

PHOTO ESSAY by Christopher Choa

about face

Luo Yongjin's intriguing portraits of public opposites



With his extraordinary photographs, Luo Yongjin captures an emerging Chinese urban landscape that straddles private and public worlds. At first glance, his architectural subjects may seem anonymous (they are empty of people and context), but they aren't devoid of meaning. Buildings reveal a great deal about their builders; indeed, they are eloquent, and occasionally unintended surrogates for their creators.

Luo's keenly observed portraits of structures reveal the preoccupations and naked egos of their makers. In short, they represent face. Over the past ten years, Luo has photographed countless architectural images. His early work captures Henan's "new residences", built privately, quickly, and in the cheapest way possible. That theme continues with the overwhelming mass and anonymity

of apartment blocks in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. In Luo's photographic "mosaics", his impressionistic images stretch to capture the whole without losing detail. His series of bizarre "villas", visible at high speed from passing trains on the way to and from Hangzhou, speak about the longing for the "ideal" house, be it a status symbol, or a strategy for storing newly found wealth.

Luo's images of buildings reflect makers who are occasionally arrogant, at other times quietly opportunistic, but in most cases generally uncomfortable in a new world of bewildering growth. Bombastic government headquarters are designed to impress. Garish gas stations aspire to become petroleum pavilions. Nouveau riche castles strain to be worldly.

For all their bravado, these constructions appear strange and



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awkward in the glare of public view. Removed from the traditional Chinese settings of protecting walls and controlled gates, the buildings seem to feel exposed; they shrink back from barren "no-man's-land" or crowd into tight areas without acknowledging each other. Although they are intended to be public expressions, they remain stubbornly private and isolated.

In one impressive series, new constructions on tight urban lots in Luoyang are entirely preoccupied with internal space, and the new-found privilege of private property. Buildings bulge furtively, anxious to capture floor area. Large expanses of blank walls are punctuated by narcissistic windows whose locations are determined only by internal needs.

But this urban environment also inadvertently describes a new

kind of public domain, and perhaps, even a future language of architecture. The facades of these building are reversed; instead of responding to civic patterns and public life, they display only their private pre-occupations. This is an emerging, and increasingly familiar pattern.

In China's rapidly morphing world, Luo's subjects are lost and unsure which way to turn. In documenting China's urban conditions, he makes a statement about the overwhelming insularity of modern life. His photographs - stark, haunting, and ultimately beautiful - illuminate the uncertain, but deeply revealing motivations of the modern builder. ■

About Face, ArtSea Gallery, 2F, Bld.9, 50 Moganshan Lu, May 20-June 30 (6227 8380)