

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

Bertien van Manen - East Wind West Wind

12.4. - 4.6.2002

The Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, WC2H 7HY London United Kingdom



Bertien Van Manen, Hong Mei and her father in a lorry - Anhui, 1999

Participating Artists:

Bertien van Manen

The Dutch photographer **Bertien Van Manen**, has produced this new series of photographs East Wind West Wind in China. As a Western photographer her work represents a view from the outside looking in, yet her images share a rare intimacy, opening a door onto a domestic reality usually hidden from Western eyes. Unlike the somewhat impersonal photojournalistic approach of Mark Riboud's and Patrick Zachmann's work in China, all of **Van Manen's** images are colour, usually taken at close range to the subjects. Avoiding stereotypical views of mass gatherings and staged events, her story offers glimpses into the everyday lives and experiences of the people she has encountered. Returning to China over a number of years, from 1997 to 2001, she has sustained a loose network of friends, their families and acquaintances, stretching over thousands of miles. Her images encapsulate the dynamism, vibrancy, colour and human warmth of people living in a diverse and rapidly changing country. Her approach is not to construct the Chinese as Other by eroticising her subjects, rather she depicts them as she would her Dutch friends and family.

"Never take a picture of what strikes you at first", says **Van Manen**, referring to her work, Hong Mei and her father travelling in a lorry - Anhui. "This is what is left when you take away all of the outside of China: two people showing a glimpse of what they share. I could have taken it in Holland. The people there are not that different from the people here. I photograph what I recognize."¹

The flow of images through this fresh body of work includes individual portraits, friends posing with shopping bags, shots of families at home, alongside street shots often taken in moving traffic. The work gives an unparalleled view across China, from the big cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing to more traditional life in remote villages. So often in her work, the wider picture of change can be seen through the detail. In Baby on bed - near Shanghai, a baby lies on a wooden Western-style bed, above which is a picture of a young couple's Western-styled white wedding. This image demonstrates how the Chinese have consumed and appropriated Western products and lifestyles. It reflects a moment when Chinese history has become more open to the free market. Bertien captures people off guard when they are absorbed in their own activities, a daughter reassuringly squeezing her fathers knee whilst on a journey; a young couple embracing; children playing.

In his book, reflecting a Western view of China, Ian Buruma comments: "China ... is traditionally a country of walled cities, walled palaces, walled gardens, and walled family compounds. The family is still the basic unit that dominates most Chinese lives. And **Bertien Van Manen** has penetrated those units, to show us how Chinese live, eat, touch, talk, and sleep in private. ...You can tell from her photographs that she was trusted. Even if she never sees them again, you feel that her subjects are her friends."²

Previously **Van Manen** has produced large photographic projects featuring particular communities or groups including, amongst others, the liberation movement Polisario in the Western Sahara; the life of miners and their families in the Appalachian Mountains, Kentucky, USA; and she has also worked in Romania. As well as having work published in Dutch and English newspapers, she has produced a number of books including one on Nicaragua (1984) and one on women in the Roman Catholic Church in Holland (1985).

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Perhaps her most ambitious previous project, started in 1991, were pictures taken in the former Soviet Union, shown at The Photographers' Gallery in 1995. This was published as *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters*, one of the most truthful portraits of the collapse of the Communist state; harrowing images of Soviet citizens living on the edge.

East Wind West Wind is a personal portrait of China, which offers us an insight into how the country is struggling with its own history and its position in relation to the West.

Camilla Jackson
Programme Organiser

East Wind West Wind was curated by Bas Vroege.
The work is a co-production of the NFI and Paradox.