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Publication: [Afterimage](#)
Format: Online

Publication Date: 01-JUL-08

Full Article Title: Eastern standards.(Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China)

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EASTERN STANDARD: WESTERN ARTISTS IN CHINA

MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

(MASS MOCA NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS)

FEBRUARY 2-FALL 2008

Attempts by outsiders to relate the particulars of another culture are so often doomed to fail. No matter the level of skill and sensitivity, those who travel abroad and return with images of other lands risk being seen as, at worst, ignorant, dreaded "others," and at best, temporary tourists. Despite this trend, "Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) takes a different approach. Instead of looking to understand an unfamiliar people or place, this exhibition focuses western eyes on a way of life--industrialization, capitalism, and their effects--as it arises in the curious but increasingly open and highly influential nation. The result is a variety of viewpoints that grapple with China, a country whose growth shows no sign of slowing and whose impact is yet to be fully understood.

London-based David Cotterrell's massive sculpture South Facing 4.3 (2006) dominates the exhibition entrance with what appears to be an improbable vision of China's urban future. Cast in plaster are over 1,000 residential towers, crowded together in a style that recalls a slightly unruly cornfield: orderly but not perfect. Closer inspection reveals streets, wider boulevards, and walking paths winding through the packed landscape. Instead of one artist's vision of wildly unchecked urban development, Cotterrell's sculpture is a possibility. According to the wall text, the piece "adheres to guidelines laid out in Shanghai's strategic plans for city development." Cotterrell makes real a fantastical vision of China's explosive growth, and while we're muttering "this cannot be possible," we learn that it is. Cotterrell also contributes three video pieces, all languid, unedited shots of urban traffic intersections raging with vehicular maclstroms. Cotterrell's titles--Hero, Impresario, and Maestro are odes to the uniformed traffic conductors who, despite the smallness of their presence, manage to enforce order on a seemingly ungovernable system.

Cotterrell is not alone in his staring. Much of "Eastern Standard" is video work, and many of the exhibition's participants attempt to understand the fleeting nature of China's rapid change by employing long stretches of video. The result is a collection of matter-of-fact documents, encouraging us to experience change via the passage of time. British artist Catherine Yass's dual-channel video installation "Lock" (2006) is a simple, 10-minute view off the bow and stern of a ship passing through a lock that is a part of the Three Gorges Dam project. Housed in a large cube of a room, the projection plays out on opposite walls, placing the viewer on the ship to witness its gentle rise as the water fills the lock and the subsequent opening and closing of the lock's gates.

Oliver Lyons and Alexis Raskin, who split their time between Berlin and Beijing, collaborated on Electric

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Shadows (2007), a set of six small, rear-projected videos. The blurred, stop-motion scenes are long looks at both contemporary and historic scenes of China's urban spaces, perhaps attempting to slow the blistering pace of change so that we may better comprehend its meaning. Lucy Raven's Leap (2008) films nothing more (or less) than the turning pages of 1970s-era books published in China. The volumes are heavy on propagandistic photos extolling the virtues of progress and industrialization; the title's reference to the horrific results of China's "Great Leap Forward" encourages a deliberate reflection on the perils of such rapid transformation.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Photography makes a limited appearance here and fails to provide a dramatic increase in the clarity of our perceptions of China, proving that video will carry the day as the medium of record during this industrial revolution. Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky's scenes of contemporary Chinese industry and urban change make an obligatory appearance, but his highly formal style distracts and obscures message in favor of visual dazzle. Two stylistically identical photographs from his "Manufacturing" series depict workers dressed in brightly colored uniforms. Each image finds Burtynsky's camera in the exact same spot--slightly above the action and looking toward the same infinite spot on the horizon, giving the impression that the factory floor and the industrial park proceed forever. Not all of Burtynsky's images employ this visual cliché. His less-formal diptych of a Yangtze River town displaced by the Three Gorges Dam project is more about "what happened" than "how it looks," but feels tired and unoriginal.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

German-born Michael Wolf's photographs of Hong Kong's staggering urban density look like smaller squares of gargantuan Andreas Gursky-sized prints. Wolf's two pieces run warm and cool, both columns of concrete and windows fill the frame. But whereas Architecture of Density #69 (2005) brings us close enough to the crowded facades of the buildings to see vestiges of humanity within the oppressive architecture (laundry hung out to dry, different styles of drapes and blinds), #28 (2003) is captured from further away, rendering the columns and rows of windows as merely a soulless grid of shapes and lines. One is more or less a pretty visual pattern, while the other illustrates the human spirit's struggle to exist, akin to flowers breaking through cracks in the pavement.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla of Puerto Rico continue the wonder-filled gazing with a unique view of the shifting landscape of the manufacturing-heavy Pearl River Delta. Their quiet film Amphibious (Login-Logout) (2005) follows turtles floating on a log from river to sea; the turtles--like so much of the work in "Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China"--just stare outward as they pass through the tumult. Much of the world is looking on like this, floating along while China's economic and cultural currents decide our path. Perhaps the speed of change that is currently transforming China is too rapid to fathom and the artists' role is not to comment, but simply to help us see and to share with us their creative witness.

LUKE STROSNIDER is a recent graduate of the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. To see more of his words, images, and projects, visit www.lensless.net.

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