

ArtReview



The Body and the City in Brazil

UK £6.50

9 1770004 409116

vol 68 no 9

12 >

'A Bigger Photo'

by Aimee Lin



*Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina - 23, 2016, photomontage,
Tilia plywood, grass cloth, traditional lacquer, gold foil, Chinese traditional
wet-mounting technique, 502 × 1502 cm (in 138 pieces)*

A continuously reimagined world is unfolding in a series of giant photo matrices by Shanghai-based collective Birdhead. What are they trying to tell us?



A continuously forming world is unfolding in a series of giant photo matrices by Shanghai-based collective Birdhead. What are they trying to tell us?



Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina – 23 (detail), 2016, photocollage, Tilia plywood, grass cloth, traditional lacquer, gold foil, Chinese traditional wet-mounting technique, 502 × 1502 cm (in 138 pieces)

Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina, a new series of works that Birdhead has been developing since 2015, comprises large-scale and multilayered photocollages consisting of grids of photographs overlaid with other, specially mounted photographs and, sometimes, traditional Chinese calligraphy. Last June, at Art Basel Unlimited, Birdhead presented *Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina – 23* (2016), the biggest work from the series to date. The body consists of a 5 × 15m photo matrix of 134 black-and-white photographs of natural and urban scenes. At the centre of this is a photograph consisting of four larger panels that feature a group of tadpoles swimming in a pond. On top of this last are four Chinese characters – *qing fang zhi dang* (Birdhead's translation of which provides the title for the work) – written in *kai* style and covered in gold leaf. The four-panel photograph is mounted using a traditional wet-mounting technique (normally used in connection with calligraphy and ink painting), and coated with traditional lacquer (normally used in connection with furniture), a transparent resin extracted from the Chinese lacquer tree.

But this is just to describe the work's outer appearance. Hidden between the four-panel photograph and the grid are six other photographs featuring fireworks exploding against a dark night sky. Beneath them, in the grid, are portraits of the two members of Birdhead. These three layers of images, together with the Chinese text on top of them, make up Birdhead's most complicated pictorial and textual world yet: one that fuses contemporary *shanshui* (landscape), traditional calligraphy, romanticism, passion (to look at the fireworks and tadpoles through Freudian eyes) and a notion of self that rests in an inner world.

Indeed Birdhead has been constructing a continuous, expanding, and incessantly reimagined pictorial world of its own since its establishment in 2004. Born in Shanghai, Song Tao and Ji Weiyu have spent most of their life in their hometown. Birdhead began because of their shared passion for collecting (film) cameras and taking photos in the street. Born in the late 1970s and early 80s, the members of Birdhead are part of a generation of artists who grew up in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, and connected with each other via BBS and online blogs, which also became sites for the publication of their works. Like their contemporaries, early Birdhead was influenced by Japanese photography, especially the photo avant-garde from the 1960s and 70s, and the use of *shashin shu* (Japanese photobook). By the beginning of the 2000s, this generation of grassroots practices had come to be called 'Chinese New Photography' (a label used as a marketing tool during the late 2000s and early 2010s), a photographic expression that is very close to urban photography and *shi-shashin* (personal photography) in Japan. During that period, as was the case in the work of other artists in this grouping – among them No.223 (Lin Zhipeng), Qing Touyi (Liu Yiqing), Pixy Liao (Liao Yijun) – Song Tao and Ji Weiyu's work comprised records of their private life, close friends and the urban landscape in which they lived. But unlike the others, Birdhead was particularly obsessed with film cameras and the tones and textures produced in a traditional darkroom. Looking at the works from the late 2000s, we can see how these two young men were trying to understand themselves and the city and times in which they were living. Back in those days, they were practising guerrilla photography, attacking their world with aggressive shoots and provocative flashlighting, and by producing a massive quantity of photographs.

There's a sense in which the viewer is encouraged to enter the image, to move or wander through the pictorial scenery

The sheer volume of its output led Birdhead to assemble a succession of self-published photobooks, such as *Xin Cun* (2007), *The End of Mainland* (2010) and *The Light of Eternity* (2013). In one regard, each of these projects documents Birdhead's life journey: departure from their home (*Xin Cun*, meaning 'new village', refers to the residential complexes built in big cities during the socialist era in China), travelling in a world that is geographically bigger and wider (*The End of Mainland*), and the spiritual arrival of Chinese classical artists' free and romanticist tradition (*The Light of Eternity*). Now comes the ongoing project *qing fang zhi dang*.

To a certain degree, the grids of photographs in Birdhead's latest works can be seen as a variation of the photobook adapted to fit a contemporary gallery space. After showing these site-specific photo matrices – all of which are titled *Welcome to the World of Birdhead Again* – at the 2011 Venice Biennale, the National Art Center, Tokyo (2012), New York's MOMA (2012) and many other institutions and galleries, there is a sense that Birdhead has gradually developed a particular photo-editing methodology and aesthetic expression, which reached its maturity in a 2015 show at Shanghart. In this analysis, I'm going to look at Birdhead's photo matrices in terms of three technical levels: at the first, each photograph in the matrix is carefully refined and transformed into an abstract pictorial unit, and then used to compose a bigger photograph. At the second level is a layer of meanings generated by the content of the images: the artists themselves, their friends, tree branches, sky, buildings and highways, a contemporary *shanshui* in which urbanism overlaps with nature and personal ambitions and emotions projected onto it. The third level comes from the special mounting technique Birdhead has developed over the last few years. Wet mounting is a traditional technique used for Chinese classical ink

art and calligraphy; when used on photography, it has the effect of flattening the printing paper, and involves the use of materials such as precious wood, handmade paper and silk, not only to protect the work but also to give it a particular aesthetic (and, by virtue of its connection to historically precious objects, economic) value. Traditional lacquer was used in ancient China and Japan to protect precious interior items such as furniture and tableware by sealing them off from the air. Over time, the colourless coat of lacquer may turn yellow, which adds a further aesthetic layer, particularly in China and Japan, where traces of time are considered to be of great aesthetic value.

Birdhead's method is to scan the films and create digital files in which Birdhead refines the tones before laying out the images in a photo-editing application to make the big picture. So the photo-matrices work is not just a group of smaller pictures, but also one big picture. In Chinese, *shanshui* literally means mountain and water; in the tradition of Chinese scholar painting, a landscape doesn't necessarily involve the actual recording of mountains and water (generally in the form of a river) and their special relation: the artist can conceptually invent his own *shanshui* on paper. Therefore, Birdhead's art at its first level is very close to the making of conceptual *shanshui*, and also, considering their emphasis on photographic tones, very close to Chinese classical calligraphy art in *cao* (cursive script) or *xing* (semi-cursive script) style, normally considered to articulate an expressionist consciousness.



Birdhead once used the expression 'a bigger photo' to describe its photo matrices. Indeed this process does overcome the technical difficulties of producing a gigantic photograph (in this way Birdhead's concept and methodology are very different to that of Andreas Gursky, for example, who focuses on the same end using a single image). For me, though, the real beauty in the apparently simple description 'a bigger photograph' lies in the fact that the photo matrix helps to overcome the limitation of photography as a mechanical way of seeing, by producing an image that is not governed by single-point perspective, but rather by a scattered perspective. As a result there's a sense in which the viewer is encouraged to enter the image, to move or wander through the pictorial scenery. British painter David Hockney explored techniques of producing the scattered perspective of Chinese scroll painting via photography in one of his early photocollages, *Walking in the Zen Garden at the Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto, Feb, 1983* (1983). In his recent paintings and videos (especially the 18-screen video-works from 2010 and 2011, included in the exhibition *A Bigger Picture* at London's Royal Academy of Arts, documenting the seasons in Woldgate Woods from clips recorded by nine cameras attached to an SUV), he has explored more possibilities to produce alternative visual experiences and pictorial expression via scattered perspective. In a way, Birdhead's photo matrix and the method of making it are not only a means to assembling an abstract and conceptual landscape, but also a development of Hockney's exploration of landscape.

While Hockney's interest in Chinese classical painting generally focuses on the scientific study of perspective, Birdhead's practice has, to a certain extent, inherited the free and romanticist spirit of Chinese classical artists. This can be seen at the second level of their work, the world of meanings made of the content of their photos, and the third level,

the aesthetic vocabularies created by the mounting of the works. The members of Birdhead believe that the action of pressing down the shutter is to take a slice out of time and space, thus a moment of self-reflection. To refine, edit and lay out those hundreds of photographs is to study their inner world and to revisit the moments of self-reflection, while the mounting of the photographs is the materialisation of self-reflection. Although *Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina* is a naughty joke, the characters are a quotation from the third-century poet and scholar Cao Zhi's *Qi Qi*, or *Seven Ideas* (210 AD), where it is used to express his ideal: to indulge one's passion and to free one's ambitions; in other words, it encourages self-expression, as opposed to the Confucian ideology of self-restraint, or the Taoist ideal of inactivity. But as a member of a family that ruled one of the biggest kingdoms at the time (he was one of the sons of Cao Cao, chancellor of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the man who laid the foundations of the state of Cao Wei), Cao never could live life as he wished, and was murdered by his brother at forty. It could be said that throughout his lifetime, Cao was a man who perceived the darkness of his present and grasped, in art, a light that could never reach its destiny. The light is a metaphor of his ideal, *qing fang zhi dang*, an ideal that was too ahead of its time: the country in the next 1800 years was dominated by the Confucian ideology (and Taoism as an option for individual life). In this regard, he could be seen as the first contemporary artist in the history of China: to follow Giorgio Agamben's definition of 'the contemporary' as 'the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times'. Birdhead's spiritual resonance with Cao is

not the result of a gesture of cultural conservatism, but rather an alternative statement in the context of contemporary art. ara

Welcome to Birdhead World Again, Shanghai, 2015 (detail), 2015, photographic installation



For a Bigger Photo 2015–5, 2015, photographic installation, wood, British Ilford archival fiber warm cotton gloss photographic paper 335gsm, Chinese lacquer, wet-mounting technique of traditional Chinese painting, Epson UltraGiclee, 250 × 120 × 5 cm