

Maleonn

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MALEONN

By Dorota Kozinska

TO SPEAK OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART AS A PHENOMENON IS TO BARELY HINT AT THE MEGA UPHEAVAL IT CAUSED IN THE INTERNATIONAL ART WORLD, AND IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ITS CULTURE.



Dejà Vu No. 2
Courtesy: CSG

These young and unflinchingly, audaciously original artists are breaking down all the barriers, with virtuoso skills combing the rich elements of their ancient culture with the avant-garde of the post- post- post-modern era, (and maybe we can now dispense with that term once and for all).

Born in Shanghai in 1970, Maleonn is yet another phenomenal artist to show in Canada. Taking the camera as his medium, he has been producing series upon series of the most fantastical, and fantastic images ever seen.

Following in the tradition of other photographers who stage their settings, Maleonn engages friends to pose for his unusual, enigmatic scenarios.

Recipient of this year's Spider Award for the Black and White Photograph of the Year, widely considered to be the world's premier black and white photography competition, he is in fact a master of colour, his favourite being red. And does he know how to use it! It may appear as a tiny accent in an otherwise monochromatic landscape or play the grand role on giant floating banners or stick thin girls' dresses.

To look at Maleonn's photographs is to enter a new, and very strange world. His settings and costumes are meticulously planned, sketched out in drawings and detailed written notes, yet despite the brazen theatricality, they are never stifling or contrived. Bizarre, yes, unsettling, sometimes, and very often quite humorous.

His *Shanghai Fables* series is broken into chapters with whimsical titles: *My Circus* (2005), with a subtitle: *Life is only a lonely circus, we lonely play ourselves. Although this is just a lonely circus, we still have to play lively; or We are so humble and small but flourishing alive* (2004); *Days on the Cotton Candy*, and so on.

And there is cotton candy galore in that series, there are boys in Mao uniforms engaging in mysterious rituals, men in grey coats and rabbit masks riding bicycles, girls in colourful dresses and yellow rubber gloves standing in the middle of circus-like bathrooms. Large sheets of fabric billow in the wind, two men with white, featureless masks wrestle in a barren industrial site.

Maleonn has opened a gate to a place we do not know, a place that intrigues us infinitely even though we do not understand the mysterious goings on, we don't care, because there is such magic in these images, such precision, such care taken of every detail, from the most complex, populated scenes, to the most serene, almost otherworldly, ghostly apparitions.

Maleonn uses the computer in addition to his camera, offering, what he calls "unlimited possibilities", and not only in the creation of the images, but even more importantly for the artist, in their dissemination.

And yet, when looking at his photographs one has the impression of looking at a documentary from a theatre production, or snap shots of acrobats practicing in an empty

park, yet something is not right, the rope held by the masked man bends in defiance of gravity, and the young woman standing in a room littered with red carrots and accompanied by a white rabbit is blind.

Amongst these exquisitely staged images are a series of less magical realism type, portraits of young boys on the streets of Shanghai, a female flame thrower alone in a narrow street, a man sitting in a tub in a black-and-white tiled bathroom staring at an open window.

There is an interesting physicality in the art of the young Chinese artists, from Zhang Huan's piled bodies and tattooed faces, to Wang Tiende's paper dresses, and so it is with Maleonn's oeuvre based entirely on the human figure and the endless variations on the context it is placed.

At once astoundingly mature in his approach to his craft, Maleonn's scenes also speak of the joy and exploration of youth, but first and foremost, they are a portal to a world of limitless imagination.

To check his images, go to Maleonn's personal website: www.maleonn.com □

EXHIBITION

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