



Culture Clash!

A review on the art show *Color Temperature*.

Contemporary photography from Belgium and China, presented in the Wintertuin, the central exhibition space at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp.

running from 2.10.'12 until 18.10.'12

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Tuesday the 2nd of October *Color Temperature* opened to the public. In the Wintertuin, a central exhibition at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, seven artists engaged in an artistic event that humbly showcased photography from two very different countries. Four Chinese artists, who also have a seat at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, met with three Belgian artists and teachers from the academy of Antwerp. Each was given a spot to try and impress the many visitors that soon flooded the exhibitions space. Although the four to six works each artists committed to the show did not testify to a clear concept at first, after spending a few minutes silently absorbing the whispering interaction between these works, it did start to show some promise of becoming interesting.

The event was a carefully presented and esthetically correct art show but lacked the initial persuasive force I have come to expect from other shows by some of the same artists presented here. The selection of photographs from Charlotte Lybeers' series *THE FURTAISTIC ADVENTURES OF THE CABBIT AND THE FOLF*, colorful, funny, weirdly scary portraits of people in animal suits, were presented on a large scale and demanded much of my attention. As well as a selection from the photographs by Geert Goiris, existing out of frivolously placed images, in different sizes, of what might be described as a typography of isolated objects, buildings and situations. Both Belgian artists mainly presented work I had seen before but succeeded in making me feel welcome in their way of looking at the world.

The work by the four Chinese artists had a fundamentally different effect on me. Liu Sanjians' photographs for example, the beautiful girl in traditionally looking garments and headwear, made me wonder what it was the artists was trying to tell me. As the repeating image of the girl showed her with a serious tension on her face and another where this act seemed to be broken with a jolt of laughter, I did not seem to be able to read the intent of the photographer. Was it a mere documentary of the communication between the photographer and this young girl, was it a staged performance, something else maybe? I didn't quite understand. The same was the case with the work by photographer Wang Jianwei. His black and white images of different, I would guess Chinese, temple features looked to be a cliché celebration of historic architecture rather than an intricate narrative or a fascinating discovery, hidden in some alien of subculture. It is however important to mention the apparent care that was put in presenting these images, from both artists really. They are visually meticulous and obviously made by photographers that understand and control their medium to the finest details.

The third Chinese photographer; Guo Weisheng, presented a selection of images that showed the daily life of Buddhist monks. Perhaps as a documentary insight to what, again, is one of the more popular cultural export products of China. They are beautiful, sometimes funny photographs but seemed a bit expected in a show such as this. I secretly thought of the Holland Village, situated in the Hangzhou Amusement Park. There it would be perfect to show cows, windmills or wooden shoes in a shallow attempt to summarize the Dutch culture but not a wax figurine of a recently successful right wing politician. Or how about a diagram that showed our failing social health care system? My point is, I guess I expected to see something that I could not have gotten from flipping through a tourist guide or a hotel television introduction. Instead these three photographers left me with a mouth full of cheese and tulips.

This exhibition is partnered with an exercise that was given to some of the students from each academy. In the project dubbed *Show Me How You Live* sixty two students, thirty two from each academy, shared parts of their daily lives with a sort of pen pal through the electronic exchange of photographs. This, by the way, can still be seen online at artesis-fotografie.be/showmehowyoulive. Unfortunately the project soon lost commitment from its participants, perhaps due to the inability to relate to each other. It was as if everyone enthusiastically started to shout incomprehensible words across the internet and then gradually started realizing it was nothing more than broken one-way communication. Something that, in a less cohesive rhythm, repeated itself in the Wintertuin.

I know, it sounds harsh but there is a silver lining to all of this. I think it cannot be neglected to mention the nature of the situation the Chinese artists found themselves in. Horribly outnumbered, with little to no initial research, they threw themselves at the mercy of one of the better centres for European art studies. So, would this change when by some flick of the wrist the location of the event traded places and it suddenly was situated at the Guangzhou Academy instead? I am pretty sure it would indeed! Most of the work by the attending Belgian artists would in that case most certainly suffer the same lack of understanding. It seems to be boiling down to the fact that *Color Temperature* is kind of like a game for the home crowd and yes, this should be taken in to consideration.

The two remaining artists yet to be discussed act as a strong symbol to the friction I felt. When entering the exhibition space the visitors were first confronted with the photographs by Bert Danckaert, opposing the work by Chen Hai. Danckaerts' work, that is often described as a colorful collection of movie-set-like cityscapes that somehow lack any actors, is professionally framed and printed in different sizes. The ready-made-ish theatre stages are clinically photographed and feel almost like monuments to a gruesome event I somehow failed to notice.

The work by Chen Hai however is rather personal, as if closer in contact with the viewer. They are black and white images that are situated in some village or city and repeatedly feature the presence of a young girl. Where the girl seems to be looking to one side of the image the decor behind her is edited, blurred out, with an effect that I can only associate with a very kitschy Photoshop filter. The work is presented within a rather weird passepartout made of a type of plastic or Styrofoam. This passepartout is then covered with something that looks like newspaper paper-maché (the lettering on the paper looking to be Putonghua or Standard Chinese to me). Again, this confuses me, in that this is something I would characterize as a rather cheap or easy artistic effect. The problem is however, the whole production does not look cheap at all. Come to think of it, for people that just travelled well over seven thousand kilometers just to showcase these works, it could hardly be called easy. To me, the work by Chen Hai is by far the most interesting out of the works by these Chinese artists. If only because it implies there is something more at work here than the simple registration of an individual interest.

Here it is then. One set of works I know, I understand, I respect and one that again leaves me wondering why. One I don't care for too much because it doesn't really qualify as art through my admittedly narrow set of expectations but then again, the other one does not evoke that much tension either. It eventually was the passepartout, used by the Chinese artists, that made me shamefully wonder if my disapproval of these works lies in their masters' lack of artistic skill or in my inability to recognise it as art altogether. However, these were exactly the kinds of questions that I was searching for to begin with. So I guess I still got what I was hoping for. A feeling of not getting it, which is paradoxically right at home here and arguably at any art show.

Color Temperature was a fabricated culture clash with a heavy stench of political motivations clouding the room. The officious introduction by the consult from Belgium did not exactly help to take some of the sting out of its formal stature. I felt like the exhibition was in part strongly meant (orchestrated even?) to be a political statement. Though, when only looking at the works though and forgetting for a second they are from rather different political contexts, it was beautiful to see the similarities as well as the abundance of differences. The flaws of both sides only allowed me to further connect to the works on a humanistic level. You see, in this modern globalized culture where images become ever more fluid, interchangeable and thus ambiguous, as a starting practitioner feeling like I do not understand my contemporaries is more inspiring than ever.

