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Feb. 26, 2019

Pékin Fine Arts (Hong Kong)

Pieter Hugo (b. 1976 Johannesburg, So. Africa)

Solo Exhibition: Africa To China

(26 March – 29 May, 2019)



Pieter Hugo, *Zeng Mei Hui Zi*, Beijing, 2015-2016

Press Release

“Here in Africa and elsewhere, I want to photograph evidence of the fragility and vulnerability of the inhabitants” – Pieter Hugo, Cape Town, 2016

Pékin Fine Arts is pleased to host the 1st solo exhibition in Hong Kong by South African photographer Pieter Hugo (b. 1976 Johannesburg. Lives and works in Cape Town).

Pieter Hugo is probably best known for his brutally frank portraits of his “kin”, mainly the Afrikaners, of South Africa’s post-apartheid era. Later on, his portraits of Nigerian gangs wielding chained hyenas in intimidating poses (“hyena men”) brought international recognition; and, over the years, his rich body of photo work earned solo museum shows at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, Germany’s Wolfsburg Museum, Paris’ Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, and many other museums.

Traversing Africa, clearly unafraid to venture out to areas earlier closed to South African passport holders, Pieter has shot starkly direct portraits of young and old, often against a backdrop of ravaged landscapes and still life images. His photo work includes Rwandan children a decade after the genocide; Ghanaian city workers at toxic recycling dumps; Ghana’s rural wild honey collectors, donning make-shift tree leaves against dangerous bee stings; South Africans with albinism; and, intimate looks at family and friends, as well as self - portraits .

His closeup - sometimes brutally unadorned - portraiture is never gratuitously startling. He consistently chooses modest even lowly subjects, to conjure images of profound revelation. In short, his works succeed at a deeper level. His photo portrait-taking is typically straight-on, placing himself as close up to his subjects- as-collaborators as allowed. Ultimately, Pieter’s unembellished images are less pessimistic, more psychological than social-documentary. Their success as portraiture lies in their protagonists’ frank embodiment of societal change without fitting into too-easy categorizations of “post-colonial”, “ecological wreckage”, and “racial divide”.

He has shot costumed actors on-set at Nigeria’s Nollywood; Botswana’s judges in full courtroom regalia, and oddly intimate nude portraits of friends, neighbors and family, sometimes in post-op hospital situations, often implying varying degrees of subsistent distress. More recently, and just before going to Beijing, as an artist-in-residence in San Francisco, he shot startling portraits aptly titled “Californian Wild Flowers” (2014- 2015) of homeless persons, many and varied, on the streets of LA and San Fran, two of America’s wealthiest cities.

In Hong Kong, he will debut works from “Flat Noodle Soup Talk” (2015-2016), his first works shot in Beijing, taken over two brief artist-in-residence stays, (Pieter’s first China trips). Eschewing the touristic, he chose instead to record Beijingers in fleeting moments of ordinary intimacy. He reached out to friends of interpreters and hotel employees, inviting them to be portrait-subjects. Choosing average, mainly young people living and working in Beijing, Pieter’s image framing and lighting is oddly reminiscent of classic poses from Dutch old Master portrait paintings. These are strong characters unintimidated by the camera’s lens. There are nudes shot at home, families on sofas, up-close street portraits, smokers, tattoos, blue hair, piercings, strong girls and funny fashions. In short, Peter doesn’t aspire (on his first trips to China) to capture anything more emblematic of China than its ordinary Beijingers, just being - however oddly - themselves.

A sampling of works, from Pieter’s more well-known Africa images, will also be on exhibit in Hong Kong.

Arguably, Pieter’s gift, as one of the most impactful photographers of his generation, is his success in creating intimacy with his camera. Ultra-closeup photo portraits, to be successful, require personal rapport with the subject. The best portrait photographers share a willingness to go “digging”, well below the subject-surface, to reveal the heterogeneity of mankind via the photo portrait medium; and, this is ultimately a collaborative endeavor. Stepping out into the unknown and generously situating photo portrait shoots takes two parties’ willingness, without creating discomfort, unequal relationships, exotic stereotypes or clichés. What Pieter Hugo’s photo portraits reveal are people relaxed enough to offer private glimpses inside ordinary lives. These photo “reveals” are never an easy thing to achieve, and especially not easy in China and Africa.

- Meg Maggio, Beijing, 2019