Art

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Through photography and our bodies, we saw things differently

Away we go (Clockwise)

Into the wild

With their intimate self-portraits, RongRong & inri have been at the forefront of Chinese photography for nearly a decade. Edmund Lee talks to RongRong ahead of the Beijing-based couple’s Hong Kong debut

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When a dejected RongRong played around with a camera borrowed from the photography shop owner in his rural village in 1988 – after failing the art academy entrance exam, as a painter, for three consecutive years – the development of China’s photographic art took a tiny if notable step forward. Having previously risen to prominence with his documents of the experimental art scene at Beijing’s East Village during the 1990s, RongRong’s career took a drastic if equally intriguing turn with his marriage to Japanese portrait photographer inri. Since then, the husband-and-wife team have been recognised for their various series of self-portraits, which juxtapose the two’s life stories against both natural landscapes from around the world and urban landscapes in a rapidly developing China. In 2007, the artist couple further cemented their place in the Chinese photography discourse with the establishment of the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, a non-profit contemporary art space specialising in photography.

Ahead of their first exhibition in Hong Kong, RongRong spoke with Time Out from his Beijing studio.

Your early series, East Village (1993-1998), is now an important record of the Chinese performance art scene. How did you come across this Beijing artist community?

I came to Beijing in 1992 looking to enrol in a photography school. I ended up taking a two-month short course, after which I began to wander around Beijing. As for East Village, it was a coincidence that I ended up living there. I arrived there in 1993, and it’s completely down to the cheap rent. [Laughs] The costs of coming to Beijing were expensive enough for me. After living there for about six months, the likes of [avant-garde artists] Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming also moved in.

How’s your relationship with them?

It was very good, because we all came from other parts of the country. We’re all very young and very lonely. I think they’re happy to know me, as there’s not a single person doing photography in East Village. Zhang and Ma are both graduates from art academy, and I felt close to them partly because I wanted to be a painter in the first place. But of course, I’d already changed my ambition to photography then.

From the Ruins series (1996-1998) and the Liulitun, Beijing series (2000-2003), it looks like you have a particular interest in documenting sites of demolition. Back in 1994, there were a few performance artists who raised a lot of attention to East Village – they did their performance naked and were taken away. Eventually we were evicted from there; we couldn’t live there anymore. Before then, I was concerned with the little village, the people, their living conditions, the performance art and the environment. But from 1995 onwards, I started to pay attention to the changes in Beijing as a whole. There was a lot of demolition going on, and it concerned me because I’ve been living in that city. So I shot the Ruins series. But I’m not only concerned about the demolition process. In the ruins, on the walls after demolition, you could still see the posters and calendars that had been left behind. You could see humanity there. You could feel the kind of people who had lived in each building. That was my entry point.

You’ve been collaborating with inri since 2000. How did you two decide on a photography style together?

We didn’t decide on a style at first, because we’re both very independent. Each of us had already done several series of individual works by then. Nine months after we met at my Tokyo exhibition in 1999, she decided to come to Beijing. And we went
Bodies were already 'full', and we had to 'empty' ourselves. As a photographer, you take things from the outside world through your lens, your film, your mind and then your body. It was an instinctive move to empty myself [at a certain stage]. My initial thought was simply to create a library about photography. I had a lot of books, as I carried a lot of books home from whichever country I travelled to. I was hoping to share these books with the public. But gradually, this has come to include an exhibition hall, an artist studio, and... it soon became a photography centre. But it started with a little dream.

Three Begets Ten Thousand Things – a photography exhibition of RongRong’s solo work between 1993 and 2000, as well as RongRong & inri’s collaborative projects from 2000 onwards – is at Blindspot Gallery and Blindspot Annex Sep 10-Nov 13.

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You’re often posing naked.

At that time, language was not the only – and certainly not an important – way of communication between us. At the beginning, I didn’t speak Japanese and she didn’t speak Chinese. Through photography and our bodies, we saw things differently. The work shows the relationship between man and nature, as well as the relationship between me and inri.

You established the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in 2007. What’s your objective?

Both of us had worked in photography for some 15, 16 years then. We felt like our bodies were already ‘full’, and we needed to ‘empty’ ourselves. As a photographer, you take things from the outside world through your lens, your film, your mind and then your body. It was an instinctive move to empty myself [at a certain stage]. My initial thought was simply to create a library about photography. I had a lot of books, as I carried a lot of books home from whichever country I travelled to. I was hoping to share these books with the public. But gradually, this has come to include an exhibition hall, an artist studio, and... it soon became a photography centre. But it started with a little dream.

Entering the exhibition, it is immediately apparent that Chabet has no interest in visual seduction. Composed primarily of standard dimension plywood boards and shelving units with metal brackets, these are starkly conceptual works. Everywhere are sharp lines, opaque forms and neon arrows. The tone of the works is austere and there is an insistence of order that can be traced back to Chabet’s background in architecture.

Among the strongest works is a cluster of blue boards propped in V-shapes in the centre of the first room. Titled Cargo and Decoy (1989/2010), the splayed forms allude to ocean waves and cleverly reference cargo cults in the South Pacific. Yet the cramped arrangement of the surrounding works suffocates the installation. Tables, fabrics and wooden ledges spill out from every wall diluting the viewing experience.

Ideally, the subsequent rooms provide more space to interact with the assemblages but the work becomes increasingly impenetrable.

To Be Continued – Hong Kong

*** Osage Kwun Tong Until Sep 21

Roberto Chabet’s To Be Continued – Hong Kong is the type of exhibition that you would never find in your average Central gallery. Space is of the essence to Chabet’s constructions, the largest of which straddles 17.2m in Osage’s Kwun Tong outpost. Hailed as one of the most influential artists in the Philippines, this show offers a window into Chabet’s prolific career. At the core of the selection are his signature plywood pieces.

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In many senses, the work Untitled (1994/2010) can be read as a metaphor for the artist. It is a tall wooden box with mirrors lining the interior walls. At the bottom rests a labyrinth of smaller vanity mirrors. Surprisingly, when the viewer peers into the sea of glass they can barely glimpse one or two reflections of themselves. However compelling, the work has a cryptic quality not unlike Chabet himself.

Although he is a formidable presence in the Philippines, this exhibition – along with Imagined Geographies, a concurrent exhibit of Chabet’s drawings at Osage Soho, until September 11 – is among the 74-year-old artist’s first shows overseas. One only wishes there were a larger range of works to offer more context or entry points into his oeuvre. Payal Uttam

Ocean of Ideas Cargo and Decoy (1989/2010)

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