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STEAMPUNKS BIRDHEAD

PROFILES BY MICHAEL YOUNG FROM NOV/DEC 2013

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Portrait of Birdhead. Courtesy the artists.

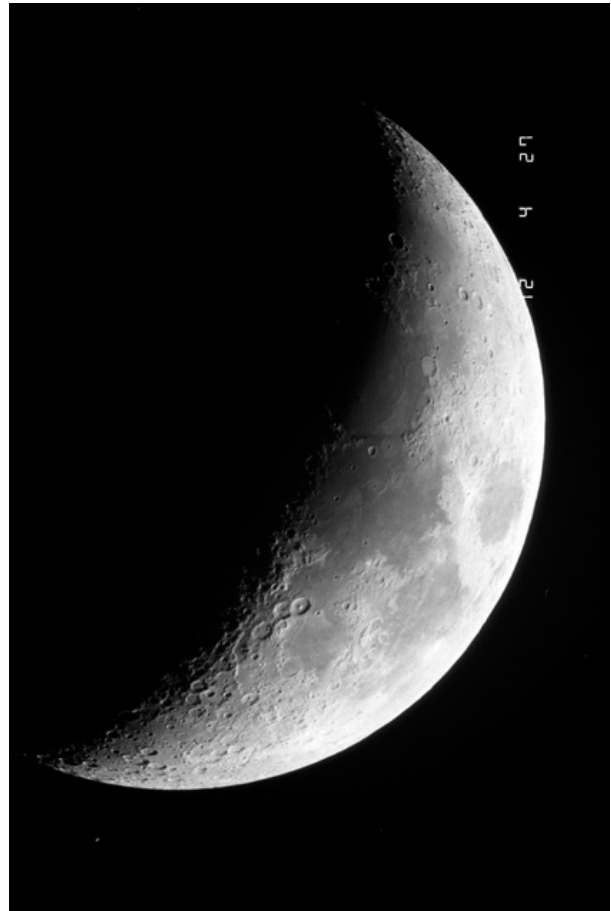
There is something charmingly old-fashioned about Birdhead, the young Shanghai-based photographic duo of Ji Weiyu and Song Tao (born in 1980 and 1979, respectively), as exemplified by their approach to technology. Their sobriquet was coined by chance in 2004 when, as they struggled with a computer, it randomly generated the name. And they still don't have a website. "Three times we have tried to make one," they say, "and each time we have failed." Although computers have now, of necessity, become part of their lives, they are dismissive of digital cameras and photography: "We prefer to spend hours processing film and making prints in a darkroom—it's fun." As for cloud storage, well, "We don't like cloud. We can't touch it." In today's fast-paced world of Facebook, Instagram and Sina Weibo, for which the instantaneous is all that seems to matter, Birdhead are definitely analog advocates who avoid the crowded social-media forums.

We are talking in the foyer of Shanghai's Salvo Hotel and quickly become engulfed in clouds of blue cigarette smoke—both of them are dedicated chain smokers. They are dressed like anarchists—Ji in a crumpled denim suit, Song in a combat jacket and cap. Their English is studied but skilled and, like twins, they often finish or qualify each other's sentences. Song rotates a pair of walnut shells in the palm of his hand, an ancient Chinese habit believed to stimulate circulation. His hands are lightly stained the color of henna, as much from the constant cigarettes as from the polished shells.

Birdhead have been friends for 15 years since meeting at high school, and both studied at Shanghai Arts and Crafts School, Song focusing on sculpture and Ji on graphic design. In 2004, they came together for their first collaboration, which resulted in a book of 200 self-portraits called *Beginning of the Summer*. The choice of subject proved prophetic—the photographs are "not very different from those we take today" and self-portraiture remains central to their practice. Black-and-white photography is their preferred medium, although color is beginning to creep in. Birdhead photograph at a frantic pace that seems to contradict their apparently laid-back approach to life—they sleep late and still live with their respective parents. Their practice entails frenetically documenting their hometown city of Shanghai, but their Shanghai is not the one found in tourist brochures but a far grittier place—it is a city in transformation, witnessing urban decay, derelict wastelands, grungy music clubs and chance encounters. Each fragmented frame offers up just a sliver of a scene or a casual observation of something seemingly insignificant—bicycle wheels, dead fish on the banks of the Huangpu River, someone eating noodles—set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing city. Interjected within this milieu are Birdhead themselves, smiling, posing, climbing walls, striking a pose or pulling comical faces at the camera, and just hanging out in the urban landscape.

On first encounter, Birdhead's works seem to be about a city reinventing itself, and they are on record as saying that they would like to be thought of as Shanghai's official photographers. But closer inspection reveals that Birdhead's photography captures the changes taking place within themselves as they adapt to the city's metamorphosis. In this context, Shanghai, their professed *idée fixe*, is relegated to a subsidiary setting, a silent witness to a semifictional

autobiography that seems overlaid with ennui: “Ultimately, we are only interested in ourselves, so our photography is a reflection of us.” They may not participate in social media, but this obsessive self-documentation would certainly be familiar to anyone using services such as Facebook and Instagram. Birdhead are products of an image-saturated world, and of a country where accelerated progress has delivered an angst-ridden generation unsure as to what to do with itself. Even their approach toward their chosen medium suggests a level of languor—they merely state that, “Photography for us is a language, and really there is no point in talking about it. Each picture, good or bad, is nothing. We don’t care about this. It is just about us.”



BIRDHEAD, *Untitled*, 2012, gelatin silver print, 60 × 50 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artists.

Birdhead’s visual language defies categorization. “Documentary or diary is not the right description for us,” they say. “The person looking at it is what matters.” With a snapshot aesthetic that assumes monumentality when assembled en masse, Birdhead have developed a complex modern-day language of urban life that is devoid of hierarchy. Every element within the photograph is as important as any other and they don’t care, they say, who took which photograph: “It is not important. We always talk from one viewpoint. We are like each other’s mirror. Every day we are talking. Every day we are taking photos.”

They say, perhaps slightly disingenuously, that the best way for their work to be viewed is on the intimate pages of a book. In 2012, they exhibited two volumes—*The End of Mainland* (2010) and *Xin Cun* (2006)—as part of “Shanghai Surprise,” the inaugural show at the Chi K11 Art Space in Shanghai. While the former shows voyeuristic glimpses of their lives in Shanghai, *Xin Cun*—literally translated as “new estate”—is a cogent social critique of the housing estates springing up all over the city. But their work now regularly appears on gallery walls—their compulsive snapshots lend themselves to being exhibited as large-scale, site-specific installations, with multiple photographs constructed into large

grids.

Welcome to Birdhead's World – Venice Project (2011) for the 54th Venice Biennale consisted of 198 color and black-and-white photographs clustered along the walls of the Arsenale, while last year's *The Song of Early Spring* (2012) was exhibited as part of "New Photography 2012" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. This last installation is a grid of black-and-white street photographs, in front of which hang two vertical mahogany panels supporting photos of Chinese characters, appropriated, one character at a time, from the billboards and signs of Shanghai, to spell out a verse from a classical poem. This work has now been deconstructed to form their latest book, *The Light of Eternity*, published in late September. Interest in their work has intensified—in June they were announced as finalists for the inaugural Hugo Boss Asia Art award, and are currently part of the associated exhibition at Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum, as well as the monumental exhibition "Portrait of the Times: 30 Years of Chinese Contemporary Art" at Shanghai's Power Station of Art.

Despite all this new attention, Birdhead see themselves as humble practitioners of photography, only coming truly alive when the city's bitumen is beneath their feet. Certainly, as the evening draws to a close, their conversation remains amusingly nonchalant: "We listen to news reports of earthquakes and we think, motherfuck, but then turn around and go eat some noodles." And, with that, they light up their cigarettes and are enveloped in smoke from their preferred brands—Zhongnanhai for Ji and Double Happiness for Song. Then they are gone, heading out into the Shanghai night to find noodles and continue the obsessive documentation of their own lives that allows them a certain freedom in a country that demands conformity over individualism and discipline over anarchy.

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