Rong Rong and His "Ruin Pictures"

I
Representations of architectural ruins in China only began after the country entered the modern era. The first serious effort to document such ruins was made by European travelers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Their works mixed western sentiment for decayed buildings, orientalistic fascination with "old China," and archaeological or ethnographic interests. Starting from the early twentieth century, some young Chinese artists went to study in Europe; what they learned there included a prevailing European "ruin" aesthetics and representational formula. Upon returning to China they found similar inspiration in old temples and pagodas. Such picturesque and sentimental images never gained real life, however. What became influential and finally developed into a modern visual culture in China was a different kind of ruin image. Instead of inspiring melancholy and poetic lamentation, these images evoke pain and terror. They shook their audience because they register, record, restage, or simulate destruction -- destruction as atrocity and violence that left a person, a nation, a city, or a country with a wounded body and psyche.

II
It thus becomes understandable why ruin images in modern Chinese art have been intrinsically connected to important political and social events. From the beginning of this century, representations of war ruins played an important role in promoting nationalism and China's transformation into a modern nation-state. Such representations provided the most concrete and direct proof of foreign invasions and could most effectively accelerate nationalist sentiment. Because of its inherent empirical "truth value," the photograph could play this role better than any traditional art form such as painting or sculpture, especially when news photos became a regular feature of the newspaper. Perceived as reality itself, a "ruin" photograph constructed an "observed" world in print for paintings to represent.
Depicting devastated fields during the civil war or destroyed cities after a Japanese bombing, these paintings often recreate the scenes based on historical photos. Representations of ruins again became an important phenomenon in Chinese art in the 1970s and 80s. A type of painting, known as Scar Art, depicted tragedies of the Cultural Revolution. While such paintings were often created by academic artists in a realistic style, young experimental artists used installations and art happenings to "restage" their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of representing a past era realistically, they often evoked a chaotic environment typical of the Cultural Revolution -- ruined Big-character Posters, tattered papers and broken objects, dilapidated layers of writing and painting. As its name suggests, the Cultural Revolution started in the cultural, ideological, and political spheres. Intended to be destroyed were not cities and villages, but "old" ideas and cultures. What replaced the old and stood for the new were not grand monuments, but a visual environment comprised of revolutionary images, colors, and slogans. Consequently, works by experimental artists in the post-Revolution era represent the destruction or self-destruction of this environment.

III
Images related to destruction, fragmentation, and ruins continue to be an important component of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s. These images do not constitute
a single trend or development. Some artists continue the deconstruction of the socialist visual language, but the fragmented images they create are much subtler and are imbued with personal experience. For example, the painter Cai Jin transforms the revolutionary color red into a personal symbol of ruination and decay; and Shi Chong employs a supra-realistic style to evoke the sense of violence and vulnerability. Other artists represent "wasted" environments and people in contemporary China. Their works continue a realistic/humanistic tradition advanced by critical Chinese writers and artists throughout the twentieth century.

But the majority of "ruin" representations created by Chinese artists in the past decade are related, in one way or another, to the transformation of the city during China's drastic modernization and commercialization. A striking aspect of Chinese cities over the past five years has been a never-ending destruction and construction: a forest of cranes and scaffolding, the roaring sound of bulldozers, the dust and mud. Old houses are coming down everyday to make room for new commercial buildings, often glittering high-rises in so-called "Chinese postmodern" style. Thousands of people have been relocated from the inner city to the outskirts by official decree. These conditions imply changing conceptions of temporality and spatiality, and supply both the context and the content of Rong Rong's photos of not only demolished buildings and abandoned posters, but also his own images amidst dilapidated, ghostly sites. These photos affiliate the artist with not only physical ruins but also an "aesthetics of ruins." Unlike the representations of the bygone destruction of the Cultural Revolution, these images have their focus in present, and transport a startling sense of loss and absence in a contemporary Chinese urban environment.

IV

Rong Rong is one of the young experimental artists
who emerged around the mid-90s. To this generation of artists, the 1960s and 70s had become remote past, and their works often respond to China's current transformation, not to history. This is especially true of Rong Rong, a farm boy turned avant-garde artist. Growing up in the Fujian countryside, he was skilled in the fields but failed almost every course in elementary and junior high schools except for studio art. This was followed by three failed attempts to enter a local art school. By chance he discovered photography and developed a passion for it. First he rented cameras to take portraits and landscape shots. He then bought his own camera after working for three years in his father's grocery store. Equipped with this camera and what little remained from his savings he went to the Capital. In Beijing he took photography classes here and there while making friends with experimental artists and musicians. When his savings were gone he tried his hand at various odd jobs, including taking passport pictures in a photo studio. He moved from one place to another place, often guided by whatever housing was cheapest. In 1993 he moved into a tumble-down village on the city's southwest fringe. Later known as the "East Village" (Dong cun), this artistic community produced some of the most daring works (mainly performance art and photography) in contemporary
1997 NO. 1 (1) Beijing 100 x 150cm collected by Smart Museum of Art, Chicago

1997 NO. 1 (2) Beijing 100 x 150cm
Chinese art, before it was closed down by the police in June 1994.\(^{\text{5}}\)

Coming from a remote southern province, Rong Rong was both amazed and disgusted by Beijing: "It is merely a fifteen-minute bicycle ride from the center of the city to my place -- from the light-illuminated Great Wall Hotel to the pitch-black East Village: the experience is like traveling from heaven to hell."\(^{\text{6}}\) But he soon found out that places even darker and more desolate were everywhere in Beijing, often next to those glimmering high-rises. These were "demolition sites": empty lots occupied by half-destroyed houses; garbage scattered among the rubble. Nothing remotely valuable could be expected to have remained there; the only thing left by the former residents were the torn pictures covering the broken walls. These ruined pictures -- mostly portraits of famous movie stars and fashion models -- captured Rong Rong’s eye with their mixture of beauty and vulnerability.

V

Let us take a closer look at Rong Rong's images of architectural ruins and abandoned images. More than any other photographs of the subject, these images capture the anxiety and silence adrift in these modern ruins. Several photos in this exhibition were taken in 1996 in China's capital Beijing, one of the fastest developing cities in the world (1997 NO. 1-1 Beijing). The scenes are terrifying: hundreds of houses were turned into rubble and a whole area in the inner city suddenly became a no-man’s land. What has happened? Where are the residents? The pictures offer few clues to answer these questions. What they offer, at the center of one image, is an abandoned illusion: a pin-up nestled inside a wooden niche that has somehow survived the destruction (1997 NO. 1-2 Beijing). The picture is torn; but the woman keeps her composure, staring sweetly at the surrounding bricks and dirt with an unchanging expression. A dispassionate viewer, in fact, might claim that the scene captured in this photo is quite peaceful: the sun is bright; a man strolls at ease among the ruins; and the pin-up continues to smile at us. Like any representation of ruins, the subject of these photographs is the absence or disappearance of the subject. But Rong Rong fills the vacancy with images. In another work (1996 NO.10 Beijing), these images --large pin-up posters, are torn and even missing a large portion of the composition, but they still exercise their alluring power over the spectator -- not only with their seductive figures but also with their seductive spatial illusionism. With an enhanced three-dimensionality and abundant mirrors and painting-within-paintings, they transform a plain wall into a space of fantasy, even though this wall is the only thing left of a house.
These broken images were superimposed upon another image in his memory. In an interview he told me this episode in his childhood: I remember I was in love with a picture in a calendar. That was a portrait of the Taiwan popular singer Deng Lijun. I was small, not yet ten years old. Her songs were forbidden at that time [because of their "bourgeois" flavor]. People told me that her songs were obscene. This calendar was given to my father by one of his friends from the South. It was hung upstairs, in my bedroom. As a boy I was rather timid and was often scared when sleeping alone. But I felt safe when I saw the portrait. Everyone said she's beautiful and I also thought so. Her eyes followed me around and to me she was actually living. I often asked myself why her songs were forbidden. Later, such feelings came back to me when I saw the torn pictures on those broken walls.

This personal experience helps explain an intrinsic contradiction in Rong Rong's ruin pictures: on the one hand, they record a brutal invasion of a private place; on the other, they convey little feeling of calamity or tragedy. We can also understand why in his photos ruins also serves as the most frequent setting for him to representing his longing for lost love (Marriage Photo Series: 1997-2000 Beijing).

To Rong Rong, an abandoned picture found inside a demolished building is inevitably imbued with his own memory, and he always substitutes himself for the original owner of such pictures in his imagination.

But to us the viewers of Rong Rong's photographs, these works must also pose questions about the missing subjects of the ruined houses. The place shown in the photographs could be any demolished site in Beijing, and the pin-up pictures are too superficial to help recognize any individuality (and this is probably exactly why they were left behind). In other words, the ruin and the ruined posters do not register a specific past, nor are they associated with the present or future. What they help construct in these photographs is a breakdown between private and public spaces. The house has been turned inside out, and its interior decoration has become part of the city's exterior spectacle. Ruins like these are places in Beijing...
that belong to everyone and to no one. They belong to no one because the breakdown between private and public space does not generate a new kind of space. Ruins form "blind spots" in an overly crowded city. People walk by half-destroyed houses in their neighborhood without looking at them, because they seem simply "not there." These ruins are therefore "non spaces."

VII
To fully analyze several large groups of Rong Rong's ruin pictures -- those of architectural ruins, the "death" of photos, and two "wedding gown" series that situates the photographer himself amidst ruined buildings -- would require a much longer essay. It is significant, however, to note that each of these groups again includes a number of mini-series. In the group of "architectural ruins," for example, a mini-series consists of two photos of the same scene but taken from different distances. In one case, one of the two photos shows a surviving wall of a ruined house, whose exposed wooden skeleton (which curiously resembles a Christian cross) is accentuated by peeling paper and dilapidated pictures (1996 NO. 1·1 Beijing). The other photo is a close-up of the dilapidated pictures on the post. We can now differentiate Marilyn Monroe from Chinese fashion stars. We also recognize the various degrees of damage the images have suffered, as well as traces of absence: the thumbtacks on the bare wall indicate the former existence of some images, which are now completely gone.

In another case, the close-up again focuses on a ruined pin-up image in a larger view (1996 NO. 1·2 Beijing), and it again turns our attention from panorama to detail: the fake frame of the image, the slashes on the woman's face, and the dirt pouring out from behind the broken poster. The perceptual change produced by each of these two photo series, therefore, is a shift from ruins to ruined pictures, from architecture to image, and from context to content. A panoramic view includes
ruined pictures as an integral element, but the ruined pictures becomes the sole content of the close-up photo. Each series, therefore, produces a shift in the viewer's perception from a "photo" to a "photo-within-photo." This shift is realized by redefining the relationship between a photo and its subject matter. By filling the second photo with a printed image, Rong Rong identifies this photo as a "meta-picture" which, in T. W. J. Mitchell's words, "explain[s] what pictures are -- to stage, as it were, the 'self-knowledge' of pictures."\textsuperscript{viii}

"To explain what pictures are" is also the purpose of another group of photos by Rong Rong that focus exclusively on ruined pictures. A study of the "mortality" of photographs in Beijing, pictures in this group document the "fate" of commercial or propaganda photos displayed in various public spaces -- on the street, in parks, and in exhibition windows. Faded and discolored, these are "ruins" of photographs. "Photos are such vulnerable things" -- Rong Rong murmured while looking at these photos. It is unclear whether he is commenting on his own photos or on the ruined images in them.

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\textsuperscript{1} This essay is based on my discussion of Rong Rong's work In Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999), with modifications.
\textsuperscript{ii} Contrary to the persistent interest in depicting ruins in European art, there was a taboo in pre-modern China against preserving and portraying architectural ruins: although abandoned cities or fallen palaces were lamented in poetry, their images, if painted, would imply inauspiciousness and danger. For a fuller discussion of ruin images in Chinese art, see Wu Hung, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern," in Gao Minglu, ed., Inside Out: New Chinese Art (New York: Asia Society, 1998), pp. 50-66.
\textsuperscript{iii} I have discussed works by these two artists in Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century.
\textsuperscript{iv} Some representative examples of these trends, such as Yuan Dongping's Sisters and Zhang Huan's 12 Square Meters, are discussed in ibid.
\textsuperscript{v} For information about the "East Village" community, see my essay accompanying Zhang Huan's 12 Square Meters in ibid.
\textsuperscript{vi} Interview with Rong Rong by this author on May 11, 1998. Unpublished manuscript.
\textsuperscript{vii} Ibid.