

# ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2005



Liu Zheng, *Rural Peasant, Yanan, Shaanxi Province, 2000*, black-and-white photograph, 18 x 18". From the series "The Chinese," 1994–2002.

## LIU ZHENG

YOSSI MILO GALLERY

When Swiss émigré Robert Frank set out to document America for his laconic if pathos-laden photographic series "The Americans" in 1955, he encountered a society in the grip of postwar consumption, vitiated by racial inequalities and rampant class division. About as subtle as Tocqueville, Frank rendered ideological his documentation of an American odyssey through bus depots and Woolworth stores, presenting the sad reality of the everyday as a parade of typologies and archetypes. Stripped of pretense and drained of affect, his photographs offered the perfect antidote to *Family of Man*-style optimism. Yet for all his deadpan nihilism—his vision of an America democratic only in name—Frank's *title* still nags.

Much to his credit, Frank's project clearly informs Liu Zheng's recent series "The Chinese" (1994–2002), without overwhelming it. Forty-six eighteen-inch square gelatin-silver prints of monks, convicts, villagers, actors, opera singers, businessmen, transvestites, and corpses were culled from the series for his first solo show in the US. Liu's self-conscious images of mainland China relate to Frank's (as well as to those of August Sander, Lewis W. Hine, Weegee, and Diane Arbus), but they are also decidedly about the present and his privileged position as a native son. Liu's China is

achingly modern, a nation wrestling with all the inconsistencies that such a designation implies. As a child of the Cultural Revolution, he witnessed the dispersion of his own ancestral artifacts, which made way for ubiquitous state-sanctioned representations. And as a longtime photojournalist for the widely disseminated *Workers' Daily*, Liu was trained to read photography as propaganda. When he began "The Chinese," legislated subjects gave way to subjective fascinations: money, sex, death.

Many works, such as *Rural Peasant, Yanan, Shaanxi Province, 2000*, display a mordant humor stripped of irony, as its conspicuous subject steadily meets our gaze with a full, toothy grin; others, like *Two Homeless Boys, Beijing, 1998*, smack gratefully of rhetoric while still conveying an unembarrassed sympathy. Liu's sitters are participants, perhaps as a result of his medium-format camera that, unlike Frank's more compact Leica, is always noticed in advance of each shot. The resultant understanding runs deep. In images such as *Two Miners, Datong, Shanxi Province, 1996*, or *Xinjiang Girl Working in a Textile Factory, Hetian, Xinjiang Province, 1996*, labor is sordidly, hauntingly personi-

fied, while in *Two Rich Men on New Year's Eve, Beijing, 1999*, and *A Chinese Girl with a Foreign Friend, Beijing, 1996*, its effects are likewise sharply drawn. Communism might exist as a nowhere horizon, but capitalism fares little better. In all cases, the details count. In *Three Country Stripppers, Huoshentai, Henan Province, 2000*, ripped bedsheets form makeshift bras and sarongs that merely call attention to the young bodies they hardly cover.

Such is Liu's darkly lapsarian view, which seems at once historically over- and underdetermined. The despondency is relieved only by the occasional equanimity of a monk or priest or a body stilled in death. However, *A Girl Killed in a Traffic Accident, Wuhan, Hubei Province, 2000*, offers its subject as a specimen wholly unredeemed. Even the statue in *Buddha in Cage, Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, 1998*, languishes in a state of disrepair, forlorn on a vacant hillside. Nonetheless, the artist insists that he has no intention of leaving China. He also cautions against reading his work as negative censure, despite the pessimism he equivocally maintains. "For me," he says, "the operative word is 'studying.'"

—Suzanne Hudson

**GALLERIES** Edited by Michelle Golden

## Liu Zheng: The Chinese

The photographs of Liu Zheng are like the country that produced them: simultaneously unsettling and serene, with elements of tragedy balanced by the quietness of open faces and landscapes. By the time Zheng's body of work, "The Chinese," was published in a book by ICP-Steidl in 2004, the photojournalist-turned-artist was already receiving attention as divergent as his images. While his exhibitions were warmly received in Arles, Venice, Berlin, London and Tokyo, critics from Beijing to Pingyao accused Zheng of not only showing the ugly and sensational side of China but also providing work that could be misused as a propaganda tool against China.

Zheng started his career in 1991 as a photojournalist for the high-circulation *Workers' Daily* newspaper, and many of the images on display through August at New York's Yossi Milo Gallery reflect the compositional sensibility of this period. Zheng's press card gave him access to events and places he would not otherwise have been allowed to attend. The early photos, carefully and beautifully executed, offer the viewer a glimpse into a hitherto forbidden world, from the business-for-pleasure parties depicted in "A Chinese Girl with a Foreign Friend" to images of prisoners' life in "Convicts Fetching Water." In 1997, he quit his job at the newspaper, and embarked upon a country-wide photo-shoot with his Hasselblad 501. The project took seven years to complete, because Zheng had to earn money along the way, and because he didn't shoot what he didn't like. "I looked for elements of Chinese culture and history that intrigued me and personally captivated me," he said in a 2003-4 interview in Beijing. "There were times when I traveled for a month and shot nothing."

The seven-year plan worked in his favor: China is big and complex, and, due to economic, social and psychological changes brought about by modernization and globalization, Zheng found the Chinese to be struggling with a new identity. "Culturally, we are taught a certain level of hardship—literally, our ability to 'taste bitterness' is our burden," he says. "Contemporary [Western] society tells them they are supposed to be having something called 'leisurely fun,' but in fact they are not, despite the masks of so-called happiness on their faces."

Zheng's work caught the attention of Western curators. A solo show at the 2003 Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, France, was followed by "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China," at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2004, which in turn led to the publishing of a coffee-table book of the images.

Gallery owner Yossi Milo became interested in Zheng in 2002, when a colleague who had visited China sent him some JPEGs. "The work was incredible," Milo recalls. "Seeing references that are so familiar from the West—August Sander, Lewis Hine, Diane Arbus—within this other, amazing culture gave



Liu Zheng's risqué "Three Country Strippers," shot in Houshentai, Henan Province, 2000.

scope to the pictures. He gives you students, coal miners, inmates, transsexuals, prostitutes, orphans—a giant caged Buddha, even—and he gives them to you all of a sudden, in your face."

Milo selected 45 18 x 18 silver gelatin prints, highlights of Zheng's journey, which are for sale from a series of ten, priced at \$2,700-4,500. There is also a set of six 15 x 15 sepia-tinted silver gelatin prints, titled "Peking Opera," a fantasy tribute to that great cultural institution.

Zheng's work is figurative, formalist, purist, within psychologically complex settings. "My interest is in individual responses to events, especially the more extreme, challenging and even cruel events of everyday life," he says. From the earliest compositions of mentally handicapped patients and coal miners to his final selections of transsexuals mugging for the camera, the message has become increasingly intense, almost frenzied at points, but the form has remained the same. In the early images, a lot of attention is paid to the details of poverty, like dirt-caked skin, and subjects display a full-on, solemn engagement with the camera. Toward the end, the focus shifts to pathos: old men wear patched-together MacArthur-style military duds, a dancer poses on gravel in ripped tights and plastic heels, a warrior sits astride a urinating donkey. Bitterness may be the pill that his people take, but Zheng, it seems, is still holding on to it, and in his mouth it has turned to cynicism. If the Chinese are learning the pursuit of happiness, as the West mandates, then Zheng is giving us humor—isn't it funny? But the viewer senses that Zheng doesn't find it funny at all.

—Jennie D'Amato

"Liu Zheng: The Chinese" will be on view through Aug. 26. Yossi Milo Gallery is located at 525 W. 25 St. in New York City. For more information, call (212) 414-0370 or visit [www.yossimilogallery.com](http://www.yossimilogallery.com)

# ARTFORUM



New York  
CRITICS' PICKS



## Liu Zheng

YOSSI MILO GALLERY

525 West 25th Street

June 16–August 26

Zheng's photos of China during the political and economic upheavals of the last decade are a combination of the over-familiar and the strange. Stylistically, they suggest an amalgam of August Sander, Diane Arbus, and Nan Goldin: Flash-lit, centered subjects and black-and-white prints; alluring yet uncomfortable intimacy; typologies of occupations and phyla of "freaks." But while Zheng's style is derivative, the world he uncovers is rich and varied. From the gruesome *Waxwork in the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum*, 2000, to *Actors in a Film about the War Against the Japanese*, 2000, to the hulking figure of *A Poetess, Beijing*, 1998, Zheng is both artist and documentarian. Perhaps the most apt comparison of all is to Robert Frank, who, like Zheng, set out to capture the complexities of a vast and heterogeneous nation.

—Martha Schwendener



## THE NEW YORKER

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JULY 11 & 18, 2005

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GALLERIES-CHelsea

### **LIU ZHENG**

From 1994 to 2000, Liu travelled throughout China, photographing his countrymen. Forty-six of the extraordinary portraits he brought back are included in "The Chinese," his first American solo show, the best of them recalling the confrontational ardor and subversive wit of Arbus, Araki, and Peter Hujar. Because Liu's miners, mourners, strippers, actors, transsexuals, businessmen, beggars, convicts, and priests inhabit his square black-and-white prints with a vividness that never feels strained, his decidedly unofficial portraits have the power of revelation. Through Aug. 26. (Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370.)

# The New York Times

FRIDAY, JULY 8, 2005

## WEEKEND **Arts** FINE ARTS LEISURE

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### Art in Review

#### Liu Zheng

*The Chinese*  
Yossi Milo  
525 West 25th Street, Chelsea  
Through Aug. 26

You may recall photographs by Liu Zheng from recent exhibitions at the International Center for Photography: the show of new Chinese photography and video in 2004 and the ICP's first Triennial in 2003. Mr. Liu presented immense, staged scenarios with people in traditional costumes or — in the case of most of the women, in states of near nudity — acting out operatic scenarios.

None of the photographs in "The Chinese" appears to be staged, but almost all convey a dark narrative intensity — often bordering on surrealist — that lifts them above ordinary photojournalism. About half of the approximately 100 black and white pictures from the series, all measuring 18 inches square, are presented in this exceptionally gripping show.

August Sander, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus are among the more obvious sources of inspiration for "The Chinese," which Mr. Liu worked on from 1994 to 2002. He aimed for a cross section of Chinese society, but he favored its less privileged segments. Subjects include coal miners, prison inmates, strippers, transsexual performers, rural acting troupes, hospital patients, wax works tableaux and corpses in morgues or coffins. Rich contrasts of light and shadow and vividly realized textures give all the images an alarmingly heightened sense of reality. However varied the subjects, you always feel the urgency of a singular sensibility: a mix of curiosity, erotic attraction, repulsion, fear, mordant humor and humane sympathy.

KEN JOHNSON



JULY 14-20, 2005

## Reviews

**Liu Zheng, "The Chinese"**  
Yossi Milo Gallery, through Aug 26  
(see Chelsea).

Liu Zheng's black-and-white photographs, collectively titled "The Chinese," are sensational dispatches from a rapidly modernizing culture. Within the first few images—a costumed opera actress, two nude miners in a communal bath, a girl working in a dark and filthy factory—the series captivates viewers with photos of China's rich and poor, urban and rural, living and dead.

Though his subjects are unmistakably located in China, Zheng's portraits often recall images by Western photographers. "The Chinese" was reportedly inspired by August Sander's epic project "People of the 20th Century," and there are strong hints of Lewis Hine's pictures of child factory workers, Weegee's corpses and Diane Arbus's photos of socialites, performers and the

mentally disabled. There's even a Nan Goldin flavor in a few shots of carefully made-up transvestites and nudes in Beijing apartments.

But it is economic, not sexual, dependence that brings a topless young woman from the provinces to loll on a sofa in Beijing. Unlike Hine, Zheng does not use his photographs to moralize about the economic conditions in China. Instead, he combines his images in ways that let the contrasts speak for themselves. Whether juxtaposing an eccentrically dressed provincial folk entertainer and tawdry Beijing nightclub dancers, or transvestites in modern dress and male "actresses" in opera

costumes, Zheng opens our eyes to the unique circumstances of the Chinese.—*Merrily Kerr*



**Liu Zheng, *Xinjiang Girl Working in a Textile Factory, Hetian, Xinjiang Province, 1996.***