

JIEHAO SU - BORDERLAND

Lowenna Waters | British Journal of Photography

When Jiehao Su was 18, he lost his mother. He set out on a nomadic journey across China, an exploration of self, and of a country in the throes of change. Lowenna Waters reports.

Chinese photographer Jiehao Su started taking photographs when, at the age of 18, he suddenly lost his mother. “It was the first shock in life,” he says. “It led me to realise the impermanence of the world.”

Around this time, a friend gave him his first camera, which became “a way to escape the painful reality.” He quickly became obsessed with photography.

He set out on a nomadic journey through Asia and Southern, Eastern and Western China. The aim of the trip was simple, to “seek comfort in [his] heart.” After revisiting familiar and nostalgic places from his past, the series *Borderland* was born in 2012.

The series has two themes: “On one hand, the series is an intimate work,” explains Jiehao. “On the other, it is my perspective of a contemporary China in its process of urbanisation.” Now aged 26, he has since trained at the Beijing Film Academy, and is still working on the project, which he plans to finish this year.

He’s already exhibited it internationally; last year it was shown in China and Los Angeles, and earlier this month part of the series was included in Magnum’s 30 Under 30 exhibition in Birmingham.

A key theme is the blurring of fiction and reality, memory and present experience. The indeterminate urban landscapes with heavy grey skies, unidentifiable figures, and punctuations of vivid neon colour are similar to his hometown, but not identical. He weaves a narrative through the photographs. I wonder why he blurs these boundaries?

“After years of wandering and constant moving, the concept of home or homeland, as well as my memory, has become blurred to me,” he says. “Instead of making a photographic documentation, I try to construct a personal narrative with a delicate balance between my own reality and the objective reality.”

The series also contains portraits of individuals and couples: a lone girl, lovers, twins, a man and his dog, siblings. Most of his subjects are strangers that he encounters in public spaces like parks, campuses and riverbanks. In one, twin brothers look quizzically at the camera, dressed in matching striped blue sweaters.

“I have always been fascinated by the relationship between individuals,” Jiehao says. “To me, there is an interesting connection between solitude and companionship.” There’s another element to his portraits, one again plays with the line between the subjective and objective: “Taking these portraits is to me like taking self-portraits, as I reach back to connect my present to my past. I see myself in the faces of people I meet along the way, especially in those of children, young people and lovers.”

This personal and autobiographical exploration also acts as a document of contemporary urban China. I wonder what he felt he learnt about his homeland through this project?

“China is a vast country and the conditions are very complex,” he explains. “As Chinese, we are living in a particularly fast-changing country in an already fast-changing world. For the past few decades, we have lost many things that used to shape who we were, and a lot of us are confused about ourselves. It’s kind of sad that we have a lot of history but very limited memory. As a photographer, I try to look for beauty and grace in conflicts, instead of accusing or criticising.”

The images are also influenced by traditional Chinese art and philosophy. “First and foremost, the Chinese views of the universe and spiritual values have influenced the perspective and main subject of my work,” he says. “The traditional Chinese landscape painting Shan Shui Hua (Mountain Water Painting), has also inspired my photographic compositions, especially on themes such as yearning for nature, the relationship between humans and the world, and the tradition of nomadic wandering through a landscape, as well as the concept of escapism and the search for an eternal ‘homeland’.”

Borderland is a complex body of work. Through autobiographically documenting his homeland, Jiehao also manipulates it: reclaiming it, making it his own, and seeking comfort through reconnecting with its past. Many of the photographs are marked by a tension between two opposing themes: fiction and reality, belonging and isolation, present experience and memory – perhaps a reflection of his conflicted past.

But ultimately, Borderland acted as a catharsis. “I have been able to reconcile my past through this body of work,” Jiehao says. It’s a way of self-healing. Borderland is a work of remembrance, tenderness and self-consolation.”

See more of Jiehao Su’s work [here](#). An exhibition of Borderland is currently on show at Format Festival in Derby.