

Hai Bo: No country for old men

Hai Bo's moving photographs of elderly Chinese villagers say a lot about mortality – but even more about life

Beijing's contemporary art scene, once a hub for economically struggling but energetically creative artists, has changed. Not that artists in China are no longer creative – they are – but, whereas before they lived in houses with paper windows and no running water, many now attend exclusive private parties and live in comfort. Openings are followed by expensive dinners and champagne-fuelled chin wags, and the art market – its glitz and glamour – is ever present.

Hai Bo's work, on show now at 798's Pace Beijing, is an uncomfortable fit for this brave new world. Easygoing and a lover of travel, he's spent the last 12 years photographing subjects whose lives are a million miles away from the sometimes heady art scene that his work attracts.



Chen Chao
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The subject of this show is one he has turned to before – the elderly. A generation on the cusp of passing from the face of China, they are wrinkled men who have lived most of their lives working hard under grinding poverty. For a project he undertook four years ago, Bo returned to his native Changchun in Jilin, where, with a traditional film camera, he photographed old family friends going about their daily chores.

He wanted to capture something of a history and a lifestyle he feels people today are already forgetting. Deploring how 'every city in the country is becoming the same as the next', Bo often photographs this – in his words – 'dying' generation. His subjects are usually poor, and people whose appearance – their clothes and lifestyle – makes them hard to place in time.

Bo worries that rampant consumerism has left people's lives without meaning or identity. 'Everyone in China fundamentally feels that they are without a home. Our generation, it's a drifting generation,' says the photographer. 'I think this has a lot to do with the way the economy is developing.' And so the artist bids viewers to remember a past that is quickly slipping from their lives.

In pursuit of this preoccupation, Bo has returned to portraying old men, and the sense of loneliness and sadness in these recent works is even more inescapable than before. Nine metres in length, 'Blind Men' (2011) is a six-panel work whose time and place is, at first glance, difficult to determine. There is no wide landscape – gone are the arid earth and faceless deserts that occupy the backgrounds of many previous works. Instead, a tall grey wall looms behind six men, sitting apart on stools at little tables.

'I bet you can't tell where that is,' he says. I can't, and he vaguely mentions a city in South China. 'The important thing is, you wouldn't know it,' he says. The men are blind fortune-tellers, who really 'tell you a load of nothing, but, because they are blind, young people go to them because they think it is a bit of fun.'

Bo's open and placid features remain serene, even jovial, as he reflects on the sadness he tackles in his work. 'When I photograph old people, I'm photographing all of us,' he explains. 'Very soon, we'll be just like them; we'll grow old. There's no way round it.'

In another new piece, nursing home residents walk in the snow in front of their monotonous, brick-red residence. Taken in Jilin's cold, dry landscape, the men are going about their daily exercise – their stooped and frail forms silhouetted before the sunset. Death

is coming for these frail figures and, if that is not clear enough, the descending sun, about to disappear behind the rectangular, isolated residence, makes for a clear-enough metaphor.

Apart from the gloomy subject matter – there are examples of impinging death and loss in nearly all of his photographs – Bo's ability to capture light and shadow has added gravitas to his work over the years. 'For some of these pieces I had to go back to the place at different times of the year, so that I could get just the right light,' he says, going into the technicalities of various lens options and items that protect his camera from the weather.

As he shows me through his works, I begin to wonder who they are for. Is he targeting a middle-class urban gallery audience, or has he got a broader proportion of the public in mind? But he takes the question figuratively: 'I want to speak through these photographs to men. Men and women aren't the same: men want power and money, they have too many desires. I want to tell men that these desires are pointless. Everyone will be old one day and, slowly, they'll die.' Then he smiles, the gloom and earnestness that overcame his stoic features, for one tiny moment, entirely gone. 'I'm trying to say people should relax a little, lead a less cumbersome life – it's not all that dark. We all die, and people today are so worried, it'll be gone before they can actually enjoy it.'

Clare Pennington