

TURNING POINTS

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

FROM CHINA

ARTWORK LABELS

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Turning Points: Contemporary Photography from China explores the work of established and emerging photo-artists working in a time of rapid social and economic change.

In the 1990s, Chinese photography became one of the most dynamic and exciting areas in contemporary international art. Artists in China increasingly began to use photography not only to document their lives but to question and challenge the status quo. The 'first generation' of contemporary Chinese artists included here – those born in the 1960s – examined the societal impact of the Cultural Revolution, and reflected on their own and their families' personal experiences. The next generation of photographers, born in the 1980s and later, bring not only different life experience, having come of age in the twenty-first century, but are actively engaged with the global community in ways that were not possible in previous decades.

The works included in this exhibition offer commentaries on individuality and identity, cultural change, the transformation of Chinese cities, and the impact of consumerism and globalisation on contemporary society.

The National Gallery of Victoria began to collect contemporary Chinese photography in 2004 and in 2008 presented the exhibition *Body Language: Contemporary Chinese Photography*. Since that time the Gallery has continued to build this aspect of the collection.

More recently, in 2016 and 2017, the NGV photography collection was transformed through the generosity of Larry Warsh. An American collector, publisher and founder of AW Asia, a private organisation and exhibition space in New York, Warsh presented a suite of twenty-nine contemporary Chinese photographs as a gift to the Gallery. His donation comprises works by some of the most important Chinese photographic artists working in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Hong Lei, Rong Rong and Wang Qingsong. Warsh's presentation effectively doubled the NGV's holdings of contemporary Chinese photography, and this exhibition, which includes a number of works from this important gift, was made possible because of his generosity.

Cang Xin

Chinese 1967–

Six photographs from the Communication series

1996–2006

type C photograph

ed. 10/10

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.549.1-6

Cang Xin is a celebrated performance artist who uses photography as an adjunct to his practice. In these photographs he is documenting a ritualistic performance in which he licks various objects that have a symbolic resonance for him. Each object has a link to China and its history, although those meanings remain intentionally obscured and subjective. The artist literally experiences the objects through a sense of taste and a physical action; the intimate act of licking becomes a gesture of communication or communion with the past.

Wang Qingsong

Chinese 1966–

Last supper

1997

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.565

Last supper was one of a number of photographs commissioned for the exhibition *Christian Dior and Chinese Artists* that opened at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, in 2008. The work references the iconography of Western paintings of Christian subjects, in particular depictions of the Last Supper; however, in place of the twelve disciples Wang presents fashion models, and the simple meal traditionally depicted in Western art has been replaced with a feast of digitally enhanced, oversized, unnaturally perfect fruit and vegetables. The result is an image of affluence and excess.

Hong Hao

Chinese 1965–

Mr Hong please come in

1998

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.553

Hong Hao looks at the impact of consumer culture and materialism on his daily life. His work explores how images of affluence, presented in the popular media, have created a new ideal in contemporary China, replacing the old socialist one. Staged in elaborate settings, the photographs offer a mocking commentary on the widespread Chinese admiration of affluent Western lifestyles. *Mr Hong please come in* is one of a series of photographic portraits in which the artist acts as either the character of 'Mr Hong', or an alternative self, 'Mr Gnoh' (a reversal of the name 'Hong') in order to create a pseudo-Western signature.

Qiu Zhijie

Chinese 1969–

Tattoo no. 7

from the *Tattoo* series 1994

1994

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.557

In his *Tattoo* series, Qiu Zhijie overlays self-portraits with drawings, images and objects, such as the coins shown here. Discussing this series, he writes, 'The *Tattoo* series focuses on the problematic relationship between an image and its background ... In this series the two find common ground. The substance of the subject, the weight of the person, and the physicality of the figure all dissolve ... This series is a response to the futility and drowning of the individual brought about by the onslaught of the Chinese media culture which began to develop during the 1990s'.

Rong Rong

Chinese 1968–

East Village Beijing no. 15

1994

gelatin silver photograph, coloured dyes
ed. 6/12

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.556

Rong Rong is well known for his images that show the lives and activities of the avant-garde Beijing East Village artistic community during the 1990s. This photograph is one of a series created to document a famous performance by fellow artist Zhang Huan, during which Zhang covered his naked body with honey and fish oil and sat on a stool in a public toilet, allowing flies to swarm over his body. Rong Rong's photographs, made throughout the performance, form a crucial record of this performative action that was intended to comment on the squalid conditions in which the artists were living.

Zhang Huan

Chinese 1965–

Shanghai family tree

2001

type C photographs

ed. 25/25

Purchased with funds donated by
Jason Yeap and Min Lee Wong, 2008

2008.95.a-i

The faces of the two young men and the young woman in Zhang Huan's suite of nine photographs are used like the blank pages in a book carrying an increasingly oppressive weight of words. The Chinese characters inscribed on their faces gradually obliterate their features and identities. In the final photograph, the trio are shown in front of a new housing development in Shanghai. Their features are totally obscured, suggesting a parallel between the loss of personal identity and the rapid pace of development that is rendering the city unrecognisable.

Zhuang Hui

Chinese 1963–

Untitled

from the *One and Thirty* series

1996

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh in honour of
Tony Ellwood, Director NGV, 2018

2018.253

The series title of these photographs, *One and Thirty*, is didactic. There are 'thirty' portraits in the sequence and 'one' figure who appears in each image, the ever-smiling figure of the artist. Each photograph shows Zhuang Hui posed with an individual he has selected as the representative of a particular vocational or social group. In one of the works shown here Zhuang is photographed seated beside an older man holding a baby on his knee, a classic doting grandfather; in the other image he is photographed with a smartly dressed, young professional woman.

Zhuang Hui

Chinese 1963–

Untitled

from the *One and Thirty* series

1996

type C photograph

ed. 3/3

Gift of Larry Warsh in honour of
Tony Ellwood, Director NGV

2018.254

Wang Jinsong

Chinese 1963–

Standard family

1996

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2017

2017.261

Wang Jinsong's *Standard family* project investigates contemporary Chinese culture and the effects of the one-child policy, which was introduced in China in the 1970s as a means of curbing population growth. Without any clear agenda or critical stance, Wang invited families to participate in photo shoots where the parents invariably elected to pose flanking their lone child. When the images are repeated and presented in a grid, the 'standard' nature of the family unit becomes evident, allowing for a reading of generic poses and expressions across the various families, and inviting speculation and commentary on the effects of collectivism when imposed on social structures.

Hai Bo

Chinese 1962–

Wood horse

1999

gelatin silver photograph

ed. 16/20

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.551

Hai Bo

Chinese 1962–

I am Chairman Mao's Red Guard

2000

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.550

Hai Bo's paired portraits illustrate the cultural shifts that have occurred over forty years as people in China have become increasingly able to show their individuality. In this image, a photograph of a young woman proudly wearing the uniform of the student paramilitary movement, known as the Red Guard, and holding Mao's *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (commonly known as the *Little Red Book*) is shown counterpointed by a contemporary picture of the same person, now a smiling middle-aged woman wearing a floral dress. Such a garment would have been unthinkable – and unattainable – forty years earlier.

Qiu Zhijie

Chinese 1969–

Fine series A

from the *Standard Pose* series

1996–98

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.558

In common with many photographers working in China in the 1990s, Qiu Zhijie uses the performing body in his images. Throughout his career he has combined performance, video and photography to create works that explore ideas of history, individuality and identity in contemporary China. The four photographs from the *Standard Pose* series reference propaganda images produced during the Cultural Revolution and consider the failure of the future that they promised. Photographed in a simple studio setting and wearing contemporary clothes, the models, with their overly dramatic poses and facial expressions, appear comical rather than heroic.

Qiu Zhijie

Chinese 1969–

Fine series B

from the *Standard Pose* series

1996–98

type C photograph

ed. 5/10

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.559

Qiu Zhijie

Chinese 1969–

Fine series C

from the *Standard Pose* series

1996–98

type C photograph

ed. 7/10

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.560

Qiu Zhijie

Chinese 1969–

Fine series D

from the *Standard Pose* series

1996–98

type C photograph

ed. 5/10

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.561

Wang Jinsong

Chinese 1963–

City walls

2002

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.564

Wang Jinsong's photograph shows aspects of the architecture and history of Beijing, drawing attention to the abandonment of time-honoured buildings, homes and ways of living. *City walls* comprises a grid of 360 images of buildings in Beijing. The great majority of the photographs are of generic concrete constructions, printed in a grey monotone. Interspersed among these are richly coloured images showing traditional architecture. The placement of the photographs in a grid creates an immediate visual link to the idiosyncratic brick construction of the older buildings, which are rapidly being replaced by new, uniform reinforced concrete structures.

Weng Fen

Chinese 1961–

On the wall: Guangzhou (4)

2002

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.567

Weng Fen explores the impact of the rapid pace of change occurring in contemporary China. The sites that he shows are on the point of conversion into modern tower blocks. This is witnessed by anonymous citizens who often appear to be reflecting, in a calm but ultimately disempowered manner, on the alterations occurring before their eyes. In this work, Weng's teenage model, herself at a point of transition between childhood and adolescence, is used as a cipher through which we can consider the rise of urbanisation in China and the increasing transformation of large cities, often at the expense of the environment.

Zhang Dali

Chinese 1963–

2001 42A

from the *Demolition and Dialogue* series

2001

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.568

This photograph, showing a partially demolished wall emblazoned with a large-scale painted outline of the artist's head and his pseudonym, AK-47, brings together several aspects of the practice of multidisciplinary artist Zhang Dali. Zhang went into self-imposed exile from China in 1989 and when he returned to Beijing six years later, he found his home was in the midst of rapid change. Zhang wanted to protest the loss of traditional buildings, document the ruined remnants before they were swept away, and convey his sense of the loss of history and identity that was a consequence of those changes.

CHI Peng

Chinese 1981–

Apollo in transit

2005

type C photograph

ed. 2/12

Purchased NGV Foundation, 2006

2006.365

Chi Peng's works often contain naked figures spiriting or running through 'history', while refusing any start or ending of their visual narrative. Unravelling like a traditional Chinese scroll, the red brick wall surrounding the Forbidden City extends the length of this digitally altered panoramic image. The artist has inserted repeat images of himself running left to right alongside the wall, in front of a variety of onlookers. A metaphor for East/West relations, this theatrical image brings together potent symbols of traditional and contemporary life in China.

YANG Yongliang

Chinese 1980–

Eclipse

from the *On the Quiet Water, Heavenly City* series 2008
2008

inkjet print

Presented by the Mering Corporation Pty Ltd through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2012

2012.158

Yang Yongliang creates an optical illusion by combining elements of a traditional Chinese *shānshuǐ* (mountain-water) landscape painting with imagery from modern Shanghai life. From afar, the work appears to be a watercolour on paper, representing misty mountains and an ethereal sea stretching to the horizon. Upon closer inspection, the ghostly formations are revealed as digitally constructed collages of apartment blocks, buildings, construction sites and giant cranes. The built metropolis becomes indistinguishable from the natural landscape, highlighting the insidious modernisation, construction and environmental degradation characteristic of contemporary existence.

Wang Jinsong

Chinese 1963–

One hundred signs of demolition #1980

1998

type C photograph

ed. 22/30

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.562

The two photographs from the series *One Hundred Signs of Demolition* show the Chinese character 'chai', meaning 'demolition', that is commonly painted on the walls of buildings earmarked for destruction. For Wang Jinsong it has become a symbol of the inexorable push for urban reconstruction. In his photographs 'chai' came to stand for the loss of the ancient city, where buildings were once on a domestic scale and constructed to facilitate interaction in communal space, and their replacement with more socially isolating multistorey tower blocks.

Wang Jinsong

Chinese 1963–

One hundred signs of demolition #1995

1998

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.563

HUANG Yan

Chinese 1966–

Chinese landscape – Tattoo (Number 1)

1999, 2004 printed
type C photograph
ed. 2/12

Purchased, 2004

2004.773

Prior to commencing his photography practice in the 1990s, Huang Yan trained as a painter. His recent work combines the centuries-old, traditional style of landscape painting with new technology; the images are contemporary while also affirming traditional Chinese culture and values. The artist alludes to complex traditions in this 'self-portrait' in which his bare chest is painted with a traditional *shānshuǐ* (mountain-water) landscape painting. The title of the work implies permanence, yet the scenes painted on the body are ephemeral, suggesting the fragility of the natural environment and the transience of the body.

HUANG Yan

Chinese 1966–

Chinese landscape – Tattoo (Number 4)

1999, 2004 printed
type C photograph
ed. 1/12

Purchased, 2004

2004.774

Hong Lei

Chinese 1960–

Autumn in the Forbidden City

1998

type C photograph

ed. 7/10

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.555

WANG Qingsong

Chinese 1966–

Preincarnation

2002

type C photographs

ed. 18/25

Purchased with the assistance of
the Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest, 2007

2007.541.a-c

Wang Qingsong works in a theatrical style, constructing and photographing elaborate tableaux in which his models play the roles of characters from traditional Chinese stories and paintings, popular culture and Western historical painting. In the foreground of this work, men carry tools to vandalise or disassemble giant sacred 'sculptures' standing atop lotus thrones. The title suggests that the man has been reborn into the past, and upon arriving in Chinese pre-history, is set to destroy it in his relentless pursuit of materialism. This work alludes to China's relationship with its early history, and the dismantling of tradition during a period of rampant consumerism and modernisation.

Shi Guowei

Chinese 1977–

Cactus garden

2016

gelatin silver photograph, colour dyes

Purchased NGV Foundation, 2017

2017.458

Shi Guowei's subtly coloured image is created through the application of layered pigment to the surface of the photograph. In some areas of the work, the colour is applied with lifelike precision, in others it registers as being 'not quite right'. His palette recalls that of early colour photographs in which the colour fades or shifts over time, creating a nostalgic quality; however, it also creates an awareness of the artificiality inherent in the scene. Although the planting in this cactus garden is 'naturalistic', it is clearly a constructed landscape, and not the wild arid landscape it would seem at first glance.

Sheng Qi

Chinese 1965–

Memories (Me)

2000, printed 2004

type C photograph

ed. 2/5

Purchased, 2004

2004.775

Sheng Qi was a key member of the '85 New Wave art movement in China that championed freedom of expression in the arts over state-approved Social Realism. He was deeply affected by the changed political climate following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, and responded in a physically direct and shocking way. He cut off the little finger of his left hand, buried it in a flowerpot, and went into self-imposed exile in Rome. When he returned to Beijing a decade later, he used his disfigured hand as the backdrop for a series of self-portraits that juxtapose his past and present.

Sheng Qi

Chinese 1965–

Memories (Mao)

2000, printed 2004

type C photograph

ed. 2/5

Purchased, 2004

2004.777

Sheng Qi

Chinese 1965–

Memories (Mother)

2000, printed 2004

type C photograph

ed. 2/5

Purchased, 2004

2004.776

Wang Qingsong

Chinese 1966–

Another battle no. 3

2001

type C photograph

ed. 1/20

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.566

Wang Qingsong works in a theatrical style, constructing and photographing elaborate tableaux in which his models play the roles of characters from traditional Chinese stories and paintings, contemporary life, popular culture, and Western historical painting. In this work he shows a wounded soldier, trapped behind the battlelines, caught between gunfire and razor wire that is littered with soft-drink cans, one of the most common forms of litter found globally. In this highly theatrical image Wang has taken imagery from popular cinema and used it to highlight the challenges presented by Western-style consumerism.

Hong Hao

Chinese 1965–

My things no. 2

2001–02

type C photograph

Gift of Larry Warsh, 2016

2016.552

Completely filled from edge to edge with ordinary, domestic objects, this image is a visual archive of things used by the artist in everyday life. Describing his creative process, Hong Hao writes, 'Day by day, I put my daily consumed objects into a scanner piece by piece, like keeping a visual diary. After scanning the original objects, I'll save them in digital forms and categorise these digital files into different folders [on] my PC, in order to make a collage of them later on. This task, like a yogi's daily practice, has become a habit in my day-to-day life as well as a tool to observe the human condition in contemporary consumer society'.