

# Building a New Forbidden City, One Frame at a Time



Eric C. Shiner



*Third Front - Water City, 2004, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*

Chen Jiagang's monumental pictures tell a story of the industrial and human activities that took place in the Third Front, the remote areas of Southwestern China, and of the grit and human toil that once powered China's military and economic engines. Sweeping in size and powerful in scale, Chen's large photographs capture not only the vacant factories dotting the landscape of the Third Front, but also the terrain within which they were constructed—as well as scars in the form of the mines and quarries that they left behind. Often times, Chen situates a lone beauty in traditional garb in the image, a gorgeous foil to the intense labor that took place there, as well as an urban representative of the Beijing-based governmental bodies that both initiated the Front,



*Third Front - Jin Sha, 2006, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*



*Diseased City - Chengdu - The Cop and the Thief, 2006, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*

and profited from it. Chen further complicates the binarism of man versus nature—and indeed the whole of Chinese art history that so often turns to man’s relationship with nature as a prime subject—by literally fabricating the images frame by frame from large-format photographs shot on location. Although the final picture appears to be one seamless image, it is in fact made up of many photographs connected digitally, or manipulated in such a way that the impossible appears to be real. Chen’s mastery of the technologic processes of the 21st-century emerges victorious over those of the mid- to late-20th-century; art prevails over industry, and not the other way around.

Often murky in color palette, but crisp in format and detail, Chen’s manipulated portraits of the Third Front recall a laborious moment in China’s past, while at the same time plugging into the contemporary societal malaise caused by an intensely rapid economic growth that often leaves morals and human relationships in the dust. Chen seems to warn the viewer that the modern metropolises of Shanghai and Beijing, ripe as they are with economic explosion, mammoth building campaigns and a huge influx of workers from the countryside, may end up in the same situation as the Third Front if China takes a turn for the worse. His epic photographs thus stand as a heady reminder that rapid expansion may lead to the extinction of cities hitherto marked as the epicenters of China’s political or economic power.



*Third Front - Train, 2006, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*





*Third Front - Dormitory, 2003, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*

Chen Jiagang is a master of building things, whether it be new architectural developments, art collections, or ideas. As a businessman, curator and collector, he has overseen the process of bringing amorphous parts together to create a unified whole; as an artist, he uses the very same processes to stitch together multiple photographic viewpoints into a single image. Throughout all of this, Chen has quite literally changed the landscape of China, whether it be



*Third Front - Mine Debris Vehicle, 2006, photograph, courtesy of ChinaSquare*

the construction of a new building in Beijing, the theoretical import of amassing one of the most important collections of Chinese contemporary art in the world, or the manipulated photography that is celebrated in his work. For Chen, change is integral to progress, just as the reexamination and manipulation of history and its documentary imagery is integral to his process. Chen Jiagang quite literally creates a contemporary Forbidden City that attracts and repels in equal measure.