The centrepiece of this exhibition at the Walsh Gallery in Chicago (October 23, 2004–January 28, 2005) was an eight-meter-long photograph showing a panorama of Wuxi, titled Mirage. One of Miao Xiaochun's latest works, the photo was taken at the top of Huishan, a famous hill in this ancient city in southeast China. A viewer of the picture can still spot some traditional buildings here and there. But this view is dominated by a sea of skeleton-like high rises, most of which have emerged only in the past few years. It is this abrupt transformation of the city that has inspired Miao Xiaochun to title the photograph Haishi shenlou, literally, "a city in the ocean with pavilions made of seashells." As he explains in the interview attached to this short introduction (see below):

It seems that all those modern buildings you see from the hilltop shouldn’t be there, but they’ve suddenly emerged before your eyes, like a mirage in the ocean or desert. I use the phrase haishi shenlou to indicate the seemingly surreal feeling of such modern architecture in the East.

To Miao, a native of Wuxi who spent his childhood in the neighbourhoods located at the foot of Huishan, such a "surreal feeling" is acute and personal. As he says in the interview, he painted Wuxi from the same hilltop even when he was in elementary school, and many places around Huishan are fused with his memories of the city. Indeed, a considerable number of photographs in this exhibition focus on these places, including the municipal zoo (Fly), a statue of Confucius (Another Time), and a huge smokestack left from the Maoist era (Towering). These places became landmarks and acquired their identities at different historical moments. They coexist with one another and also with the newly emerging highrises in Haishi shenlou; thus, the photograph represents a city that is profoundly heterogeneous—a spectacle composed of fragmentary elements and characterized by constant historical discontinuity. Fantastic yet disturbing, this cityscape has inspired me to call this exhibition Phantasmagoria, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines in three interrelated senses: 1) a fantastic sequence of haphazardly associative imagery, as seen in dreams or fever; 2) a constantly changing scene composed of numerous elements; and 3) fantastic imagery as represented in art. All these meanings are pertinent to Miao Xiaochun's recent photographs in this exhibition.

Since the late 1990s, Miao Xiaochun has created a large body of works that can be divided into four groups or periods. The initial group, shown in his first photography exhibition, at Gallery Stellwerk in Kassel, consists of his graduation works from the Kunsthochschule Kassel. This is a series of black-and-white photographs, each with a life-sized mannequin as its central character.
Dressed as an ancient Chinese gentleman, the figure has Miao Xiaochun’s face and is clearly created as the artist’s alter ego. Several photographs represent him as a mysterious traveller to the West from an unidentified time/place in China’s past: he is arriving in a desolate subway station (Arrival) or watching other travelers in a crowded airport. The figure then appears in various social contexts in his new foreign home—at the dinner table with an ordinary family (As a Guest of a German Family) or in a factory shop, a classroom, or a political gathering. On all these occasions he remains dignified but distant, rigid, and with an unchanging expression. His enduring silence amounts to an inability to communicate. Thus when he does act he takes on the role of a detached watcher of other people (On Herkules). These photographs are clearly autobiographical in nature, as they embody Miao Xiaochun’s personal experience while he was a foreign student in Germany. But they are not self-indulgent because the images problematize his self-identity. As he states in the interview, he substituted the mannequin for himself because the statue could better symbolize Chinese culture at its prime moment in the past. But such voluntary substitution is not without cost: the artist as an individual has to disappear from these autobiographic representations, and the statue, while remaining lofty and self-possessed, can never become part of real life.

This dilemma continues and deepens in the second group of photographs, which Miao Xiaochun created after he returned to China in 1999 and exhibited in a one-man show in the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2001. The exhibition’s title, From East to West and Back Again, defines it as a sequel to the previous exhibition. This significance is again established by the statue, which appears in each photograph as well as in a three-dimensional sculptural form. Situated in the Chinese environment, however, the meaning of the ancient gentleman is further complicated. On the one hand, he is resurrected from the past and is a stranger to modern life. On the other hand, he has returned to China by way of a foreign country. The contrast between this figure and his surroundings thus reflects the conflict between China’s tradition and modernization and also signifies Miao Xiaochun’s “culture shock” upon returning to his country after five years, during which time China underwent rapid globalization and commercialization. Some photographs in this group show the statue in a western-style fashion shop, a fast food restaurant, a barren new housing development, or among omnipresent commercial advertisements (Propaganda and Advertise). Miao Xiaochun explains these images in the interview:

Actually, the relationship between this figure and contemporary China seems even more “disharmonious” than in my German pictures—its appearance in a Chinese city seems even more abrupt and illogical. I think this is because China’s changes in recent years have been extremely abrupt and sudden.
This also explains some other photographs in this group, which are characterized by a nostalgic longing. In one of these images, the ancient figure looks at the “monkey rink” (houshan) in the Wuxi zoo, a place that Miao Xiaochun knew well from childhood. Another picture was taken from the top of Huishan, where Miao painted Wuxi when he was a boy. Several other photographs represent the statue on the Great Wall. While this last series seems to reinstall the figure in his original cultural environment, one photograph represents him as having fainted on the Wall (No Hostility, No Resistance). One woman has stopped to rescue him, while some western tourists walk by him with puzzled expressions or their faces.

Starting in 2002, Miao Xiaochun began to create large, colourful photographs with the help of digital technology. Whereas these works constantly evoke earlier themes and images—the deepening commercialization of Chinese society, the solitude of the ancient gentleman, and the contrast between traditional and contemporary culture—their increasingly complex compositions reflect the artist’s heightened attraction to stylistic and technical innovations. His tendency to frame a picture in an unusually long composition was already evident in the previous period, but now Miao Xiaochun began self-consciously to connect this compositional style with ancient Chinese painting. He frequently talks about this connection in the interview. Generally, he considers that a traditional Chinese painting, either a horizontal scroll or a vertical hanging scroll, differs fundamentally from a western painting in its inherent temporality. Unlike a western painting (or photograph) composed according to the linear perspective system, a scroll painting often has multiple scenes and corresponding vanishing points. The multiple appearances of a figure further guides the viewer to read the painting as a narrative. Digital technology allows Miao Xiaochun to realize in photography this artistic vision derived from traditional painting, as he can weave numerous images into a single composition, creating subtle tensions and transitions unattainable with a conventional camera.

Take his 2002 Transmission, for example. Its horizontal composition roughly consists of three sections. To the left, a quiet river flows by a cluster of traditional-style houses; Miao Xiaochun’s ancient gentleman stands inward, contemplating the dark water. The middle section is dominated by a stone runway leading up to a bridge; its exaggerated foreshortening is further enhanced by the much reduced sizes of two passengers. A narrow lane appears next to the runway and cuts deeply into the picture plane; two boys are running toward us with toy guns in their hands. To the right of this lane is the third section of the picture, showing a row house at a sharp angle. We are suddenly pushed to the white wall of the houses, in front of which a young girl is dialing a cell phone. Fusing reality and fiction in a constructed pictorial space, the photograph is deliberately incoherent and even absurd. But the artist has so skillfully maneuvered the transitions between

Exemplified by Transmission, most pictures in this exhibition belong to the third group of Miao Xiaochun’s work. This period is terminated by Hai shi shenlou, the photograph with which I began this introduction. Significantly, in this picture the sculpted gentleman makes his last appearance, while Miao Xiaochun’s own image appears for the first time. Sitting in two separate cable cars, they pass each other going in opposite directions. It is as if the artist is saying goodbye to the statue, who will no longer serve as his alter ego.

From this moment on Miao Xiaochun enters his fourth and current phase, represented by two backlit transparencies in this exhibition. Both works are intertextual in intent and take temporality as the main subject of representation. Stumble, which represents a young girl falling as she walks up the stairs, evokes Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2. Celebration records the inauguration ceremony of a large housing complex in Beijing. While its grand composition and precise imagery recalls Andreas Gursky’s work, Miao Xiaochun’s major inspiration again comes from the inherent temporality he finds in traditional painting.

Instead of showing the statue, it represents real people reappearing multiple times here and there—the idea is that these people were moving around during the event. It’s usually considered a taboo to repeat the same figure in a photograph. How can a person appear twice or three times in the same picture? But this is exactly what I hope to represent. For example, there is a journalist who photographed the inauguration from different spots, and an organizer of the ceremony was at one time on the stage and at other times below the stage. When I combined these moments in the photograph, it’s as though this organizer is watching himself directing the program on the stage. This photograph thus conveys a different sense of reality because it represents the whole process of the event. I no longer need the ancient figure because the connection between the photograph and traditional culture is now found in the style of the photograph. In an ancient painting, such as those depicting Tao Yuanming’s Peach Blossom Spring or his homecoming, a figure often appears multiple times in representing a sequence of events. This is a particular pictorial language or style, which I have absorbed into my photographs.

We can conclude this introduction with these words because they state the goal of Miao Xiaochun’s current artistic experiment.
AN INTERVIEW WITH MIAO XIAOCHUN
WU HUNG

Wu Hung: Let's start from your education and career. Yesterday you said that you first studied art history. That's interesting.

Miao Xiaochun: Actually my college major was German. Although I had always loved to paint, I was turned down twice by the Nanjing Art Academy. My paintings showed too much influence from modern Western art, and people in the academy decided that I was not the right student for them. But because my grades in humanities were good, I was able to pass the entry exam to enter the German Department at Nanjing University. I still couldn't forget art, however. So after graduating from college I applied for the Master's program in the Department of Art History of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and was admitted. In that program I focused on the history of modern Chinese art. But I continued to paint and eventually became a freelance painter after graduating from the Central Academy.

Wu Hung: Which years were you a freelance artist?

Miao Xiaochun: From 1989 to 1995. But toward the end of this period I decided that I should study art abroad. So I went to Germany.

Wu Hung: What kind of painting were you doing then? Are your later photographs related to these paintings?

Miao Xiaochun: The paintings were oil and semi-abstract. My photographs have a strong emphasis on composition, and I think that this comes from my training as a painter. Actually, I've always wanted to practice traditional painting but have never been able to fulfill this hope. Many of my photographs have elongated compositions similar to a horizontal handscroll or a vertical hanging scroll. Other features of traditional painting, such as a moving viewpoint, also have a definite impact on my photographs.

Wu Hung: What did you study in Germany?

Miao Xiaochun: My training there included various art forms—not just painting but also sculpture, ceramics, and photography.

Wu Hung: Why did you choose to study in Kassel?

Miao Xiaochun: At that time a professor from Kunsthochschule Kassel had just established an exchange program with China. Through him I went to Kassel as an exchange student. I was attracted by Kassel as the location of the Documenta exhibitions and thought that it would be a good place to learn new developments in contemporary art. After I got there I found Kassel a quiet, mid-sized town. It was easy to travel from there to other cities in Germany and Europe, to see museums in surrounding areas. In Kassel I developed an art project, which then became my first photographic series.

Wu Hung: Was it your graduation exhibition at Kunsthochschule Kassel?

Miao Xiaochun: Yes. It's a set of black-and-white photographs, which marked the beginning of a much larger project. After I returned to China I continued this project but in a new direction.

Wu Hung: Now we can move on to discuss your photographic works. For example, from your point of view, how has your photography developed? From the very beginning you included a
mannequin in your photographs—a Chinese gentleman with your face but dressed in ancient clothes. Of course the meaning of this figure may have changed over the years. But what was your original impulse to create and photograph this figure?

Miao Xiaochun: At the time I was a Chinese living in Europe. I wanted to express some of the complex and deep feelings I had there in my photographs. Then the question became how I could achieve this goal. I couldn’t simply photograph myself because my appearance—my clothes, etc.—had nothing special and couldn’t really reveal my inner feelings. People who saw me might think I was Korean or Japanese, for example. Then I began to think what kind of “self-image” I should represent in my pictures. I hoped this image would make me feel proud—I wanted him to represent Chinese culture at its prime moment, such as the Tang or Song dynasty. To me, this image is about Chinese culture.

Of course, there have been contemporary artists who have photographed themselves in disguise. I didn’t follow their example because I felt that it was important for me to have complete control over this “self-image” and the entire composition at the same time. There is a major difference between my work and a disguised self-portrait; while a disguised self-portrait focuses exclusively on the figurative image, my pictures exist even if you cover the figure. The mannequin is only one of many elements in the picture, not the whole. This feature is again related to ancient Chinese painting. Many old landscape paintings have tiny figures called dianjing renwu in them. Although these figures are very important to the composition, the whole painting still remains coherent and expresses the artist’s intention when you cover them.

Wu Hung: So this figure represents both an individual and a cultural tradition, and he is part of a larger pictorial construct. This seems to have become very clear from your first series. But these works created in Germany also differ from your later photographs, as they often situate the figure within social occasions such as a classroom seminar or a family gathering (As a Guest of a German Family). It seems that these pictures are about communication and focus on the figure’s relationship with real human beings.

Miao Xiaochun: Cultural communication is indeed a dominant theme of these photographs from my German period, which have a strong narrative flavour. But later, especially in the works I created in China, this figure has become increasingly merged into the surrounding environment, becoming one of many elements in a picture.

Wu Hung: So if your earlier photographs are about your relationship with an alien culture, your later photographs are about your relationship with Chinese culture itself. But it seems that these later works show a consistent “disharmony” between the figure and the environment. So my question is: If this figure represents Chinese culture, then what is the source of such continuous disharmony?

Miao Xiaochun: Actually, the relationship between this figure and contemporary China seems even more “disharmonious” than in my German pictures—it’s appearance in a Chinese city seems even more abrupt and illogical. I think this is because China’s changes in recent years have been extremely abrupt and sudden.

Wu Hung: Yes. In these pictures this figure looks blank and seems at a loss.

Miao Xiaochun: When I first made this figure I was attracted by the unchanging, mysterious look on his face. This is also why I didn’t want to photograph myself. I would have had too many expressions responding to various situations.
Wu Hung: How did a German audience react to this figure? I’m thinking that although you created this image as a more authentic representation of Chinese cultural tradition, could it also be perceived as another stereotypical image of China? Does it only reflect your own notion of China? Can it also reflect an alien culture’s conception of China?

Miao Xiaochun: In Germany I read many books about China. Most of them describe Chinese as Manchus of the last dynasty, with a queue and thin mustache. But to me, Chinese people should be represented by a different image from a glorious and brilliant period, such as Han or Tang times. But Westerners know little about these periods. They know more about those declining and chaotic periods such as the late Qing or the Cultural Revolution. This is regrettable. I didn’t want to use these declining periods to represent China. I prefer to see and depict Chinese as shida—people who are cultured and intellectual. I think that if I had been born a thousand or two thousand years ago, I would have probably been this kind of person, to whom learning is more important than anything else.

Wu Hung: This could be your conceptualization of this figure. But the pictures you made in Germany seem to tell something different: arriving at a train station or standing in a telephone booth, this figure seems lost and misplaced, while the people around him look real and active (Telephone Booth). One feels that he does not have a language, and thus he keeps silent while other people are talking. It seems that you want to glorify a great tradition, but this tradition doesn’t have a place in the situations you represent.

Miao Xiaochun: Yes, we can say that this is a “state of losing language” (shiyu zhiguang), which was related to my personal experience in Europe. In that environment it was very difficult for me to express my feelings and to communicate with other people. For example, if I were triggered by a situation to recite Tao Yuanming’s famous lines “Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence, I leisurely turn my eyes to the southern mountains,” few people would have understood what I was thinking and talking about. It is a “symptom of losing language” (shiyu zhiguang) because the context of language (yuqin) has disappeared. You are right to say that it is a kind of displacement—the context of Tao Yuanming’s poetic expression has been displaced.

Wu Hung: I can understand this problem well because I have also spent a long time in the West. Discussions of your early work have often focused on the issue of the gaze. This is certainly an interesting issue, because in my view, this figure actually doesn’t have a gaze or a clearly directed vision. But language and communication are equally important to understanding these works. Now, if we move on to examine your later works, does this “losing language” problem still exist?

Miao Xiaochun: I think that it still persists—at least partly.

Wu Hung: In what way has the figure partly recovered his ability to communicate?

Miao Xiaochun: Perhaps I should first talk about the part in which the “losing language” problem continues. Let me use the photograph Ferry as an example. This picture represents a modern bridge over the Huangpu River. Now we can drive a car across the river over this bridge. What made an ancient poet write the line “At an empty ferry in the wilderness, only a boat floats on the water” (Yedu wuren zhou zhiyi) clearly no longer exists. If someone now crosses the river on a small wooden boat, it can only be an art project.

Wu Hung: So here we return to the concept of yuqing—the context of an expression. Once this context has disappeared, although you can still cite one or two sentences from an ancient poem, their meaning is entirely different. But as you have said, this problem is partly cured in China. How is this so?

Miao Xiaochun: I think that in China, an ancient expression can still be somehow related to a current situation, although such connections are not straightforward and must be established by a kind of “indirect imagination.” For example, my photograph Fly represents an aviary in a zoo. When I saw birds flying around in it in the evening light, I immediately thought of the poetic line “Flying birds return home in pairs” (Feiniao xiangyu huan). In the photograph Lingerer Under a Lone Pine, in the centre a cement road leads to a modern highrise and a TV tower. Suddenly there is a lonely pine tree standing along the road. It made me recall the line “Linger in a spot to caress a lonely pine” (Fu guang er pailunzan).

Wu Hung: Talking about this last picture, your mannequin is small and facing inward, away from the audience. It’s unclear whether he’s looking at the pine tree or the modern buildings. If he’s facing the tree, then the situation seems closer to his original cultural context; but if he’s looking at the buildings, then his relationship with the environment is disharmonious and ironical. These three images—the figure, the buildings, and the pine tree—form a triangular relationship. This type of relationship also seems to exist in other works you have created in China. For example, in Transmission, the figure faces a small river in a traditional city; the mood seems closer to his own time and space.
Miao Xiaochnun: Yes. But then there are other images that disrupt this harmony. For example, a western-style church stands beyond an old wooden bridge, and a young woman is making a call with her cell phone. Other details in the picture, such as the kids running in a narrow lane, are also important to me. Perhaps they have just finished watching a TV program and were imitating the story—running out of their house with toy guns in their hands.

Wu Hung: This leads us back to a point you made earlier, that the horizontal composition of these photographs is related to traditional handscroll painting. Like a handscroll, a photograph like Transmission has multiple focuses and vanishing points that correspond to different images—the ancient gentleman contemplating the little river, the modern woman making a phone call, the kids running out of the house. When did you first make such long pictures?

Miao Xiaochnun: I developed this style after I mastered digital technology. I could then realize my artistic vision based on classical Chinese painting. A picture made from a conventional camera necessarily has a single vanishing point. My later photographs are entirely different because each of them pieces together several images to form a single composition. In this way I can show aspects of an object that are absent in a conventional photograph. To me, it's not enough just to represent an object, such as the bridge in Transmission. Rather, it's important to show various aspects of this bridge in a single picture. This is actually based on the "multiple viewpoint" perspective (sandian toushi) in traditional painting. Take a vertical photograph such as Capital, for example. It's close to a traditional hanging scroll in which images are depicted according to the principle of "three distances" (san yuan), where you have a focus on high mountain peaks (gao yuan), the "middle distance" scenery (zhong yuan), and the flat, far-away vista (ping yuan). If you used a conventional camera to take this picture, the old woman in the foreground would inevitably be much larger, blocking the view behind her. The horizon would be in the middle of the composition. This goes against my intention to represent different views. So what I have done in this picture is elevate the background and lower the figure in the foreground.

Their size and spatial relationship also change correspondingly. In an ancient Chinese painting, the images in the foreground, such as a figure or a pine tree, are often quite small. This is "incorrect" according to a linear perspective system, but correct in one's subjective perception: a person or a tree is always smaller than a mountain. I hope to emphasize this subjective perspective in my pictures.

Wu Hung: The tiled ground in this picture is very intriguing. The angle of perspective changes gradually and the ground seems to move.

Miao Xiaochnun: This is because I used two different lenses to photograph the ground and pieced the pictures together seamlessly. Again, here I was inspired by traditional art.

Wu Hung: How many images were used to compose this photograph?

Miao Xiaochnun: Many. Two images would only produce an awkward combination. Only many images can create a subtle transition.

Wu Hung: Yes. This is why the ground forces the viewer to shift his gaze. Very subtle and interesting.

Miao Xiaochnun: It then occurred to me that there are two kinds of truth: the truth of the camera and the truth of the photographer. Now I hope that the camera will serve my inner vision. Zhang Zeduan's masterpiece Spring Festival Along the River must be "scientifically" wrong in many respects. But I prefer to believe that the Song dynasty was exactly the way he depicted it in this marvellous work. The painting is encyclopedic, representing a whole city. To me, it's more truthful than a picture that represents reality objectively.

Wu Hung: How about the photograph Opera? Is it a single shot?

Miao Xiaochnun: No. It also integrates many images. If I had only used a powerful telephoto lens to take the picture from a distance, the perspective would be different. The figures would show a greater difference in size and their expression would be impossible to make out.

Wu Hung: This kind of reconstructed photograph raises an interesting problem. Like Zhang Zeduan's scroll painting that synthesizes many details, your Opera, though combining many
Miao Xiaochun: Jeff Wall impresses me with the depth and breadth of his social representations. Although he finds his subjects mainly in a limited area around Vancouver, his photographs capture the spirit of an entire historical era. Gursky’s sensitivity in “seeing a composition” (kan changmian) is quite extraordinary. While a painter can demonstrate his style through brushwork and other means, it’s difficult for a photographer to develop an individual style. In my view only great photographers can reach this level of artistry, and Gursky is one of them.

Wu Hung: Style cannot be separated from progress—it implies continuous artistic experiments. Gursky’s stylistic development is very convincing.

Miao Xiaochun: It also means developing a unique way to see the world. I feel that photography is more about “seeing” than “making.” One only photographs what one sees.

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Wu Hung: Now can we talk about Wuxi—your hometown and the subject of many of your photographs? How long did you actually live there?

Miao Xiaochun: I lived there until I went to college. Then I spent more than ten years in Beijing and about five years in Germany. But whenever I return to Wuxi I gain a lot of inspiration. It’s not just because I grew up there; the city is an interesting mixture of tradition and modernity. On the one hand, it’s full of classical beauty; on the other hand, it’s a medium-sized industrial city known as Little Shanghai. So every time I go there I find many things I can photograph.

Wu Hung: Is your family originally from Wuxi? Are your parents still living there? Where did you live before you left the city?

Miao Xiaochun: My family is from Wuxi, and my parents are still there. When I grew up we moved several times but never left the area around the foot of Mt. Hui. So I’m very sensitive to changes in this area. I remember that when I was a little boy, I made my first “serious” painting from the top of that hill. I have just created a large photograph from that exact spot. You can see the pagoda on Mt. Hui in the photograph.

Wu Hung: How old were you when you made the painting?

Miao Xiaochun: About seven or eight. I was in elementary school.

Wu Hung: Was it a pencil drawing or a watercolour?

Miao Xiaochun: A watercolour. After almost 30 years I returned to the spot and took the photograph Haishi shenlou.

Wu Hung: Did you take an earlier version of this photograph in 2001?

Miao Xiaochun: I’ve actually made two photographs with this title. When I made the first one, Fatamorgana, I still faced many technical difficulties. The concept of the photograph is clear, but compositionally it only shows a small section of the view from the hilltop. The recent version,
Mirage, took a lot of work to finish. It combines many individual shots. I climbed the hill day after day, using two tripods to support a large-format camera with an enormous lens. The guard on the hill got to know me quite well. This work is very important to me because it's imbued with many of my memories of the city.


Miao Xiaochun: It has less to do with this meaning, but more to do with the abrupt change in the place. It seems that all those modern buildings you see from the hilltop shouldn't be there, but they've suddenly emerged before your eyes, like a mirage in the ocean or desert. I use the phrase *haishi shenlou* to indicate the seemingly surreal feeling of such modern architecture in the East.

Wu Hung: A *haishi shenlou* or mirage is also attractive and alluring. Your photographs don't criticize what they represent. Rather, they problematize reality.

Miao Xiaochun: There's a great deal of uncertainty in them. It's not easy to figure out where these buildings come from and what they are leading to. They also can't be judged easily. The uncertainty of the scene resides in their historical ambiguity.

Wu Hung: What is your next project? It seems that your recent photographs show a strong interest in the development of the city.

Miao Xiaochun: My next project will focus on the notion of temporality. I've basically completed the series with the statue of the ancient figure in it. This series is now finished because it has run a circle from East to West and then back East. Unless some great new ideas emerge, I will probably not use the figure again. My newest works focus instead on the momentary nature of contemporary events.

Wu Hung: You recently made a photograph called *Celebration*, which represents the inauguration ceremony of a large real estate project in Beijing. Does it belong to this new series?

Miao Xiaochun: Yes.

Wu Hung: Then why does the ancient figure disappear from this picture? It seems that the subject of this photography is still changes in a Chinese city.

Miao Xiaochun: In fact, many people have tried to find the figure in this photograph. But this picture is different. Instead of showing the mannequin, it represents real people reappearing multiple times here and there—the idea is that these people were moving around during the event. It's usually considered a taboo to repeat the same figure in a photograph. How can a person appear twice or three times in the same picture? But this is exactly what I hope to represent. For example, there is a journalist who photographed the inauguration from different spots, and an organizer of the ceremony was at one time on the stage and at other times below the stage. When I combined these moments in the photograph, it's as though this organizer is watching himself directing the program on the stage. This photograph thus conveys a different sense of reality because it represents the whole process of the event. I no longer need the ancient figure because the connection between the photograph and traditional culture is now found in the style of the photograph. In an ancient painting, such as those depicting Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* or his homecoming, a figure often appears multiple times in representing a sequence of events. This is a particular pictorial language or style, which I have absorbed into my photographs.

Wu Hung: This leads us to re-examine your photographs *Opera*. We have discussed that it also integrates many individual shots taken at different moments. But the result still conveys a strong sense of a simultaneous happening. Your new works seem to have a different goal. Instead of integrating multiple images into a single moment, they preserve the sequential nature of the separate shots. Do you see this development in your art?

Miao Xiaochun: Yes. That's correct.

Wu Hung: Then I agree that the ancient figure would be superfluous in these new works.

Miao Xiaochun: As I said earlier, even in my older works this figure is one of many elements, not the only subject or even the dominant subject. Its main role is to lead the viewer to imagine something behind the immediate physical surroundings. This figure disappears from my art when the representation of the environment begins to tell its own story.

Translated by Wu Hung

*This is a revised version of the catalogue essay for Phantasmagoria, presented at the Walsh Gallery in Chicago from October 1 to November 27, 2004.*