

FeiFan Zhang

The Traveler

*The traveler sees what he sees; the tourist sees what he has come to see.*

G. K. Chesterton

So many American and European photographers have gone to China and seen what they expected to see. Many excellent Western photographers have shown us the mesmerizing scale of China's natural scenery, recent industrialization, fantastic urban constructions, and appalling environmental issues. We might expect a young Chinese photographer, arriving in Chicago on her first visit to America, to also feel similar photographic temptations, and to proceed as a tourist in our city. It would have been easy for FeiFan Zhang to photograph the widely known sites of Chicago, and see in Chicago examples of what any tourist would expect to see in America. But no. When FeiFan Zhang came to photograph Chicago in 2015, she came to explore. She is a traveler, not a tourist.

*In essence, landscape is the biggest artifact that any culture creates.*

Frank Gohlke

FeiFan's interest in the constructed landscape began in China, and focused on the generally ignored fragments of Beijing that seemed to be constructed without plan or conscious design. She pursued this interest in Chicago, exploring our city with boldness, curiosity and commitment. Carrying a heavy view camera, FeiFan Zhang walked all over the central Chicago area for more than two years, in all types of weather and at all times of day.

The results of this quest are shown in FeiFan's *No Man's Land* Series. Rather than photograph Chicago's "sights", we see fragments of the Chicago landscape that longtime residents might never have seen or paid any attention to. Her

photographs depict the incongruities between new construction and adjoining historic buildings, the odd, ill-considered spaces between buildings, the clash at the intersection of industrial and residential areas, the residue of advertising in the landscape, the small slices of nature left in gaps of redevelopment and bits of nature reemerging in the abandoned fragments of the city landscape.

How does a photographer make subject matter generally considered unimportant and uninteresting now appear to her audience as significant and engaging? Any photographer dealing with overlooked aspects of the urban landscape faces challenges. Many artists hope to solve this problem by constructing a conceptual framework and relying on a simple visual solution. A more challenging strategy is to design each photograph to hold onto the essential visual information, but to be so cohesive, visually challenging and engaging, and unexpectedly beautiful that the viewer is engrossed and then encouraged to value and think about the photograph's content. This is the route FeiFan has taken, her dedicated explorations and expanding abilities as a photographer creating these compelling and memorable images.

While tourists strolled down North Michigan Avenue appreciating the architecture and all the design elements of that famous street, FeiFan was the traveler, making photographs just a few miles away. Her resonant pictures suggest a total lack of planning, design, or even concern for much of the Chicago cityscape. The photographs prompt us to pay more attention, think more deeply about the places we construct and inhabit, and perhaps encourage us to try to do better in creating and valuing all our landscapes.

Bob Thall

Photographer