

JERWOOD **PHOTOGRAPHY** AWARDS

Jerwood Photography Awards 2008

CATALOGUE TEXT

Marta Weiss discusses the work of the 2008 Jerwood Photography Award Winners: **Martina Lindqvist, Alice Myers, James Pogson, Kurt Tong and Nicky Walsh.**

“As a way of beginning, one might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing... Surely the best of photographers have been first of all pointers – men and women whose work says: I call your attention to this pyramid, face, battlefield, pattern of nature, ephemeral juxtaposition.”

John Szarkowski, *The Work of Eugene Atget: Old France*, p.11 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981)

The five winners of the 2008 Jerwood Photography Awards are all pointers. Whether drawing the viewer's eye to Chinese parks or female Thai kickboxers, to plastic cups, to island coastlines, or children in swimming pools, each of these photographers has made a visual discovery and demanded that others see it too. Their approaches – from constructing models based on family snapshots to posing subjects in front of a simple backdrop – are as varied as their subject matter. Each of the selected bodies of work exhibits a coherent vision and each photographer expresses, in a distinctive voice, the demand that we look.

Sorting through his family snapshots, Kurt Tong was reminded of the parks he had visited as a child in Hong Kong in the 1980s. For his series *People's Park*, he set out to document similar parks in mainland China today. As Tong explains: “In 1958, at the beginning of ‘The Great Leap Forward’, when private ownership was banned, many existing parks were renovated and new parks

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were built all across China for the people, many of which were named People's Parks. Over the years, they became main focal points of the cities, where families have their outings and couples meet." Today, however, as the Chinese economy booms, many families and young people seek entertainment elsewhere, and the parks have fallen into disrepair. "Millions of older Chinese would have grown up with these parks and have memories of time spent in them... Like the family photos I have, the photographs in the series act as a record of memories that may soon disappear entirely, along with the People's Parks."

The photographs in the People's Park series offer a melancholic, nostalgic view of the parks. Although often shot from the low vantage point of a child, the eye behind the camera is clearly that of an adult attuned to the poignancy of the parks' fading cheerfulness. Capturing a balloon-like sign that looms among branches overhead or plastic grapes dangling from the ceiling of a picnic pavilion, Tong draws attention to the collision of nature and artifice that is perhaps common to all parks, but that seems especially acute in these spaces. Despite the presence of such man-made structures, the People's Parks are in fact un-peopled, populated only by animals, both real and artificial. An oversized family of chickens in painted cement inhabits a clearing in one view, while in another a pair of real peacocks perches on a swing. In another precisely framed composition, a row of live caged birds hangs in front of a painted mural of birds and bamboo. In this place of tamed and cultivated nature in the midst of modern urban life, live birds are contained in small, garishly coloured cages, while only painted ones fly freely.

Childhood memories as experienced through family snapshots also inform Martina Lindqvist's work. But unlike Tong, who photographs actual places similar to those in his family pictures, Lindqvist makes more direct use of old photographs taken by her parents. The series Rågskär Island depicts the small island off the coast of Finland that Lindqvist grew up visiting every summer. The views are brooding and lonely, the only hint of habitation a half-obscured cottage. Water appears in each of these crepuscular landscapes, whether as a rocky shoreline or a blue patch on the horizon, underscoring the sense of island isolation. Dark and mysterious, the images seem at first to have been made at dusk or just before dawn.

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On closer inspection, there is something unsettling about these murky views, beyond the loneliness of the landscape and the ominous, purple-grey lighting. Only the middle section of each image is in focus, while the foreground and background soften into obscurity. Based on memories of her time on the island, the landscapes are not in fact direct recordings of an actual place. Rather, they are photographs of miniature models that Lindqvist constructs after family snapshots, in which enlarged prints of the original snapshots form the backdrop. Her process, then, is a combination of re-photographing existing photographs and the construction of models based on those photographs.

The series elicits an uneasiness in the viewer that is in keeping with the photographer's own ambivalence about the island, which she describes as "paradoxically... connected to both positive and negative mindsets." Seemingly made at twilight, that in-between time of day when light comes not from the moon or sun but is reflected by the atmosphere, these images emerge from somewhere between intangible memories and the concrete fact of a place recorded in a photograph.

If Lindqvist evokes the moodiness of a place surrounded by water, Alice Myers captures the exhilaration of bodies propelling themselves through water. In her series *Rocket*, Myers records "the moment when a child pushes away from the side of a pool and stretches into a 'rocket' shape with muscles tensed, trying not to sink." Myers was also drawn to the subject because of her own "memories of the fear and hope" experienced at the moment of launching oneself into an expanse of water, but the resulting images are less evocative of the child's perspective than that of an adult anxiously watching a child's progress into the unknown.

Viewed from above, we see the children from the vantage point of dry land as they reach out, stretching and splashing away from the safety of the water's edge. Suspended by the photograph, the children are caught in awkward poses, half-submerged, their wet hair seemingly solidified into gleaming shapes. Their limbs wobble through the water's distorting lens or are truncated by obscuring white splashes. Their pale skin and brightly coloured swimsuits form bright, contrasting patches in the centre of expanses of blue. Simultaneously conveying a sense of dread and delight, these are visually engaging images.

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While Myers takes obvious pleasure in recording the play of light over water and flesh, Nicky Walsh pares down the study of opacity and transparency to its most basic elements. Myers's limited palette of blues and pale flesh tones, punctuated by the occasional splash of red, is largely dictated by her subject matter. For Walsh, however, a limited palette and narrow tonal range are part of a deliberate, disciplined attempt to depict the most subtle differences in opacity and tonality of everyday objects. In this cool space of an anonymous office, expanses of pale greys and greens are broken occasionally by the hard black edge of a table or the metallic gleam of three binder clips. In one image, a single leaf presses against a pane of frosted glass, bringing into focus what would otherwise be a ghostly green mass. It is as if the plant – the only living thing in this sterile atmosphere – cannot help growing in spite of its fluorescent-lit surroundings.

Walsh's austere, minimalist approach invites an aesthetic contemplation of ordinary objects such as a stack of paper or three clear plastic cups. She writes of her quiet office still-lives, which she designates Untitled: "There are no transformations taking place, no natural evolution, no history; these locations are trapped in a perpetual present, demonstrative of routine, boredom, and the daydream." Indeed, the blankness of Walsh's studies inspires a kind of reverie.

James Pogson's portraits of female Thai kickboxers are as loud and vibrant as Walsh's still-lives are muted. The series Ladykillers takes its title from the event at which they were made, an international women's Thai kickboxing tournament held in England in 2008. Formerly banned in Thailand, women's kickboxing remains a subcategory of a sport dominated by male competitors. Pogson's series offers a Technicolour glimpse of a proud and intense athletic subculture.

On a formal level, the portraits are in complete accord with the assertiveness of the subjects they depict. The cobalt-blue background brilliantly offsets the intense hues of the competitors' outfits and flushed, pink skin, and the photographer's flash-gun glints garishly off the sheen of their satin shorts and perspiring flesh.

Photographed either immediately before or immediately after they compete, the women appear preoccupied, and even when their gaze is directed at the

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camera, they do not seem to engage with the photographer or – by extension – the viewer. Their mental absorption leaves the viewer free to examine all the details of their physiques and paraphernalia, taking in the sweaty gleam of their skin, their tightly bound hair, and noting their multicoloured, multilingual clothing, occasional bruises and tattoos.

The consistency of these half-length, frontal portraits creates a uniformity that invites comparison of details such as hairstyles, insignia and other accoutrements. We notice, for instance, that three of the 'Ladykillers' wear the same brand of boxing gloves and that two have tattooed bands on their upper left arms. We observe the garlands of flowers worn by some, and champions' belts worn by others. The subjects are unnamed, identified simply as Ladykiller #1, Ladykiller #2 and so on, reinforcing the fact that these are not portraits of individuals but rather almost anthropological studies of participants in a specific activity.

Collectively, as leading recent graduates of UK photography degree courses, Kurt Tong, Martina Lindqvist, Alice Myers, Nicky Walsh and James Pogson are pointing the field in promising directions. We can look forward to following their outstretched fingers and seeing where they direct our attention next.

Marta Weiss is Curator, Photographs, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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