

**exhibition review**

**LAURA WARNE**

*Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography*

China Institute Gallery, 125 East 65th Street, New York, September 24, 2009 – December 13, 2009

The current exhibition on display at New York City's China Institute, *Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography*, showcases 100 highlights of the 600 photographs recently acquired by the Guangdong Art Museum in Guangdong, P.R.C. Both the collection itself and the portion selected to travel internationally is remarkable; for all that Chinese art has been celebrated in recent years, photography may be the last media to gain its due recognition as a social, political and artistic powerhouse. At times exploited by the Chinese government for propaganda purposes, at other times strictly censored, photography is a medium with a mixed recent legacy in China. While serving many functions, one need only to think of the famous *Tank Man* image to appreciate the relevancy of the photographic medium to China's struggle for change. And change it has over the past 50 years.

The photographs acquired by the Guangdong Museum of Art are all documentary in nature, aiming to present a visual truth about China during the period of rapid change between 1951 and 2003. While it is no simple task to define documentary photography, photographer and essayist Bao Kun's perspective is referenced within the exhibition as "photography that contains emotions and viewpoints" and "photography that cares." Indeed the museum's curators Wang Huansheng, An Ge and Hu Wugong went to great lengths and many provinces to select images with these qualities for this landmark collection. The end result are photographs united by an interest in people and their individual stories, reaffirming that all of which are worthy of being told, no matter how small or large the implications.

This range of human experience—from a kiss on a crowded street corner to emaciated children in an orphanage—comes from a place few images of China seem to come: from the Chinese themselves. A central theme in the history of photography concerns the documenting of the "other," be it person or place. It is for this reason that this exhibition comes as a breath of fresh air. These photographs of everyday Chinese people, their joys and their struggles, have all been taken by photographers who understand life in China because they are living it themselves. China has undoubtedly played host to a large number of societal ills over the course of the twentieth century, but these photographs remind us that the Chinese themselves can shape their destiny and are responsible for

the transformations the country has seen.

Though it has been long-delayed, it makes sense that first museum in China to make photography a collecting priority is the Guangdong Museum of Art. The region, including specifically Hong Kong and Macao, is considered to have been the main entry port for photography into Chinese culture. One can only hope that like the spread of photography in the nineteenth century, this initiative will lead to similar collections elsewhere in the country, as well proper acknowledgment of the immense role photography has had in both allowing foreigners to see inside this country and in helping the Chinese to see themselves.

Laura Warne is a graduate student at Columbia University, studying Modern Chinese History in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. Her interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century Chinese photography.