

INTERVIEW: JIEHAO SU

Tom Griggs | [Fototazo](#)

Jiehao Su (b. 1988) is a Chinese photographer. His work has been exhibited in various group/selected/solo exhibitions in Europe, North America and Asia, including at Derby QUAD Gallery, Belfast Cultúrlann, Musée du quai Branly, Benaki Museum, UNM Art Museum, United Photo Industries HQ Gallery, Actual Size Los Angeles. His work has been featured in publications such as The New Yorker, British Journal of Photography, Paper Journal, GUP and China Life Magazine.

Su is a finalist of APA / Lucie Foundation Scholarship in 2014. He is included in the Ones to Watch of British Journal of Photography, as well as the Magnum 30 Under 30. Recently he has received an Arte Creative Award from Düsseldorf Photo Weekend, an IdeasTap Award from Format Festival, a Grand Prize from Feature Shoot Emerging Photography Awards. Su currently lives and works in Beijing.

He has also been interviewed on [urbanautica](#) and featured on [Lenscratch](#).

fototazo: For those that aren't familiar with "Borderland," tell us about the project.

Jiehao Su: "Borderland" is a project deeply rooted in my personal history. I spent my early twenties living a nomadic life in China, trying to escape from the sorrow of my mother's sudden death when I was 18. After years of wandering, I began work on "Borderland" in 2012 as a way to look inward and recall my early memories, to reflect on my identity and to search for a sense of belonging.

As I returned to some places in my mind, revisiting moments from the past, I construct a personal narrative with a mix of atmospheric portraits and landscape, as well as intimate still life details. Together the images comprise a delicate, phlegmatic and melancholic meditation on my personal history. My aim is to rebuild my self-awareness through an autobiographical portrait of my homeland, as well as to seek comfort through reconnection to the past. In this sense, "Borderland" is an intimate work of remembrance, tenderness, and self-consolation.

f: How do you try to balance the references to your personal narrative in your work with this almost documentary gaze of the rapidly urbanizing peripheries of Chinese cities and the people who live there? What are the ways as a photographer that you can try to make sure that the project is not dominated by the personal so that it's too opaque for others to enter or, on the other hand, not so strongly rooted in document that it swallows the personal side of the project?

JS: Yes. I felt that this was the most challenging part when I was working on this project. What I try to do is to find a delicate balance between personal and societal. It's like writing a poem. I try to find something beyond the reality, something personal, emotional, and intimate, yet presented at a calm distance. The personal emotions in my work are usually revealed in a calm manner.

f: You talk about the photographs as a way "to reconnect with memory in a different way." This is an intriguing idea to me, and an inversion of the usual relationship that we imagine between photograph and memory – photography is being used here to access the past and memories of the past instead of to document the present to serve as memories in the future. Tell us more about your ideas of reconnecting with memory and the past through your work.

JS: Honestly, I think it's a very personal situation. As I mentioned earlier, I've tried very hard to escape from the trauma of losing my mother in my late teenage years. Afterwards I lived a nomadic life for several years and wished to forget all the memories of my past. Eventually I was able to forget some of my past memories. Later, after a long time of wandering in my homeland, I began to yearn for a sense of belonging and wanted to retrieve my early memories and rebuild my self-awareness. Part of the reason I started this project is to recall my early memory, as well as to search for a sense of belonging. The whole process is like self-healing.

f: Of the portraits, you say in the interview you did with Steve Bisson on urbanautica, "When I am portraying people, I feel like I am taking self-portraits." Do you feel you can make a self-portrait with any model or does it need to be a very specific sense of being drawn to them as a subject or a particular sense of connection to them? Does this feeling cause you to make portraits differently than someone without this feeling?

JS: It needs to be a very specific sense of being drawn to them as a subject or a particular sense of connection to them. I choose models very carefully, taking into consideration their states of being, especially their emotion and state of mind, as well as the relationship between them and the places they are in. My models are usually strangers. The way I approach them is smooth, delicate, and calm. I try to create empathy between the model and me, which may be perceived by the viewer. Sometimes it is like a process of meditation.

f: You talk about your work blending fiction and nonfiction as well as in being between reality and imagination. Can you expand upon what you mean for us?

JS: I feel there is a deep duality in this body of work, not only between reality and fiction, but also between present experience and memory, isolation and belonging. Instead of documenting reality, I prefer to use documentary photography to construct my personal experience.

f: Take us out shooting with you. If we were to be sitting nearby watching you as you took a photograph, what would we see?

JS: Usually I choose a place on the map and then go there. I would spend a couple of hours driving or walking around there, searching for something in my mind. It is very important for me to keep a high concentration level while working. Then I set up my tripod and camera if I see something capturing my interest. I always pay a lot of attention to details, such as composition and perspective. I just want to make sure that everything is exactly what I want.

f: What is your perspective on the boom in landscape work being created in China, both by other Chinese photographers and by foreigners? What is some of the best work you've seen created there? Are there consistencies that can be identified in the work?

JS: China is a huge country with a sophisticated and conflicted reality. It is also a country with plentiful resources, which is ideal for photographers. In my limited knowledge, to name a few of my personal favorites, I think the British photographer Nadav Kander produced a great work of the Yangtze River, the mother river of China. I also would like to mention some Chinese photographers, including You Li, Muge, Taca Sui, and many more.

f: Are there other photographers working with the landscape in China who have impacted your own work or vision for creating photographs of China?

JS: Regarding photography, I would say my influence mainly comes from Western photographers. For instance, Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore, Robert Adams, Rineke Dijkstra, Elina Brotherus, as well as the Dusseldorf school of photography, like Thomas Struth and his friends.

f: What is the most important thing you've learned about photography in the last year?

JS: I realize that it is important for me to find a balance between doing photography and life itself.

f: Anything else that you'd like to add, Jiehao?

JS: I plan to finish the "Borderland" series this year and am looking for opportunities in publication, exhibition and gallery representation.