

## Nadav Kander

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Yangtze, The Long River

Chongqing XI, Chongqing Municipality

28/49

The scale and speed of China's transformation is one of the greatest historical developments of our time. Millions have uprooted themselves from agrarian life to join a vast industrial and commercial urban workforce. Wealth, inequality, consumerism, social fragmentation and pollution have sprinted ahead, hand in hand. The air in many major cities is so dense with smog that it blocks photosynthesis; rapidly and inexorably, it seems, China's GDP closes on and will

overtake the colossus of the old century, the US.<sup>1</sup> The intense energy and brutality of the Industrial Revolution are writ large here, with truly global consequences. So Nadav Kander is right to say of his photographic series made along the Yangtze River, that it is not just about China but about all of us.<sup>2</sup>

Kander's project tracks a part of this vast change along the course of the great river, from Shanghai, where it meets the sea, to its source in a remote area of Tibet. Many of its photographs show massive new constructions, including the Three Gorges Dam, which involved the displacement of over a million people, the remoulding of an entire region's environment and destruction of historical sites. The scale of these recent developments is hard to grasp: Kander photographs Chongqing, a city of 27 million people, over three times the size of London. In all, 500 million people have moved into sprawling concrete cities, heavily reliant on motor transport, and they are sharply divided between those with decent jobs and enough income to be able to buy consumer goods, and a huge underclass of casual migrant labourers who are denied basic public services.<sup>3</sup>



Yibin V, Sichuan Province

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<sup>1</sup> This is imminent, if it has not already happened. See Robert J. Samuelson, 'Is China No. 1 (in GDP)?', *Washington Post*, 14 May 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Nadav Kander, 'Artist's Notes', in *Yangtze—The Long River*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern 2010, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> There are many accounts of this extraordinary social change. For a recent, brief analysis and editorial, see 'Where China's Future Will Happen', *The Economist*, 19 April 2014.

The photographs deploy a particular and familiar mode: well-composed, large landscapes decorated with a few small-scale figures. By their actions, the figures, like those in Poussin or Claude, hint at the unfolding of stories, while the grandeur of the surroundings that dwarf them, gesture towards the significance of the drama, and the larger forces at work that make puppets of the apparent protagonists. In Kander's variant, figures and a few older elements are set against massive new structures—bridges, container-lifting cranes, apartment blocks and flyovers. The colours are subdued, almost bleached in some pictures, the light is white and even, and distance dissolves forms with a haze (much of it doubtless pollution). Often, the eye is led into these distances where architectural form softens and disappears, implying the endlessness of concrete construction.



Yangtze, The Long River

Yibin I (Bathers), Sichuan Province

39/49

So, in a gesture towards the past, the new forms of architecture and infrastructure are loaded into an ancient pictorial genre. People engage in old river-bank activities: picnicking, bathing and fishing, but do so in alien and dramatically polluted environments. Kander's muted pictures are not of the activist sort which are used by environmental organisations. They only hint at the chemical factories that line the river, and the vast quantities of industrial and agricultural waste and sewage that are emptied into it. The Yangtze and its banks, once rich in wildlife and fertile

land, is close to ecological collapse and fish populations along its entire course have declined dramatically.

In Kander's series, the mathematical sublime (of expanse) is shown calmly and without drama, as if it speaks for itself. The dynamic sublime (of speed) is implied, as different time frames are juxtaposed, and the ruination and active destruction of the old is glimpsed amid new concrete frames.<sup>4</sup> Memory often inheres in particular places, and tends to be destroyed with the environment of its creation—here in favour of the useful and unadorned (block housing for the masses) and cosmopolitan fantasy: we see an Empire State Building replica in Chongqing, and the absurd and rootless stylistic eclecticism of housing for the newly wealthy.



Yangtze, The Long River

Nanjing II (Metal Palm), Jiangsu Province

15/49

Kander writes of his attachment to the paintings of Friedrich, Turner and John Martin, explicitly invoking the sublime.<sup>5</sup> The feeling is of danger held at a distance—the storm seen from the lighthouse, the battle seen on screen, the thrill of acceleration and falling on a roller coaster. It has often been turned to conservative ends, as the elite quivers at the spectacle of the labouring masses it is (fairly) sure will not rise against them, however desperate their situation becomes. Yet the danger indicated in Kander's photographs is not distant, though it is neatly framed and

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<sup>4</sup> The terms are drawn from Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait, University of California Press, Berkeley 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Nadav Kander, 'Artist's Notes', n.p.

held in measured compositions: it is a present and profound threat. That as more and more of the world's population are drawn into energy-intensive living and a fashion-driven disposable consumerism, biodiversity will further crash (the Anthropocene mass extinction event has long been unfolding), basic ecological functions (photosynthesis and insect pollination) will falter, and global warming will enter an unstoppable feedback loop.

Kander's images are calm, melancholy and even nostalgic. Things change in China so fast, he says, that even these pictures, which focus on new structures, can never be taken again.<sup>6</sup> They pull from a degraded, often desolate environment, an order and pictorial beauty that are at disturbing odds with what they depict.

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<sup>6</sup> Nadav Kander, 'Artist's Notes', n.p.