

## ART BEAST

Hai Bo and China's  
Photography Boom

by Philip Gfelter



**On the heels of Obama's summit with Hu Jintao, an evocative new exhibit by photographer Hai Bo opens in New York. Philip Gfelter explores the art of documenting China's vanishing history.**

It's no secret that contemporary art in China holds its own in the international art world. After the first hint of new artistic life in China surfaced on the global stage at the 1999 Venice Biennale, a number of large survey shows of contemporary Chinese art were mounted in museums around the world. Five years ago, auction sales at Sotheby's confirmed that an appetite for new work by individual Chinese artists was growing in the marketplace. And, last year, a sale of contemporary Chinese art at Sotheby's Hong Kong brought in \$27 million.



Courtesy of Pace / MacGill Gallery, New York

Of course, where there is contemporary art, there is photography. Should there be any doubt about the vitality—and viability—of contemporary photography in China today, *Photography From the New China*, an exhibition of recent acquisitions at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles through April 24, showcases the work of seven contemporary Chinese photographers who reflect a variety of conceptual and traditional art-making practices. One photographer, Wang Qingsong, is having his first solo exhibition in New York at the International Center of Photography, through May 8. Another, Hai Bo, is having his first show at the Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York, through February 26.

The annual trips Hai Bo makes from Beijing to his hometown, Changchun, in the Jilin province in northern China, have led to several bodies of photographs. In his current large-scale color work, lone figures appear in context of that region's vast, empty landscapes. One image, *Passing Traveler, 2008*, has no visual cues to place it in time: The landscape is barren; the overall amber light might just as easily be sepia-toning from the 19th century as air pollution in industrialized China today; the figure in the center of the frame could be a soldier or a factory worker, but his clothes do not place him in any specific period in recent Chinese history. The combination of the season and the time of day in which Hai Bo chose to photograph render a mythic timelessness to these pictures of local residents making their way on a long empty road across the desolate countryside. "One can say that [these photographs] are elegies for the vanishing agricultural society of China," Hai Bo has said about this work.

Time and memory weave through Hai Bo's work, as they have for the last 20 years. For one series, *They*, he obtained souvenir-photos from family friends and acquaintances taken during the era of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Often these were group portraits of Red Army members posed in rows: No hierarchy of importance was allowed and anonymity was underscored with uniform haircuts and utilitarian clothing. With a distance of 30 years, Hai Bo found and gathered the same individuals to recreate the original souvenir-photos. He posed them in the exact positions. Then he paired the pictures of past and present in diptych form. Today, with the influx of Western influences in China, hairstyles and clothing vary from one person to the next. And, because the subjects are not part of a *danwei* (work unit), the re-photographed individuals are no longer interchangeable with one another. Rather than members of a group, they are individuals grouped together.

*They* highlights not only the passing of time, but also the poignant cultural divide between China then—the agrarian-based communist country under Mao Zedong, when the Cultural Revolution swept away the vast legacy of Chinese traditions in the arts and literature—and China today, which is undergoing a rapid expansion, westernization, and industrialization as part of the global market economy.

Still, Hai Bo's artistic preoccupations are grounded in personal experience. "After moving to Beijing, my hometown took on a new perspective," he wrote in 2005. "Once I returned to Changchun and met an old acquaintance of my mother on the street. She and her friends used to play with me when I was small, and in my mind they were a group of beautiful young girls. I was shocked by the middle-aged woman in front of me and, without thinking, I exclaimed: 'How come you have become so old!' She replied: 'Look at yourself, have you not grown up as well!' I suddenly felt the cruelty of time."

In a piece called *The Four Seasons*, Hai Bo made photographs of one tree taken from the same position in every season, situating himself in front of the tree in each of the four pictures. The exploration of time has many precedents throughout the history of photography, but Hai Bo's version suggests his own aging process measured against the enormity of nature itself. He photographed the tree in *The Four Seasons* in his hometown. "My youth companion and I once had a good time here," Hai Bo said. "At that time it was a piece of wild field, but 30 years later, it is a Chaoyang Park here."

In *Old Man, 2009*, Hai Bo photographed his elderly neighbor in the forest with his head against a tree. Once again, the contrast of man and nature mingles with his own concerns about age and time. The process of facing one's own mortality resonates for Hai Bo. "Their today is our tomorrow," Hai Bo says about his pictures of old men. "By showing the loneliness, helplessness, and even despair of these old men, I want to convey the emptiness of success and ambition, and the futility of power and strength."

In the last 10 years, as revolutionizing technologies arrived in China, the use of digital cameras, scanners, and Photoshop gave Chinese photographers greater artistic control over the photographic image. And digital printing methods made it possible to grow the size of the photographic print. Hai Bo became proficient very quickly. The optical clarity of his images and the technical precision of his wall-size prints give his work a physical gravitas.

What makes Hai Bo a Chinese photographer, though? His traditional documentary photographs use as subjects his uncle, his son, and local residents of his hometown in northern, rural China. But it's his exploration of time, memory, and history in visual parables that register on a more cultural frequency—from an elegiac sense of the People's Republic of China of his parents' day to a modern China facing dizzying transitions in which the past, for better or worse, is being erased.

*Philip Gelter writes about photography for The Daily Beast. He previously wrote about the subject for The New York Times. His book of essays, Photography After Frank, was recently published by Aperture. He produced the feature-length documentary, Bill Cunningham New York, and is at work on a biography of Sam Wagstaff.*

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