

## NEW YORK

## Sze Tsung Leong

YOSSI MILO GALLERY

Sze Tsung Leong's extraordinary "History Images" series, 2002–2005, documents the human habitats of the new China. Taken mostly from elevated viewpoints, the photographs command large vistas; basic to all of them is a sense of great space, which they need every inch of to encompass the gargantuan construction projects and freshly built housing developments that they describe. This framing of distance is one device through which Leong's work develops its visual power. Another is the frequent repetition of geometric forms, in the columns



Sze Tsung Leong, *Beizhuanzi II, Siming District, Xiamen*, 2004, color photograph, 72 x 87 1/2".

and rows of identical windows and terraces, vertical tower blocks and their horizontal stories, that make up the countless units of the new architecture's visual and physical grid. In several photographs, Leong observes the dwarfing closeness of these numbingly regular, frighteningly pristine arrangements to older buildings, making China's imperial, Communist, and current histories abut. Here debris, demolition, and the abused earth of urban spaces in forceful transition often appear as correlatives to the rigid order they are intended to produce—and the modest low-rise housing of former times in any case seems heartbreaking in proximity to the massive new. The skies in today's China look mostly whitish gray, and the farther parts of Leong's C-prints often dissolve in haze: There is no clear air, no view through.

The urbanist and the economist, the statesman and the historian, would all find news in these photos. Nothing I have seen or read conveys more vividly the enormous change that China is undergoing. And the news is bad—the images are grandly disturbing, arguing for the new society as a place of inhuman scale, erased history, and enforced, anonymous uniformity. On a larger level still, the work makes you worry for the world, and for its ability to tolerate the accelerated rates of consumption and waste in the global economy that is coming into being.

It should be said, though, that Leong's China is very clearly an aesthetic construct. (I suspect that the "History Images" title announces this right from the beginning; history painting, we remember, was at the ambitious top of the premodernist Beaux-Arts aesthetic hierarchy.) It's not just the contrivances of framing and perspective; more obvious still is the decision to work almost entirely without human subjects. Leong's cityscapes are largely vacant. Some photographs must have been shot in early morning; others show figures so remote and small as to be almost invisible—though the contrast between these pathetically tiny individuals and the mighty planar structures surrounding them is not lost on us. The contrast is weird: Implicit in the photographs is the presence of an enormous population, the grids whose regularity and size are so emphasized being made up of boxes, each one of which is the container for a family. Another photographer would have shown these places crammed with the busy life that must be there—but Leong arranges artfully to show them empty.

The sense that most overtly results is of a social space waiting to be lived in, waiting to be born. That feeling is ambiguous, though—we could equally be seeing the aftermath of disaster. In fact, Leong's images kept reminding me of a more explicitly tragic and strange group of photographs, very different in manner and subject: the albumen silver prints that Felice Beato made in Lucknow in 1858, after its ruin in what the British still call the Indian Mutiny—scenes of a city made desolate, inhabited by living ghosts. Inserting that kind of vision into views of the present, Leong questions the future of the cities of China, and of the world.

—David Frankel