

OUR GENERATION – PORTRAITS OF K.

Until 7 March 2021

Prague City Gallery

House of Photography

Revoluční 5, Prague 1

Open daily except for Monday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., on Thursday until 8 p.m.

Curator: Lü Peng

The exhibition of photographs by Xiao Quan follows from a recent event, when we had the opportunity to see paintings by two representatives of new Chinese painting – Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangji – at the Stone Bell House. Like Xiao Quan, these artists were part of the generation of artists up and coming at the time when China's social climate was beginning to change.

The photographs feature a number of leading personalities of the underground, which formed in post-Maoist China relatively quickly and spontaneously. They portray proud and confident creative people who enjoy their status to the fullest. There are also key events of this promising period – a symposium on modern poetry of the *Stars* magazine (1986) organized by poets Shu Ting and Gu Cheng, Cui Jian's rock concert in Chengdu in honor of the Asian Games (1990), and last but not least the Guangzhou Biennial Art Fair, prepared in 1992 for the first time without any state supervision by the curator and critic Lü Peng, which, according to him, "legitimized the existence of contemporary Chinese art".

In addition to this, we can see revolutionary transformations of large historic settlements, with fatal consequences for many ordinary people, where traditional buildings disappear under the excavators. The original social ties are broken and people are thrown into the anonymity of cold and uniformed skyscrapers. However, celebrations of public holidays and tributes to former and current leaders are still a part of their lives; they passionately read their newspapers and are avid football fans.

Xiao Quan maps Chinese society with a high degree of objectivity, despite his affiliation with the unofficial scene. At the same time, his work is full of empathy and understanding that the long period of totalitarianism cannot be erased by waving a wand and that its remnants are ubiquitous, paradoxically existing simultaneously with manifestations of commercialization, which is eventually embraced by the majority of people whose yearning for freedom and democracy is fading out.

On the one hand, Xiao Quan's photographs speak about China's ascent – about self-awareness, the first steps towards opening China to the world, about the generation of people who have found the strength and courage to stop serving the regime and longed to connect with the outside world. The fact that they soon had to come to terms with the complete denial of all humanistic values is a chapter not to be seen at this exhibition. Nevertheless, it provides a useful and exciting insight into China's recent history, which gives at least a small hope to the world that one day this atmosphere may be successfully restored together with democratization efforts.

Magdalena Juříková

G TISKOVÁ ZPRÁVA HMP

In his photographs, Xiao Quan captured a diverse range of prominent personalities in the art world of the time – writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers, painters and actors. He watched and photographed them in the context of their personal lives and work. Taken together, his photographs form a unique documentary about a time in China's rather recent past. However, Xiao Quan was not just an observer or uninvolved witness. It was the other way round – he and his camera became part of “our generation”, and in his youthful zeal, he and others attempted again and again to get to the “castle”. Intuitively, maybe even instinctively, he recorded that time through his lens in all its variability, in a fragmentary, random way.

Xiao Quan has never stopped working this way. He is an observer of all the alleyways and the nooks, whether in cities or human souls, the small details that make life colorful. Thus, at various moments, he immortalized a generation as they deeply inhaled the electrifying air charged with the liberalization of conditions in their country, providing us thereby today with deep portraits of a not too distant past. The photographer's intuition and emotions lie behind all the scenes captured, as if he shot them directly with his nerve endings. In this respect, Xiao Quan has gone in the same direction as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson or Marc Riboud before him: he perpetuates the fleeting moments of the eloquent everyday precisely, gently, and with detachment.

Xiao Quan took many portraits of “our generation” on his demanding journeys. They are not celebratory portraits of gods and demigods, but rather the dusty faces, the battered and scarred bodies of individual people, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and hopelessness, their searching and groping, their self-confidence and frustrations that have formed and changed over time, those who influenced Chinese society through their poems, short stories and novels, paintings, films, dance, music and images, who wanted to prove something, who together with their generation lived and shaped the story of their time and left an indelible mark on the memory of our past. Despite this, for all these Chinese K., the “castle” is still out of reach...

Lü Peng

On the occasion of the exhibition, a book of photographs by Xiao Quan with texts by Walter Guadagnini and Lü Peng, *In China When It All Began*, published in 2019 in Milan, can be purchased at the House of Photography or in the e-shop of Prague City Gallery.

Exhibition Curator: Lü Peng

Graphic and Exhibition Design: Anymade Studio

Media Partners: Art&Antiques, A2, ArtMap, Český rozhlas, ExpresFM, Flash Art, protisedi.cz, Radio 1, XANTYPA

Entrance Fee: CZK 150 full (adults) / CZK 60 reduced (students, senior citizens)

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Prague City Gallery is one of the most important galleries in the Czech Republic, which in its exhibition activity focuses in particular on modern and contemporary art. It collects, protects and professionally processes art collections of the City of Prague. Currently, Prague City Gallery exhibits in seven buildings: The Stone Bell House, Municipal Library – 2nd floor, Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace, The House of Photography, Villa Bilek, Troja Château and František Bilek's House in Chýnov.

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