement that took place over the past decade. A good example of the Chinese pop style from the Chaney family is "Jurassic Age," a large dinosaur by Sui Jianguo, which still resides in front of MFA. The red dinosaur caged in a shipping crate is a CONTINUED...



CHINA RISING From top: Han Bing's 'Love in the Age of Big Construction' at Deborah Colton Gallery and 'Rebuilding' by Peikwen Cheng at Travis Tower. And below from left: 'Soul Stealer: Cosplay #2' by Zheng Han at Bering & James and Cang Xin's 'Man and Sky as One' at the New World Museum.





EASTERN STARS Charles Foster and his wife Lily Chen Foster, at home near Yang Jin Long's pop-style Foster family portrait

...CONTINUED metaphor for China—the world's fastest growing economy due largely to the export of mass-produced consumer goods.

Also, governmental changes are affecting a sort of artistic renaissance. Before the political art phenomenon, authorities were raiding exhibitions around China that contained subversive artwork, or stopping art shipments altogether. Now the government seems to be moving toward seeing art as something that will reveal China's rich culture to the rest of the world.

Photographers in particular are beginning to flourish in this new artistic freedom, as Houston galleries this month will show. Instead of having to mask their strife and heritage, or display it in the sardonic manner of the pop movement, artists are showing real-life China—the good and the bad.

This year's FotoFest, beginning March 7, has been a long time coming. Wendy Watriss and her FotoFest co-founder Fred Baldwin have had their eyes on China for years. Through their mission to make Houston a hub of international art, the pair helped bring U.S. attention to undiscovered talent from the Asian nation. And, on a trip a few years ago to LinagHu, Watriss and Baldwin met three key Chinese entrepreneurs who became interested in their FotoFest concept. The three were so impressed that they hosted *Meeting Place FotoFest Beijing 2006*, a partnership with their Houston counterpart, which helped propel a photography revolution in their home country.

After the positive reception in Beijing, Watriss decided to focus on China here—hoping to show both the dramatic rise of new art and to provide a context for it. "We want to show people that what we see in China today is not simply the creation of the last 10 years," she says. "It builds on the past. And even though a lot of the past is rejected and

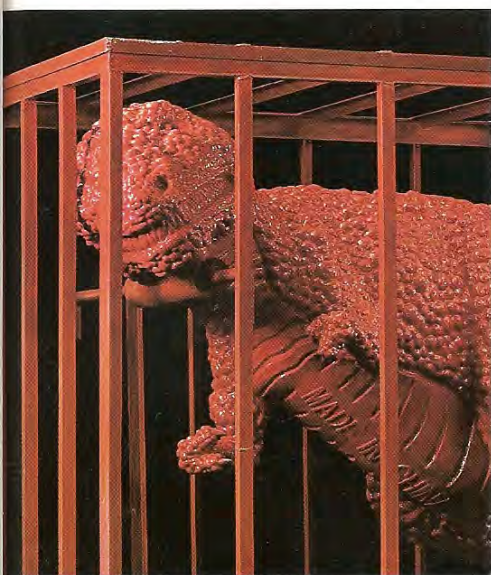
criticized even by the Chinese themselves, it's something that has been incorporated into every aspect of their lives."

Watriss is also quick to point out that many works on display during FotoFest, which happens every other year, haven't been seen in the Western World. "If the West doesn't buy [Chinese art] now, there won't be anything left," she says. "Because the Chinese will have it all."

Deborah Colton, owner of Deborah Colton Gallery, is on the forefront of the movement. This month she hosts *China Under Construction II: China's Contemporary Art of the Everyday Comes of Age* in her main gallery. It's a varied collection of works depicting all aspects of the changes in China. The show, through mediums including black and white and vivid color images, sculpture and digital installations, is very much social commentary. "The old quote, 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is true," says Colton. One of the featured artists in her show, Han Bing, engages the drama of modernization in a theater-like setting in his series of installations, "Love in the Age of Big Construction." The multimedia piece has the artist caressing and kissing various objects related to construction, such as an enormous steel claw.

China's changing landscape is the subject for other FotoFest photographers. Work by two U.S. photographers living in China, Peikwen Cheng and Daniel Traub, are on display at Travis Tower Downtown. Cheng explores how the Chinese adjust to rapid industrialization. In one nostalgic image, Cheng has three men standing in a development site, flying kites in the demolished neighborhood where they grew up. Traub's large-format series, *City's Edge*, focuses on border regions. His portraits of factory workers and members of migrant communities are set in bustling construction sites.

At Bering & James Gallery, many of Chinese **CONTINUED...**



RED ALL OVER From top: 'Urban Fiction 8' by Danwen Xing at Bering & James, dancer Li Cunxin and Sui Jianguo's 'Jurassic Age' at MFA

...CONTINUED photographer Danwen Sing's images depict small preliminary models of new urban structures. Sing hopes viewers will question living in the world today, as cities become denser and personal space diminishes. The artist theorizes that physical proximity creates psychological distance, instead of leading to greater intimacy. His photos evoke loneliness in snapshots manipulated with computer techniques. "In our childhood, skyscrapers were buildings that we had to raise our heads to look at," the artist says. "Now we can imagine our future by bending down to examine tiny models of buildings."

Watriss is also excited about an artist named Cang Xin. Xin's collection of startling landscape shots feature the artist himself, fused—one image has the backside of a naked man perched on a rock overlooking never-ending countryside—with nature. At the core of Xin's work is the Chinese philosophy of Shamanism, which urges the divinity of nature. His collection of crisp color images can be seen at both the New World Museum and at Deborah Colton Gallery.

Excitement about Chinese arts is also afoot in a new film about Li Cunxin, a former Houston Ballet star. Cunxin was a peasant in rural China when, at age 10, he was recruited by Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy to study ballet and serve in Chairman Mao's revolution. At the academy in the '70s, Cunxin faced strict discipline as he honed his craft. It was worth it; when then Houston Ballet artistic director Ben Stevenson visited Beijing to teach master classes, he offered Cunxin a summer scholarship to study in Houston.

Li became the first instance of a cultural exchange—and eventual defection—between America and China under the communist regime. After fierce, highest-level negotiations between the nations (culminating in a 21-hour detainment stand-off at the Chinese consulate in Houston

"If the West doesn't buy Chinese art now, there won't be anything left," says FotoFest co-founder Wendy Watriss. "Because the Chinese will have it all."

and a global media frenzy), Cunxin became the Houston Ballet's principal dancer for 16 years.

He documented his life in a best-selling book titled *Mao's Last Dancer*, which is now being made into a movie. Filming begins here this spring. Cunxin always knew that shooting in the city that made him who he is today was important. "I felt very strongly about it," says the dancer, who now lives in Australia and travels around the world as a motivational speaker. "The producer and director really agree with me that the actual places have to be in the film. I want Houston to get that kind of exposure. Houston is a very special place in my heart."

Bruce Beresford (*Driving Miss Daisy*) will direct the film. Producer Jane Scott and screenwriter Jan Sardi—who also worked on the Oscar-winning film *Shine*—were in town in December scouting locations. "The whole film production is happening as we speak," Cunxin says. The dancer is keeping mum about any big-name stars signing on, but there will be three different actors portraying him in various stages of his life, two of which are fellow Madame Mao Academy alums. Charles Foster, the Houston-based immigration lawyer responsible for Cunxin's release from the Chinese consulate in 1981, will also be portrayed in what Cunxin says is a pivotal role: "Without him, I would have been taken back to China that night." Married to former Chinese movie star Lily Chen, Foster is also Chairman of the Asia Society Texas, a co-sponsor of FotoFest.

While the fest delves into China's changing cityscapes, Houston has its own urban evolution. The Asia Society breaks ground on its Texas headquarters this spring in the Museum District. The aim of the \$50 million building, dubbed "Asia House," is to educate Houstonians on the diverse countries of Asia. The "800-pound gorilla in the room, which is of course China," will be in the spotlight, according to Foster. Designed by Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi (who was responsible for the expansion of the Museum of Modern Art in New York), Asia House will have two art galleries and an auditorium for performances. It will be Taniguchi's first freestanding building outside Japan. "Asia House will be 100 percent focused on performing arts, visual arts and other mediums. We will provide a platform for the best in Asian art in an extraordinary setting."

Foster sees the vast country opening up to a remarkable degree in terms of artistic freedom, and he's proud that our city has recognized as much. "Houston is a new, open, free-flowing city," says Foster. "We are making an effort to reach out to China. It's important and wonderful." ■

See *Calendar: Visual Arts* for more information on FotoFest and the galleries involved.

Focus on the context, not the subject

■ Michael Somoroff rethinks German photographer August Sander's photos from the 1920s and 1930s

By **PATRICIA COVO JOHNSON**
FOR THE CHRONICLE

In a portrait, you see the sitter's face, some body language, maybe his hands, possibly something of the context in which he lived.

When Michael Somoroff looked at the portraits shot by German photographer August Sander in the 1920s and 1930s, the context is what he noticed. Sander had set off to create a photographic index of his fellow citizens, which he called

People of the 20th Century. The Nazis confiscated many of his plates, but some 1,800 of the portraits survived.

In 2007, Somoroff appropriated a number of those images. He kept Sander's titles, but digitally removed the figures to create his descriptively titled series *The Absence of the Subject* and so transformed a sociological study into haunting inquiry.

A lone chair appears abandoned on a grassy lawn in

*Please see **SUBJECT**, Page E8*



MICHAEL SOMOROFF

LOOKING BACK: A lone chair appears abandoned on a grassy lawn in *Working Class Family*. Once, in German photographer August Sander's time, a father sat in it, surrounded by his large family.

SUBJECT: A technical tour de force

CONTINUED FROM PAGE E1

Working Class Family. Once, in Sander's time, a father sat in it, surrounded by his large family. In *Blind Children*, two books lie open on a table where two boys read the Braille text. A large cooking pot is now abandoned, where once a pastry chef stood moodily, almost defiantly, momentarily suspending his stirring.

Even without knowledge of Sander's pictures, questions arise. Where did the family go? Why did the pastry chef abandon his cooking? The technical answer is known; the human questions are not.

Somoroff, known in Houston for *Illumination I*, an ephemeral sculpture he created on the grounds of the Rothko Chapel last fall, is senior partner of a

large commercial film studio in New York. He worked with his expert team to reinvent Sander's photographs, erasing the people in them and seamlessly filling the emptiness left by their removal through pixilating magic. It's as if no one had ever inhabited the pictured spaces.

The process-intensive results are intriguing as depopulated vignettes. In a way, they underscore the care Sander took in composing his pictures: The emptied views have evocative qualities of their own. The wall

THE ABSENCE OF THE SUBJECT

■ **When:** 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
Tuesdays-Saturdays; through April 20

■ **Where:** Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer, third floor

■ **Details:** 713-864-2364

of ivy behind *Pharmacist*, for example, is a complex pattern of distinctive leaf shapes casting shadows, catching light and assuming the role of protagonist. The gate a young girl opens when Sander photographed *Middle Class Child*, is now an

entry only to the landscape beyond.

Somoroff goes a step further in three animations created from the stills he altered.

The cascading vegetation of *Pharmacist* flutters delicately. The pages from the open books of *Blind Children* rattle softly. Blades of grass on the edge of *Working Class Family* shudder ever so slightly. It happens in a blink, but the images were crafted so flawlessly you think you're looking at a video.

Both the stills and the animations are mesmerizing, more so when the human question comes up. Narratives begin to form. Perhaps the family went inside for lunch, and the staid

pharmacist is on his way to the apothecary. The children are in another classroom.

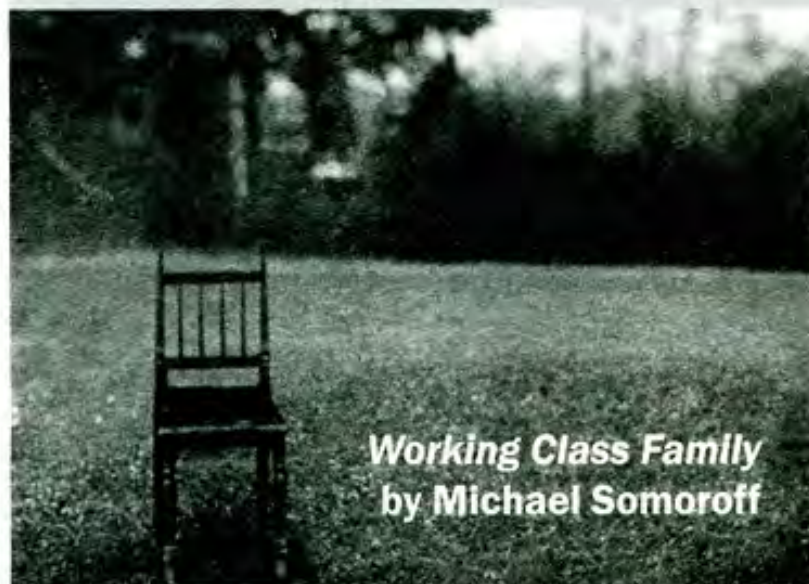
But the source images were from Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Maybe the subjects are absent because of the Nazi curse.

Or perhaps the pictures are metaphors for the perennial struggle of life, death and the search for immortality. Maybe the series is a lesson in just looking.

Maybe it's all of the above. Few exhibits raise these possibilities with this kind of grace. Ultimately, *The Absence of the Subject* is a technical tour de force of visual richness coupled with philosophical inquiry.

ADDITION BY SUBTRACTION

At first glance, the works in **"The Absence of Subject"** seem pretty basic. "They look like pictures that would be sold at Pottery Barn, but when you realize what's gone into them — it's pretty rad," says Deborah Colton Gallery assistant Evan Garza. For the show, artist Michael Somoroff (the mastermind behind the Rothko Chapel installation *Illumination I*) took photo-



DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY

graphs from legendary German photographer August Sanders's collection "People of the Twentieth Century" and removed the people. His meticulous touch-ups make it look as if the people were never there — that he returned

to the original scenes and took pictures without them. All that remains in *Dentist* is a chair against a wall; in *Pharmacist*, a tall bush next to a brick wall; in *Blind Children*, two opened books on a table; and in *Working Class Family*, an empty chair.

Somoroff's process makes these more than just pictures of stuff; the absence of the subject, as it were, puts everything into a dark, goose bump-inducing context. But Somoroff really raises hairs as he brings the photographs to life. In a darkened room of the gallery, three photos are projected onto a wall. They seem motionless, but after a while the viewer notices subtle motions — the leaves in *Pharmacist* softly rustle in the wind, as do the book pages in *Blind Children* and the grass in *Working Class Family*. Garza says the motions were created using only the altered photograph and a computer animation program. The process took up most of the two years Somoroff spent working on the show. It seems his patience paid off. 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Through April 30. Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer. For information, call 713-869-5151 or visit www.deborahcoltongallery.com. Free.

— DUSTI RHODES

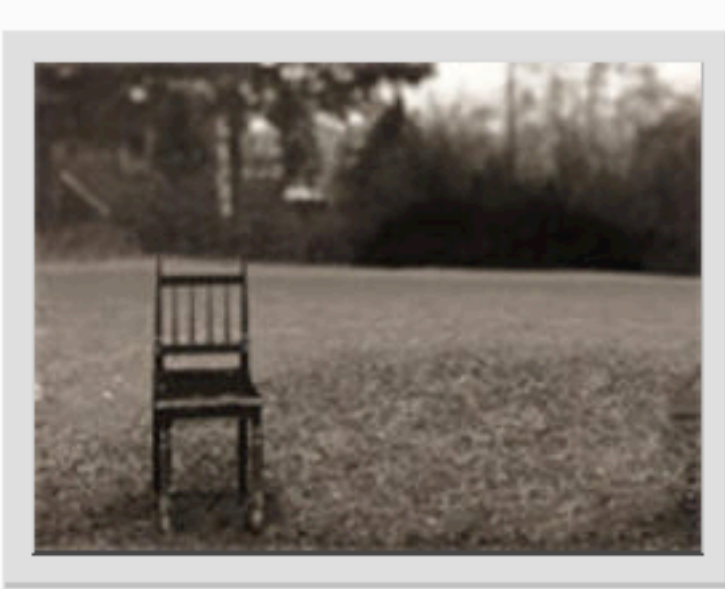
“The Absence of the Subject”

Michael Somoroff masters addition by subtraction

By Dusti Rhodes Thursday, Apr 10 2008 Comments A A A

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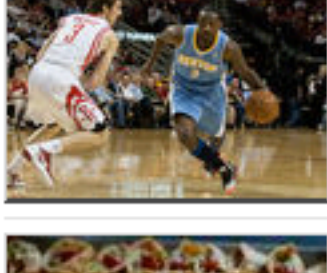

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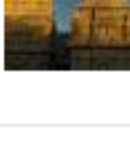
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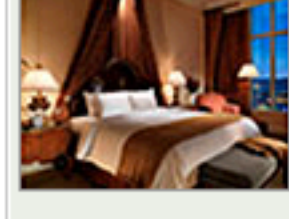
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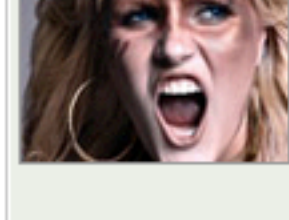
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