

北京银矿

BEIJING SILVERMINE

THOMAS SAUVIN

11 JANUARY - 22 FEBRUARY 2014

'Beijing Silvermine' is a unique photographic portrait of the Chinese capital and the life of its inhabitants in the decades following the Cultural Revolution.

Since 2009 Beijing-based collector Thomas Sauvin has amassed, edited and archived more than half a million photographic negatives destined for destruction in a recycling plant on the edge of the city. It was here that Sauvin encountered a man by the name of Xiao Ma who stockpiles negatives, x-rays, compact discs and other detritus to melt down and filter for their silver nitrate content intended to be sold to laboratories. Recognising a rare chance to rescue abandoned memories, Sauvin struck up a deal to buy these photographic negatives by the kilo. This 'silvermine' of anonymous subjects and vernacular photography styles covers a period of roughly 20 years – from 1985, when affordable consumer film first came into widespread use in China, to 2005 when digital photography encouraged the mass disposal and willful neglect of film.

In his phenomenal accumulation of photographs Thomas Sauvin allows us to witness the intimate and public lives of ordinary Chinese people during a period of immense social change. These material images reveal the mundane and extraordinary moments in everyday life that have been rescued from oblivion. More than just a glimpse into the lives of people who might otherwise have been invisible participants in an impersonal collective history, the subject of 'Beijing Silvermine' is as much the wondrous, imperfect and perishable qualities of film photography itself – its delayed surprises between the split-second of exposure and the alchemical magic of development.

'Beijing Silvermine' at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art presents a selection of photographs from this extraordinary archive curated by Thomas Sauvin that explore universal themes of love, leisure, birth, youth, happiness and the subtle changes – both in domestic settings and in the wider public realm – that the economic opening to the West brought into ordinary Chinese people's lives. Also presented are two mesmerising video animations, produced by Beijing-based animator Lei Lei in collaboration with Sauvin, that reveal the surreal imagescape and stupendous depth of the silvermine.

'I think it is a world of survival of the fittest. If they can't keep up with the trend, they will be crowded out of the market.'

— Beijing resident's response to the announcement of Eastman Kodak's file for bankruptcy, CCTV News, 21 January 2012

Plastic, gelatin, colour dyes and millions of silver halide crystals in a small metal canister: these are the basic components of the underappreciated feat of engineering known as a roll of colour negative film. 'You Press the Button, We Do the Rest' remains one of the most successful advertising slogans ever written, such was the fervour of Kodak founder George Eastman's desire to place a camera in the hands of the masses at the turn of the 20th century. Eastman excelled at feeding humanity's limitless appetite for the photographic image whilst servicing his company's rapacious expansion of a new consumer market - the net result being that our obsession with photographing ourselves and each other is self-evident in the 21st century.

Whilst this is not a story about Kodak, it's an intriguing and fortuitous irony that an ordinary 'man in the street' in Beijing feels that he can give such cautionary and unsolicited advice on an obvious rule of capitalist market forces to one of the most prominent American brands of the past century. Kodak's recent history in China illustrates what can happen when the inevitable obsolescence of technology meets present-day corporate obsession with the colossal purchasing power of the nebulous demographic called the Chinese middle class. Betting to the hilt on this free marketer's holy grail, Eastman Kodak announced in 1998 that it would stake over US\$1 billion in taking over and modernising several loss-making Chinese photographic manufacturers, representing one of the largest ever investments by a foreign firm in China at the time. And then the world turned. In the end, even Kodak's local competitor China Lucky Film Corporation, founded in 1958 as China's first domestic-owned manufacturer of photosensitive film stock and magnetic recording media in Baoding south-west of Beijing, succumbed to the march of the smart phones and stopped producing colour film as 2012 came to a close. In the mad rush of these four short years lies the promiscuous heart of the all too human indifference and neglect that is the starting point of the story of Thomas Sauvin's 'Beijing Silvermine'.

Speaking of the conspicuous lack of a built environment of ancient and pre-modern monuments in Chinese cities – relative to the European continent at least – Australian writer Simon Leys (the pen-name of eminent Belgium-born, sinologist, professor, essayist and literary critic, Pierre Ryckmans) describes in his essay, 'The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past' (1986), 'the parallel phenomena of spiritual preservation and material destruction that can be observed in the history of Chinese culture.' Leys notes that 'the past which continues to animate Chinese life in so many striking, unexpected or subtle ways seems to inhabit the people rather than bricks and stones. The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible.' Of course, this topic is as vast and open to interpretation as the history of the world's longest continuous civilisation itself, and yet viewed in microcosm through the hundreds of thousands of tiny worlds that populate 'Beijing Silvermine' we glimpse the universal truthfulness of Leys' assertion when applied to the medium of photography alone.

If we do indeed live in a world ruled by the ruthless principles of the survival of the fittest, then we must ask ourselves what has changed in our moral universe to allow the intimacy of private moments to be drowned out in a flood of impersonal digital files? What and whom else will be left behind? Who will save the past from wilful destruction?

Pedro de Almeida

Program Manager, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

GROUND FLOOR

北京银矿 / Beijing Silvermine

2009 – 2013

wall vinyl

courtesy Thomas Sauvin.

银矿 / SILVERMINE

2013

documentary by Emiland Guillaume

duration: 14:52

film making, framing, editing: Emiland Guillaume

animations, calibration: Marie Gonguet

sound mixing: Virtuel Audio

voice-over: Emiland Guillaume

stroboscopic animation: Lei Lei & Thomas Sauvin.

FIRST FLOOR

北京银矿 / Beijing Silvermine

2009 – 2013

28 photographs

courtesy Thomas Sauvin.

北京银矿 / Beijing Silvermine

2009 – 2013

wall vinyl

courtesy Thomas Sauvin.

北京银矿 / Beijing Silvermine

2009 – 2013

35mm negatives

courtesy Thomas Sauvin.

FIRST FLOOR

Lei Lei & Thomas Sauvin

2013 – 2014

照片回收 / RECYCLED

five-channel video animation

installation with 2,200 photographs

courtesy the artists.

Lei Lei & Thomas Sauvin

照片回收 / RECYCLED

2013

single-channel video

duration: 5:18

animation: Lei Lei & Thomas Sauvin

sound: Zafka

courtesy the artists.

Silvermine

edited by Thomas Sauvin

five albums each containing 20 prints

published by AMC Books, June 2013

limited numbered edition of 200

each album focuses on a different theme:

- Blue album: TVs and Fridges

- Green album: One and Two

- Orange album: Marilyn and Ronald

- Pink album: Party and Transvestites

- Yellow album: Leisure and Work

accompanied by original accordion-

format folder containing 12 black & white

negatives produced in China, c. 1970s

courtesy Thomas Sauvin collection.

Thomas Sauvin is a French photography collector, editor and curator who lives in Beijing. Since 2006 he has worked as a consultant for the UK-based Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC) for whom he collects Chinese work, from contemporary art photography to period publications and anonymous photography. A glimpse into this collection is presented in the photobook 'Happy Tonite' published by AMC in 2010. Sauvin has participated in exhibitions including 'Photographic Oddities' from the AMC, Caochangdi Photo Festival, Beijing (2012), and more recently his project 'Beijing Silvermine' has been presented by Singapore International Photo Festival (2012); FORMAT Photo Festival, Derby, UK (2013); The Salt Yard, Hong Kong (2013); and Lianzhou Foto Festival (2013), China's premier international photography festival, where it received New Photography Award of the Year. Sauvin's 'Silvermine', a limited edition five-album set of photographs from his archive, was shortlisted for the Paris Photo Aperture Foundation First Photobook Award 2013 and was selected by renowned English photographer Martin Parr as one of the Best Photobooks of the Year for The British Journal of Photography.

Lei Lei is a Chinese multimedia animation artist based in Beijing with experience in graphic design, illustration, short cartoons, graffiti and hip-hop. In 2005, while still in school, he founded the design group Raydesign Studio and in 2009 received his master's degree in animation from Tsinghua University, Beijing. His works have been screened in international festivals and have received numerous awards.

Emiland Guillerme is a French filmmaker and journalist currently based in Rome. Since graduating in journalism from La Sorbonne his news stories have appeared in The New York Times, France 2 and Canal+ among others. His short documentary 'Silvermine' (2012) about Thomas Sauvin's project is included in 4A's exhibition.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS - FREE EVENTS

4A up late for Chinese New Year Festival Night Markets with talks
 Friday 24 January, 6-9pm
 Saturday 25 January, 6-9pm

Chinese Language Tours
 Saturday 18 January, 12-1pm
 Saturday 15 February, 12-1pm



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BEIJING SILVERMINE IS
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 SYDNEY CHINESE NEW YEAR FESTIVAL



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EVENT PARTNER



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