

## Design is for Beetles: Interview with Sichuanese Photographer Adou

by Sam Gaskin 14/01/13 6:01AM EST



Adou, Luther's Run, Gansu, 2011, silver gelatin print

SHANGHAI — Chengdu-based photographer Adou (阿斗) started his working life as a designer in the advertising industry.

“Graphic design in China at the time was a young, fashionable industry and it really interested me, but now I see that I was mistaken,” he says. “Compared to being an artist, it’s more like I was a beetle.”

Born in 1973, Adou graduated from the fine arts department of Sichuan Aba Normal College in 1995. By 2002, his wife noticed a downturn in his demeanor, and told him to stop making excuses for himself and pursue work that truly interested him.

Adou soon began taking photographs of people on buses with a small digital camera, which he says allowed him to easily capture and communicate their daily lives. He describes these early experiments as a doorway to the more ambitious works that followed, many of which can be seen at his first-ever solo show in China, on now at M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

(Adou’s previous solo shows include two exhibitions at Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York.)

The exhibition encompasses two series of work. Inspired, in part, by Joseph Koudelka, "Samalada" features portraits of Yi minority Chinese taken using expired film on Daliang Mountain in 2006. One of the most enchanting is called "Witch With Chicken".

The more recent series, "Adou" (2011), shows the artist alone and naked, small but undiminished in the expansive deserts of Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. Adou shoots with a low depth of field that exaggerates his minuteness, which he describes as a simple human reality: "People who haven't discovered their smallness just haven't grown up yet."

Though he appears small, Adou is no Gregor Samsa in these images. The figures in his pictures actively engage with the landscape — cavorting in it, adding structural strength to it, and performing dangerous experiments, such as "Dropping the Sun".

An ambiguous orb appears in several of the images, often imbued with a mythical significance that casts Adou as a Chinese Prometheus. (Only where he leans into a boulder, pushing it up a Sisyphian hill, does he become more like a beetle, rolling dung.)

"The sphere has a very abstract feeling," Adou says. "It really can act as many different things, symbolically, and from the beginning, I decided it could be used flexibly."

Adou emphasizes process in his life as an artist. It's the challenge of working with a large format film camera, rather than the mystical properties often attributed to film, that explains his preference over digital. "To reach a certain special result is most photographers' misfortune, but I am an artist. Artists' enjoyment of their processes far exceeds other people's need for results. Therefore, though, artists' results are often terrible."

It's a final caveat that, at least in regard to Adou's own work, he needn't have made.