

## Curator's Statement

***Pictures are Words-not-Known:  
An Exhibit of Photographs at the LiShui Museum of Photography  
LiShui, China  
Fall 2011 & Winter 2012***

This exhibit explores the concept of “concept” in photography today. That’s a familiar idea to those of us in the West who have integrated the lessons of Conceptualism in many of its various forms (from Fluxus to performance to Relational Aesthetics, etc.)—that is: we are familiar with art of the idea, where what it’s about is more important than how it looks. But how does this work in photography, and how does someone photograph an idea? When asked to curate this exhibit for the LiShui Museum, these were the questions I asked myself.

When I teach photography and art, questions are the starting point. In fact, the goal is to learn to use materials and technology (film and lenses; computers and cameras) to ask questions, to explore our world—culture, relationships, history, dreams. Unfortunately, though, the work of finding the right questions is usually hidden beneath the glossy surface of the already-found answer. I mean this in a particular way: the picture you’re looking at is not the work. The picture is the residue of the work.

Our general understanding of the art-making process has been misdirected—we’ve gotten the words wrong. What we call the “work” is not really the work at all, but rather the result of the work. The actual work of the artist is the question that the artist asks. The picture, or the sculpture, or the dance, or the computer interactive poem, is an attempt to ask the question clearly, and perhaps to give an answer. By the time an audience sees or hears or plays with any particular artwork, the really difficult work—the dynamic, sweat-and-grime work—is done and gone. What we see on the wall is what’s left over. At that point, standing in the gallery, the job of the audience is to see through the art on the wall and imagine the work, the questions, behind it.

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Most of the time, however, we look at art as if it were a mirror. We only want to see ourselves. And when we do in fact see ourselves, we “like” it, and move on. And if we don't see ourselves, we “don't like” it, and move on. In both cases we miss the point entirely. The artist didn't bleed and cry for us to feel good or not feel good. That is perverse. No, the artist was driven to look carefully, feel deeply, and explore and experiment and fail a million times because ... why? Why would anyone put themselves through that pain and potential humiliation? This is the mystery and wonder that the audience searches for, perhaps to glimpse briefly, perhaps to breathe into their own process of living. But it's impossible to reach that state of awareness, of transparency, if you only look for a mirror.

As a teacher I want students to see something other than a mirror, to look through the work of art and find the questions. This is often extremely difficult because first I must convince them that such a thing is possible. Usually we move so fast and feel so little that we barely breathe at all, much less take time to see past the initial surface of the artifact in front of us. But for someone who wants to be an artist, this skill is critical. After all, the job of the artist is to explore the world as it is, and to imagine a world as it can or might be. And there's no other way to do that except by digging for the right questions, even if they can't be spoken, or written in words that everyone already knows. In fact, often, finding the right question takes a lifetime of trial and error, fearless exploration, the willingness to fail, the courage to feel deeply, and the discipline to respond.

I realize that the audience in LiShui doesn't have a lifetime to respond to these pictures, but I hope that you'll take the time to see the idea of the artist's response in them. For example, the artists here, my fellow faculty at the ICP, have each shared their questions—their explorations—in their writing as well as in their photographs; that means you'll see that some

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artists ask about their ancestors, while others ask about immediate family; some explore their home cities, while others explore cities they've never known; and some work on questions about politics and markets, while others wonder about the meaning of their dreams. There are many other questions here as well, and as you look at and between these photographs, you might begin to piece together questions of your own. That's the concept I'm most interested in. When the work is real, when the questions are true, the artist's success provokes the audience to see something that a mirror can never show.

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Staten Island, New York