



L. & R. Mike Osborne, *Untitled* (from the series *Enter the Dragon*), 2007; inkjet prints; 40 x 50 inches; images courtesy the artist and Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas

DALLAS

Mike Osborne
Holly Johnson Gallery

Entitling his recent exhibition *Enter the Dragon*, Mike Osborne offers a series of photographs from the perspective of a foreigner on the outside looking in. Ending a recent term in China as a Fulbright Scholar, Osborne photographs almost as a tourist would, albeit an aesthetically sensitive tourist. The inevitable sense of the traveler portraying the “exoticism” of an unknown destination, however, is the least interesting aspect of this work. Furthermore, the recurring theme of conflict between old and modern China is, with a few exceptions, only journalistically noteworthy. What does make many of these well-crafted photographs more than the sum of their somewhat pedestrian subject matter is Osborne’s skill at finding eloquent stillness and monumentality in the seemingly mundane.

Less obviously staged than a Gregory Crewdson or Jeff Wall photograph, there is still a decidedly manipulated feel to Osborne’s art. As a viewer, one clearly accepts the familiarity of the world portrayed, yet color and light are adjusted and emphasized giving the images a slight shock of the unreal. In photos of construction sites and buildings there exists an eerie quietude, due mostly to the absence of human action. Despite the visual complexity of the compositions, a silent calm pervades these locations.

The artist successfully balances and unifies his images into a surreal yet neutral state that equalizes the presence of nearly every element pictured, while simultaneously highlighting objects of specific importance. In one memorably bright image, Osborne depicts a brilliant yellow excavator, standing still like a praying mantis in front of a hodgepodge of architecture cribbed from historical and modern styles. The image shows a city in flux yet static and fixed in a kind of hyperreal presentation.

Osborne is also adept at using the photographic lens as a framing device, moving us to reflect upon the many ways in which disparate worlds collide within urban space. The imposing advertising machine in modern China and the oversized scale of buildings are often contrasted with smaller, temporary structures built upon the cityscape. Emphasis on new industry suggests vigor and excitement, but it also implies a kind of resigned numbness to rapid social change.

In one striking image, excessively happy and wealthy Chinese citizens grin at us from a gigantic billboard; below this imposing idealization is the reality of everyday life: a lone figure sits in a worn automobile near a dilapidated bus-stop bench. Strangely, these dramatic juxtapositions often take on science-fiction overtones. In several of the photographs, neon lights glare and zigzag about the surfaces of contemporary architecture, making the structures feel nearly alive even in the dark solitude of night.

Aside from these varied narrative scenarios are powerfully realized formal investigations. Within every photograph, the artist captures a beautiful array of tonal differences and saturated colors. Every detail feels closely considered, including a sense of scale, proportion, light, reflection and composition. Even in works that are less than conceptually intriguing, Osborne marks each with vibrant and visceral impact.

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