

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## PERFORMANCE

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IRANIAN ART



## CHI PENG WITH RICHARD VINE

*If the Chinese art world has a living embodiment of the term shen tong (wunderkind), it may well be the 28-year-old photographer Chi Peng. In 2003, two years after leaving the northeastern coastal city of Yantai to enter the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the youth was visited by independent curator Feng Boyi, esteemed for his groundbreaking exhibitions involving Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan, Song Dong, Gu Dexin and other avant-garde artists. Feng selected the CAFA sophomore to be one of eight young participants in "One to One: Visions—Recent Photographs from China," an exhibition he organized for Chambers Fine Art gallery in New York.*

*The show changed Chi Peng's life. His digitally manipulated images—most featuring human figures collaged into Brave New World contexts—were immediately sought after by other galleries in Asia, Europe and the U.S. Additionally, in the five years since the artist's international debut, examples of his work, both old and new, have been included in group shows at such major nonprofit venues as the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, the House of World Cultures in Berlin, the National Museum of Modern Art in Seoul, the Prague Triennale and the Essl Collection near Vienna.*

*Offering a clear-eyed take on 21st-century China, Chi Peng's pictures also reflect the dominant aesthetic current in post-Mao photography. Over the past three decades, Chinese art photographers have progressively moved away from "straight" documentation, however subjective in actual practice, toward either elaborately staged or digitally fabricated tableaux. (Examples of the earlier approach are currently on view in the survey "Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography" at the China Institute, New York, through Dec. 13.)*

*The major reasons for this shift are deeply enmeshed in national history. Straight images are often marked by the conventions of photojournalism, and thus either too mundane to be considered art from a cultured Chinese view-*

*point or simply too close for comfort to the propagandistic practices of the Maoist era (1949-76). Meanwhile, advertising, the visual lingua franca of the New China, now assaults the public with a form of sheer artifice too powerful to ignore. Staging and manipulation, then, provide experimental artists—Xing Danwen, Cang Xin, Liu Zheng, Miao Xiaochun, Weng Fen, Wang Qingsong, Hong Hao and others—with ways to take personal control of imagery in an environment where it has long been force-fed to the populace. This impulse dovetails remarkably well with a fundamental principle of traditional Chinese painting—something no academy-trained artist escapes, even today. For centuries, indeed for millennia, the chief goal of pictorial art in China has been to convey not the outward, material appearance of a scene but its inner, spiritual reality. In the words of the 8th-century painter Zhang Zao, "One should learn from nature and paint the image in one's mind." Chi Peng's work is, in effect, an urbanized, electronically enabled realization of that maxim.*

*I visited the artist in August 2009 at his two-story studio in a typical middle-class Beijing apartment tower. My thanks go to Simon Kirby, Koko-Shen Li and Christina Yu for access, first-draft translation and follow-up correspondence.*

**RICHARD VINE** Do you like the view from your apartment?

**CHI PENG** High-rises to the horizon, traffic. That's China now. I can't ignore it.

**RV** Some other Chinese artists do.

**CP** I'm not other artists. I only know how to be me. Sometimes people wanted me to be different—more patient, less curious. But it never worked out. In art school, some of my fellow students complained that I had too many concepts, not enough skills. And they didn't like it that I formally catalogued my work and sometimes gave pieces away. They thought I was trying to get noticed.

**RV** Were you?

**CP** If I have a good idea, I want to share it.

**RV** Did you always want to be an artist?

**CP** No. When I was growing up in Yantai, my father wanted me to do something normal, like be a government man. But I wasn't all that great in academics. Especially math and English.

**RV** What does your father do?

**CP** He's an administrator at a newspaper in Yantai. So I grew up around journalists, printing equipment, cameras.

**RV** Is that what planted the image-making seed?

Chi Peng with cotton quilts from his installation *Soft*, 2008. Photo Richard Vine, 2009.

### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

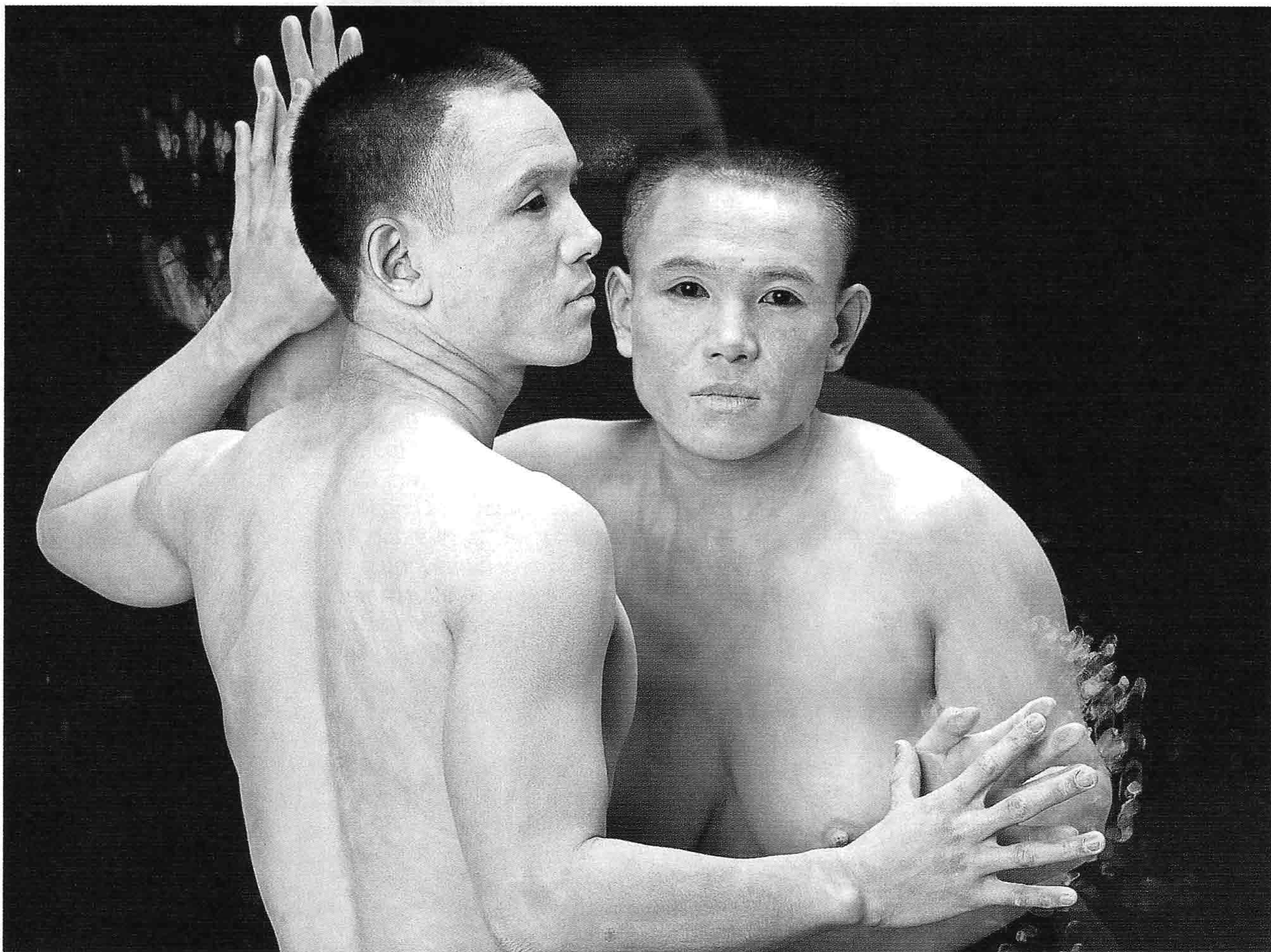
Chi Peng's solo "The Journey to the West" at Kiang Gallery, Atlanta, through Nov. 28.

His photographs in three group shows:

"City\_net Art: Seoul, Istanbul, Tokyo, Beijing" at the Seoul Museum of Art, through Nov. 2;

"Me, Myself and I" at the Chambers Fine Art ArtFarm, Salt Point, N.Y., through Dec. 5; and

"China@BOZAR" at the Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, Nov. 29, 2009-Jan. 29, 2010.



Above, Chi Peng:  
*Consubstantiality I-1*, 2003,  
black-and-white photograph,  
30¾ by 47¼ inches.

Opposite, *Sprinting Forward-1*,  
2003, color photograph, 53⅛  
by 42½ inches.

All photos this article, unless  
otherwise noted, courtesy  
Chambers Fine Art, New York.

**CP** Probably. I also loved advertising, where everything was so clear and compelling. For a while, I even thought about being a movie director, until I realized that it was a lot like being a politician—always negotiating things, always compromising, and then having to coordinate a bunch of other people.

**RV** Not like the control you have sitting at a computer console.

**CP** That's part of it. Mostly I just wanted to be a real artist—you know, a painter.

**RV** Did your family support that idea?

**CP** Not really. But they were very modern and enlightened. They didn't give me an order to stop. We sat around a table and talked about it. My parents cared about my happiness—I'm a One Child Policy kid. They were worried about how I would live. My mother worked in a bank, you know. In the end, they didn't really help me pursue art, but they didn't prevent me from preparing for the state exams. My first high school art teacher, a painter who was only about four years older than me, was very encouraging. He was pleased

that I had my own ideas about art and I would even criticize his work. Sadly, he drowned about six weeks after we met. I was devastated, crying. Eventually, I decided I had to go on, and I spent one year preparing to apply to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

**RV** And you succeeded, even though only about 10 percent of applicants do, after years of rigorous preparation.

**CP** I squeaked by my entrance test—not because I could paint so well, but because the other parts of my portfolio, the design and concepts parts, were much better. When I came to CAFA in 2001, I immediately saw that the painting students were all highly skilled. The ones doing Chinese painting knew all about the tradition of ink, and the ones in the oil painting division were blathering away about Western artists. Me, I didn't even know who Andy Warhol was. I was way behind on information, and I couldn't hope to match the others technically. So I went into the digital media department.

**RV** You thought it would be easier?

**CP** Well, with a camera anybody can make some kind of decent image. Then, of course, you have to figure out what to do with it. The whole trick is to catch the viewer's eye and get your picture to stick in their head. And to make it meaningful, the way real artists—painters—do. Once, when I was still doing basic courses, we were all supposed to sketch a bicycle, and I felt like I just couldn't do it—not beautifully and correctly like the other students did. So instead I took a lot of photos of bike parts and stuck them together on one sheet of paper and recopied the sheet. That's what I handed in as my sketch.

**RV** And?

**CP** For some reason, the teacher liked

**“WHEN I FIRST STARTED TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS, I DIDN’T SEE THEM AS ART BUT AS SOMETHING THAT I WANTED TO TAKE ON SERIOUSLY AND FINISH PERFECTLY.”**

it. I got a high mark for the class even though I was almost never there.

**RV** So you became a star student in the media department?

**CP** God, no. Everyone there was better than I was with a camera. They knew which lens to use when, how to light a scene, the different effects of different kinds of film, all the darkroom techniques. I felt like a duffer. That’s mainly why I got into digital manipulation so intensely. It was something I could do as well as anyone else.

**RV** Maybe better?

**CP** My teachers didn’t think I did the regular photography assignments exceptionally well. Go shoot a sunset, a figure study, a landscape—that sort of thing. I was only so-so. But I worked very hard to catch up, and I was also doing my own projects on the side. I was making images outside the curriculum that I thought were more interesting. Apparently, some of the faculty thought so too.

**RV** Including your teacher Miao Xiaochun, a pioneering conceptual photographer in China, who is now a master of digital imagery?

**CP** He was one of my guides to the world of art.

**RV** You did more than follow, though, or you wouldn’t have made the impression you did.

**CP** What inspired me most was not an artist or a work but the belief that I should perfect what I do. When I first started taking photographs, I didn’t see them as art but as something that I wanted to take on seriously and finish perfectly.

**RV** That seems to be your approach to this day.

**CP** For better or worse. In the last two years I’ve only finished maybe ten images.

**RV** Yet that quirk, that combination of inventiveness and perfectionism, paid off big-time one day in 2003.

**CP** Yes. Feng Boyi, the famous curator, came to CAFA looking for some new photographers to put in a show he was doing for Chambers Fine Art gallery in New York. Miao Xiaochun said, “Go look at Chi Peng’s work. He’s making something that’s his own.” The next thing I knew, Feng Boyi picked me to be in “One to One” [2004].

**RV** So while in your third year of art

school you were already showing at a commercial gallery in the U.S., in Chelsea no less.

**CP** Sometimes I have the stepping-in-dog-shit kind of luck.

**RV** Don’t you think that the dealer Christoph Mao might have had something to do with your good fortune?

**CP** Yes, of course. He’s the one who invited Feng Boyi to do the new-photography show in the first place. And the next year, in 2005, he gave me a solo exhibition.

**RV** A Manhattan solo, at age 24, three months after you graduated from art school. Some artists work half a lifetime for that.

**CP** True, yes. But then maybe I’ll be dead

by middle age. Luck goes both ways.

**RV** Those 2004 and 2005 Chambers shows, coming just when the market for Chinese artwork began to go wild, were not exactly isolated events. Looking at your CV in these catalogues, I see you’ve averaged about three solo shows and eight group shows every year between 2005 and 2008.

**PC** What can I say? Everything seemed to happen at once. . . . I’ve been very busy. The CV doesn’t list everything.

**RV** What kind of work did you show in those first two exhibitions?

**CP** In the 2004 group show, several “Sprinting Forward” pictures [2003-04].

**RV** They each have multiple images



“WE CANNOT IGNORE THE PAST AND ITS TRADITIONS, [BUT] WHAT I’M CONCERNED ABOUT IS *THIS* SOCIETY AND OUR CURRENT LIVING ENVIRONMENT.”

of you running naked, pursued by red airplanes.

**CP** The running figures represent a mental stage of liberation. The red planes are like a recurring image in one’s dream.

**RV** Any significance to the color red?

**CP** I don’t know what you mean.

**RV** Red. The hue has a long history in China, right? Imperial red, or the red traditionally associated with joy and well-being, or Communist Party red.

**CP** The planes are things that free you but also limit you, that’s all. Like a dream.

**RV** Speaking of that paradox, your early “Consubstantiality” images [2003] feature nude, digitally constructed her-

maphrodites, some of them mirroring each other.

**CP** Those works reflect something that exists in reality; I’ve seen such people with my own eyes, at show bars I went to back then. At the time, I tried to use a simple way to present what I experienced.

**RV** Some sort of anxiety about sexual identity?

**CP** Or curiosity. I was young.

**RV** By 2005, in the second Chambers show and elsewhere, you were peppering many of your images with swarms of winged Chi Pengs, all naked and impossibly free as they zoom over cities, landscapes, seashores, around

the Eiffel Tower. In *The Day After Tomorrow* [2006], for example, the human dragonflies are buzzing a cityscape that combines New York and Shanghai—two places with very liberal reputations. That must have meant something special to you.

**CP** Every image reflects my mentality at the time it’s made. Today, that first meaning may be replaced by something different, or it might be invalid.

**RV** In your New York solo you also showed works from the “I Fuck Me” series [2005], where twin Chi Pengs screw each other in a telephone booth, under a desk in a modern office, in an apartment shower, in a public restroom, etc.

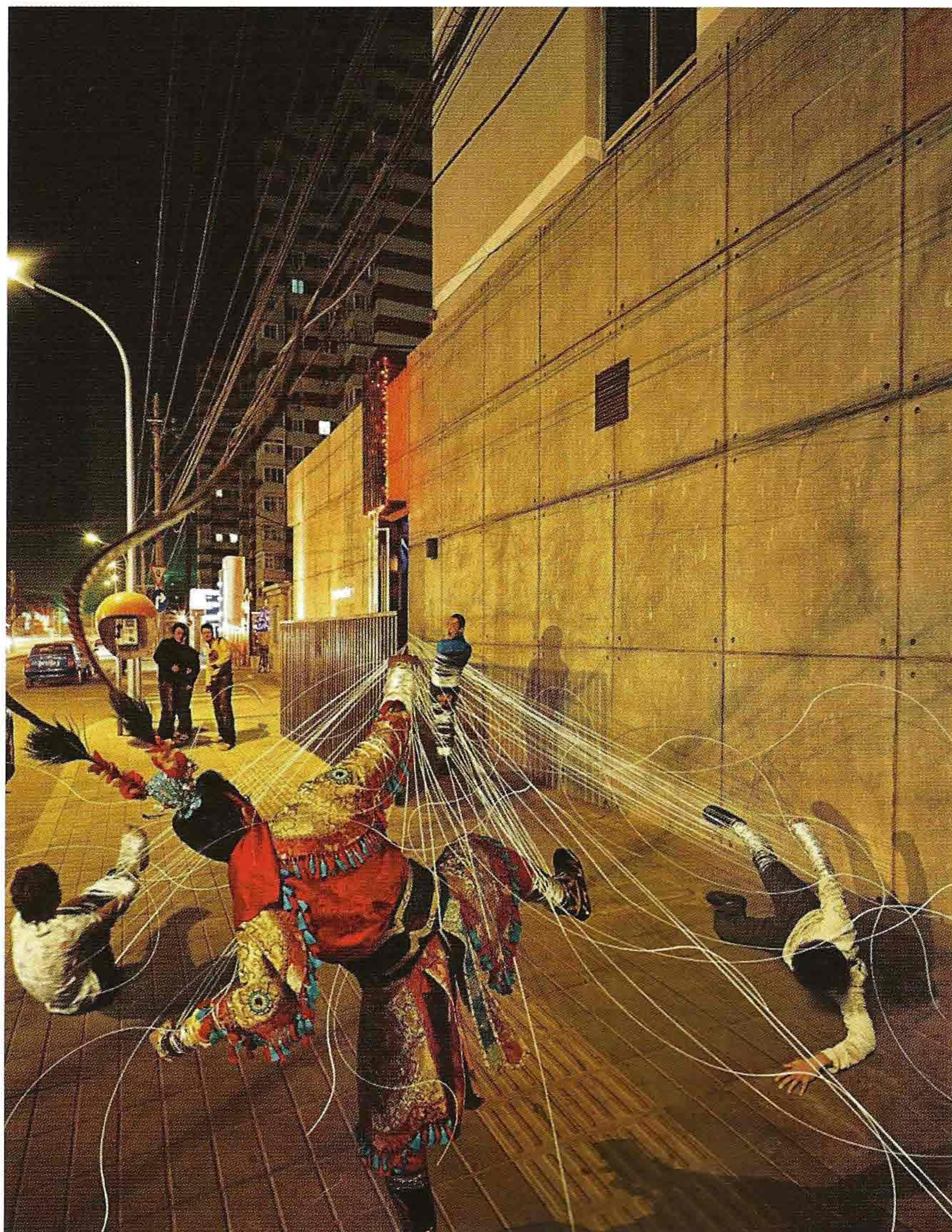
**CP** I wanted the look to be modern. One of my buddies worked for an international courier service. We did some shots in their offices at night. I don’t think his boss ever knew—unless he came to one of my shows, which seems unlikely.

**RV** The scenarios suggest queer—and perhaps narcissistic—themes. Have you had any problems showing this work in the PRC?

**CP** Those pictures have been exhibited in China, and there was no problem at all. Of course, just as in America, homosexuality is far from completely approved here. It’s harder for families to accept their homosexual members than for society in general to accommodate them. It’s a human issue that needs to be addressed by everyone, not just Chinese people.

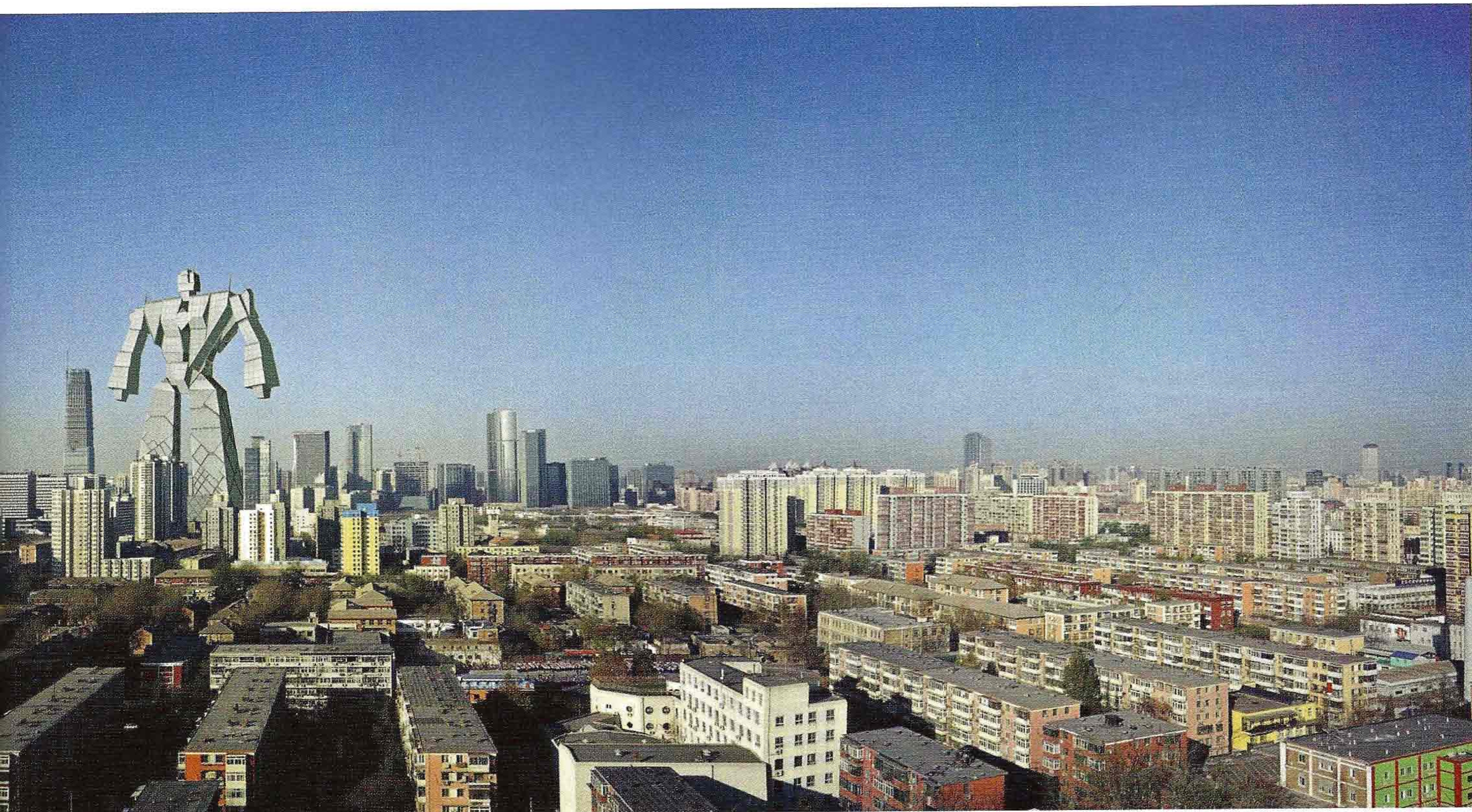
**RV** Were you trying to make a larger social point with the corporate setting?

**CP** The office is only one of several places we used. This work tries to



Left, *The Cave of Silken Web (Destination)*, 2007, 87 $\frac{7}{8}$  by 68 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches.

Opposite, *Why Should I Love You?*, 2008, color photograph, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$  by 98 inches.



challenge and provoke excitement, like the temptation scene in a porno film. Just because something looks weird, doesn't mean that it doesn't go on.

**RV** A lot of well-known photographers—Arbus, Mapplethorpe, Clark, Goldin, Araki—would agree. How has your frequent use of nudity been received here?

**CP** Chinese viewers react to nudity pretty much the same way Americans do. Today's China is not as conservative as people think.

**RV** So I've heard. *Time Out Beijing*, for example, always has a gay and lesbian section.

**CP** Why not?

**RV** It's only fifteen years ago, nine years before you made your "Consubstantiality" images, that Zhu Ming and Ma Liuming were arrested for nude performances.

**CP** Fifteen years, that's more than half my life.

**RV** Many of the earlier avant-garde artists in China made work in the late 1980s and '90s that had a definite political edge, even though they had to be fairly cautious and indirect. Faintly mocking portraits of Mao, depictions of the aftereffects of the Cultural Revolution, bizarre actions staged in Tiananmen Square—that sort of thing. Do you

feel any affinity with those older artists and that kind of work?

**CP** What I'm concerned about is *this* society and our current living environment.

**RV** Clearly your imagery is, for the most part, quite contemporary and fresh. But in a 2007 series, you draw heavily from the sixteenth-century tale *Journey to the West*. How do you see Chinese tradition functioning in the People's Republic these days? Do you sense a personal connection to the classic past?

**CP** Every kind of lifestyle is developed from tradition and history. Nothing is absolutely new. We cannot ignore the past and its tradition.

**RV** So in this series you've got an elaborately costumed Monkey King figure—with two attached head feathers sticking up maybe five feet in the air—who keeps turning up in present-day settings, often disrupting things.

**CP** The original *Journey to the West* is about a righteous Tang Dynasty [618-907] monk who travels west to India in order to bring the original Buddhist scriptures back east to China. He's joined by several companions, the most troublesome and unforgettable being the Monkey King. Obviously, there's a ton of folklore mixed in with later, more formal, religious and politi-

cal ideas. The characters have endless adventures and misadventures, and Chinese kids grow up learning many of the episodes—Stealing the Peaches, Fighting the White-Bones Demon, etc.—by heart. The stories are endlessly repeated in books, cartoons, TV shows, movies.

**RV** Your version of the Monkey King turns up in places like a luxury clothing boutique, a contemporary art auction, a fancy restaurant.

**CP** Today, of course, the "West" means something very different—really the opposite spiritual direction. Not old India and the Buddha anymore but America and Europe, where all the new stuff comes from—the cool products and trends.

**RV** You seem to have ambivalent feelings about that influence.

**CP** Do I?

**RV** Well, in one typical shot, a gigantic Chi Peng faces an Emporio Armani billboard with his pants dropped to his ankles. The title is *I'm Sorry, I Just Don't Love You* [2008]. In another, Rem Koolhaas's famous China Central Television building has become a gargantuan "transformer" figure that towers menacingly over the rest of Beijing. You call that one *Why Should I Love You?* [2008].

**CP** [Laughing] Everybody in China



Right, *World*, 2006, color photograph, 11 by 47¼ inches.

Below, *I'm Sorry, I Just Don't Love You*, 2008, color photograph, 47¼ by 59¾ inches.

knows those ads, that building. The Koolhaas CCTV headquarters has a big hole in the center, a big nothing. **RV** Meanwhile, in *World* [2006], up here on the wall, there's a kind of cultural reversal. Times Square has been totally taken over by ads featuring Chi-

nese celebrities. Let's see, who do we have here? Zhang Zhi Yi, naturally, from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Yao Ming, the star basketball player. The sleeky actress Maggie Cheung of *Irma Vep* and *In the Mood for Love* fame . . . **CP** And the "ugly" supermodel Lu Yan,

right next to an ad for the high-class gay film *Lan Yu*. Also the champion hurdler Liu Xiang, who disappointed all China when he limped off the track at the Beijing Olympics last year. That one below Yao Ming is the singer Faye Wong. People in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan

disagree about a lot of things, but they all love Faye Wong. Oh, and this girl in green, with the funny hair—she won the Chinese version of "American Idol." The producers wouldn't let her say she was lesbian, but everybody knew it. People were texting each other like crazy. It was a landslide.

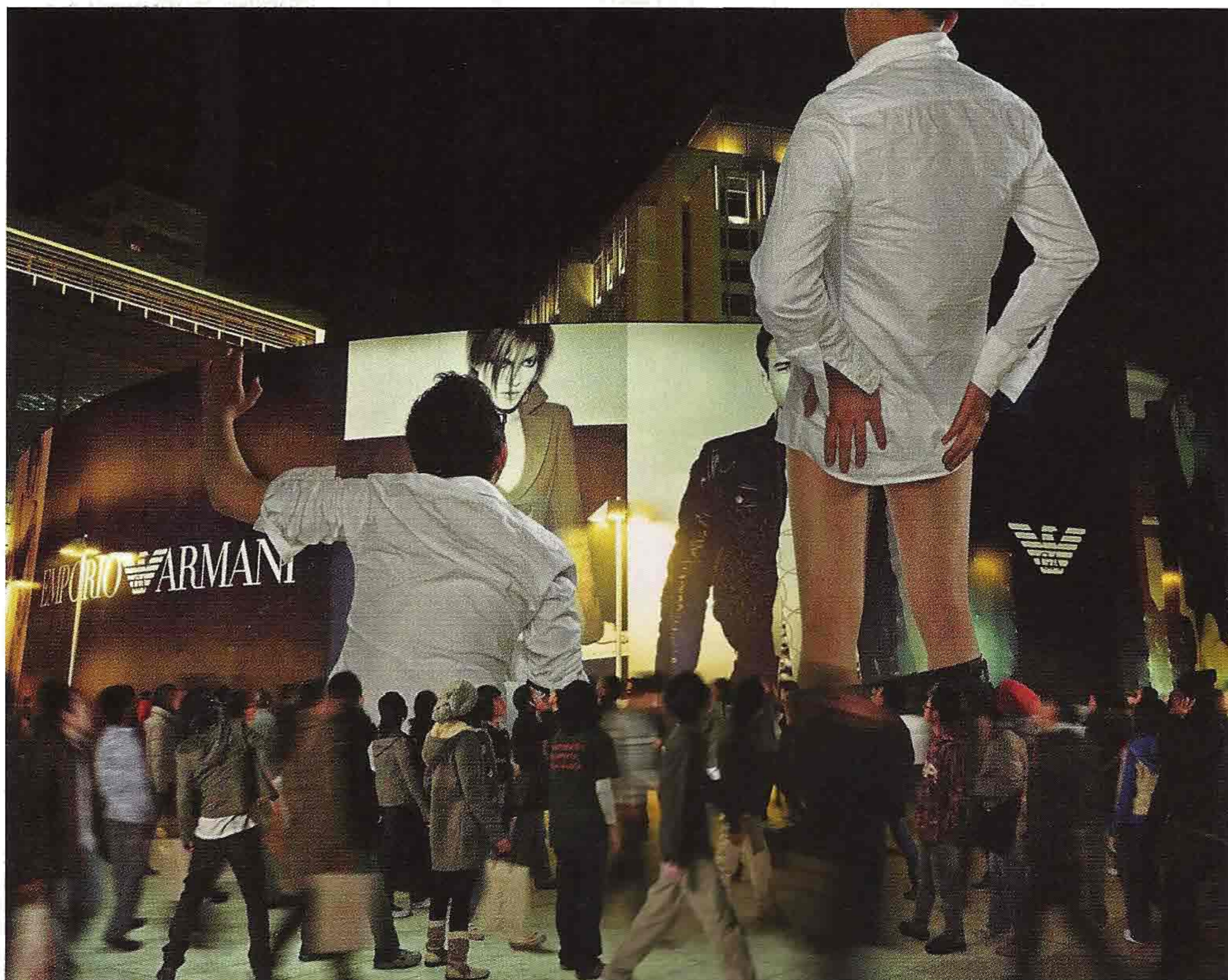
**RV** I notice the English words "New World" and "Shit" are fairly prominent in the scene.

**CP** Yeah. Funny, huh?

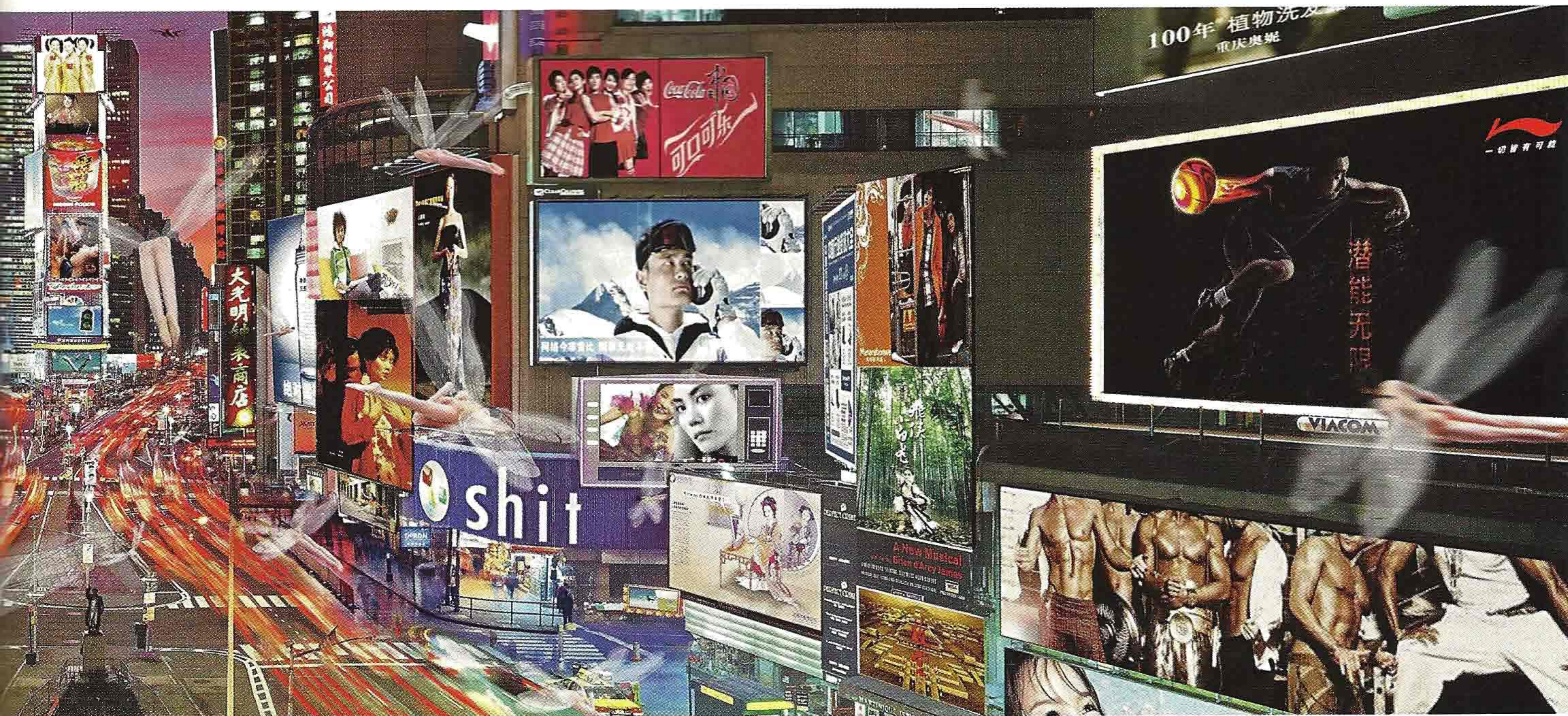
**RV** So is this a flip-flop, showing Westerners what it's like to be Asian and have your public space taken over by another culture? Or—the other way around—are you saying, in effect, this is how the world will look once China rises to its proper place?

**CP** Depends on the day. I've thought of it both ways.

**RV** Some of your latest works—I'm thinking of *Children in the Rye* and *Catcher in the Rye* [both 2008]—are really huge, over 20-foot-wide horizontals. Do you engineer the digital files here, on a laptop on your dining table?







**CP** No, I have more equipment upstairs. Want to see?

**RV** Sure. [Minutes later] Hi, guys. . . . Are these your assistants?

**CP** Two of them, yes.

**RV** Looks like they're making paper animals. Something new for your solo exhibition next year at the Groninger Museum in Holland?

**CP** Maybe, we'll see. For *Tokyo, It's a Beautiful City* [2008], we had to do, like, ten thousand paper cartoon characters that got digitally inserted onto the rooftops in a vast panorama.

**RV** You also have a horde of characters in *Don't Wake Me Up from This Beautiful Dream* [2008]. All super-big-breasted Japanese dolls in various states of undress. It's like some adolescent heterosexual fantasy—kind of a change of pace for you.

**CP** I see it as a documentary view of current Japanese society, not really part of my art creation. Last year, I participated in the Yokohama international studio program. I documented what I saw in Japan from the viewpoint of a visitor, a guest.

**RV** How do you feel about the influence of Japanese pop culture? Has it been mostly good or bad for society, for art?

**CP** I'm not Japanese, so I can't say that I know what Japanese culture is, or even what Japanese pop culture is. But I feel it is somewhat like a newborn baby. It cries a lot and cries loudly. It is cute sometimes, but annoying some other times.

**RV** Do your two "Rye" images—one an enormous field of kids, one an enormous field of scarecrows—indicate that you have serious concerns about the youth of today? Do you, like Holden Caulfield, dream of saving them somehow?

**CP** I'm not that grandiose. The "Rye" pictures convey my uncertainty about my own future, a kind of hopeless feeling.

**RV** Chinese artists are known for directing their own careers, for working with this gallery and that, whenever it suits them. In the last three years, you've shown at White Space Beijing, Alexander Ochs in Berlin—he recently opened a space in Beijing, right?—as well as Tang Contemporary in Bangkok and other galleries in Singapore and Taipei. Plus you've got a solo this fall at Kiang Gallery in Atlanta.

**CP** That's right.

**RV** Despite all the activity, your setup here is relatively modest. A couple of assistants, two or three computers. I mean, when Wang Qingsong does a shoot, he rents a soundstage and brings in hundreds of people to pose. Then he walks around with a megaphone, directing scenes like Fellini.

**CP** This is simpler. The artists I admire most are those who can utilize limited resources to the fullest. Their works can be truly groundbreaking—not just in some shocking or dazzling way, and not just technically.

**RV** We should wrap up, so you can get

back to making art instead of talking about it.

**CP** Thanks, let's go down.

**RV** [At the main door.] Oh, before I forget. . . . When I came in, I noticed you have this little room here by the entrance. It's lined and stacked with white padding.

**CP** Yeah, the material from my "Soft" installation [2008]. You can stick your head between the layers, if you want. Or just lounge around.

**RV** That's OK, but I'll gladly take your picture.

**CP** See, you can stick your arms in. Anything.

**RV** In the U.S., when we want to imply that someone is dangerously crazy, we say that they're "ready for a padded cell." Odd that you've got one right here in your studio.

**CP** Sometimes I have this dream where I have to keep folding quilts forever. It's not all bad, though. No matter if a person is strong and powerful, or the opposite—he has a heart that is soft and warm. Just like the room covered in cushions, inside it is soft and warm. ○

A solo exhibition of Chi Peng's work is scheduled at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, The Netherlands, fall 2010.