

China's land, sea, and sky. In Search Of Home by Jiehao Su at Actual Size LA

Olivia Fales | *Droste Effect Magazine* | 2014

It's no accident that the Roman poet Ovid began the *Metamorphoses*, his epic poem of change and unrest, with the creation and arrangement of land, sea, and sky—artists of all stripes are drawn to transformations, be they physical, spiritual, or both. The powerful consequences of a surging economic growth on the land, seas, and skies of China are likewise as ripe for investigation by artists as they are by journalists. The Chinese photographer Jiehao Su spent 2012–2013 capturing his native country's landscape, honing in on Eastern China, a region that has undergone the most dramatic growth since the Communist Party's economic reforms of 1978. Su covered territories both urban and rural with a perspective that is all-encompassing: he does not shy away from documenting the smog and construction notorious to China, but he also bestows his sensitive attention to the world beyond it. China is more than a country of smoke clouds and relentless development; it is one of recreation, family, and feeling.

While Su's photos can easily function as documents—artistic and expressive documents—they are also the product of a personal journey. Su, raised by a “Tiger Mother,” was the poster child for China's draconian parenting system: he was a devoted student, a disciplined boy. When his mother died unexpectedly, he confronted—presumably among a surge of other sensations—the urge to travel. He felt upended and in many ways liberated.

The sojourn that ensued gave birth to an evocative photo series now on view at Actual Size Los Angeles in *IN SEARCH OF HOME: New Work by Jiehao Su*. The select photographs underpin the binaries that Su seems to gravitate to (solitude/companionship; abandonment/occupation), as well as the marks of a changing landscape. What provides evidence for this change? For one, the construction zones. Swaths of barren land lay covered in tarp, newly built high rises wait to be filled with residents. From distant, aerial views of transition and transformation to intimate portraits of inhabitants, Su weaves a telling chronicle of Eastern China's physical and cultural terrain.

As his distant photos of golf courses and high rises attest, Su's aerial photos are reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting: humans are mere fixtures in a vast landscape. A photo of men at the beach is another riff on this tradition. The scene is a humorous one: adult men casually watch a young boy urinate on a mound of unpacked earth. Building a narrative is irresistible: Have they recently arrived at the beach, eager to launch out but forced to pause for the boy? The scene, shot from above, feels voyeuristic, an odd contrast to the blatant voyeurism taking place below.

Su is also drawn to pairs: sisters embrace in a field of bare trees, twin brothers sit side-by-side on a ping-pong table, a man poses with his German Shepherds. One of the show's curators, Corrie Siegel, notes that Su's gravitation to pairs is interesting in light of China's one-child policy. It seems that Su, in his search for home, responds to companionship as much as he does to solitude. Isn't that the corollary of an existential journey—finding comfort in both? The more we travel the more we discover about ourselves and other people; the less guarded we hopefully become.

Who would have thought a photographer of siblings in embrace was also responsible for an image of stacked mattresses and night tables, waiting to be reclaimed or perhaps abandoned by their owners? The composition is architectonic with its overlapping and stacking of geometric shapes, verticals and horizontals; it resembles a Mondrian painting.

The narrative and aesthetic qualities of Su's photos are magnetic. They have a distinctive quality about them: they are sparse but substantial; varied yet subdued in color; honest, even earnest. Su's photos reflect a captivating journey that encourage acceptance of life's varied palette of contrast and nuance.

IN SEARCH OF HOME: *New Work by Jiehao Su* is on view at [Actual Size Los Angeles](#) through March 15.