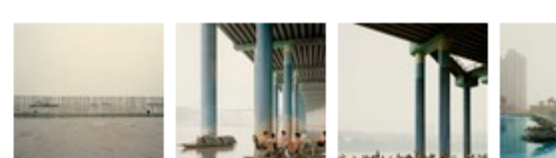




Changxing Island I (Island of Oranges), Shanghai, 2006. Chromogenic print. © Nadav Kander, Courtesy of the artist and Flowers Gallery, New York/London

INTERVIEW

Nadav Kander Talks to William Avedon



"The State Is Shattered, Mountains and Rivers Remain." – Du Fu

Nadav Kander's photographs, *Yangtze – The Long River* at Flowers Gallery, New York, capture an authentic un-staged snapshot of people's lives in a region undergoing the most significant and broad sweeping changes to their physical environment in 5,000 years of their recorded history.

Despite being an outsider, these photographs express a genuine intimacy as Kander followed the course of the Yangtze River upstream, from the coastal estuary to its source in the Himalayas, over a three-year period. As Kofi Anan wrote in the introduction to Kander's book, *Yangtze – The Long River*, "His aim was to chart the consequences of the extraordinary pace of Chinese economic development upon the world's third largest river. In so doing he also illuminates the effects of this development on the lives and traditions of the peoples who live in the 186 cities and myriad towns and rural villages that line the banks of Yangtze – in all, a population greater than that of the United States."

Nadav explains the motivations that led him to create this project in China and the experiences he had capturing these photographs:

William Avedon: I've lived in China the past 12 years and was struck by the sensitivity and depth of understanding of Chinese culture portrayed in your photographs there. What led you to photograph China and the Yangtze River?

Nadav Kander: I wanted to work in China not because I wanted to be a documentary photographer within that landscape, but rather because I found it a troubled land; the reading I had done, the news casts that I saw, it seemed to be a country ill at ease. I think that always attracts me because I can take the kind of pictures that bring up emotions in the viewer that go to the collective consciousness of mankind; reminding us that we are vulnerable, that we have dark sides that we like to shy away from, but I think my photographs make you turn back to that and realize that through vulnerability we connect. So I don't really see myself as a documentary photographer although I do realize that any series one takes in the world, provided they're not obviously Photoshopped, become a document. I certainly don't mind that fact but it was never my intention. I don't go out to document what it's like to be in China or how much water goes down the river.

I'm not a war photographer, I'm not a documentarist – I'm much more about making work that excites me and it excites me when it points very clearly to what it's like to be human. And I don't know if that's a surprise to you, but I think that's one of the reasons that my work is, as people think, varied; but I don't, actually. I think that is the thing that is in all my work. It's in my portraits, my latest body of work, which is on bodies of humans – they're nude, and they always are quite naked, exposed but turned away. And that's the same thing with China: it's quite naked, it's very exposed, quite beautifully photographed, but it's that shrouding in beauty that brings up the poignancy and softens one's heart I think. I feel that people are touched by these, but they're not generally touched about the information that these pictures give them. It's more about the smallness of man and the vulnerability of man; that's what I like to show.

WA: Do you think that the people you photographed in China, in this case, actually feel that vulnerability? Do you think that vulnerability you mention comes across from their side?

NK: No I don't think that's particularly them, I think it's more about me, it's more about us, it's more about the collective consciousness. I think all human beings connect at certain levels. I very much like the work of Rothko for instance. The amount of paint and information he has on a canvas – he has very little information on a canvas if you think about it in a documentary sense – yet the emotions of people who like his work run high. It's the same with Francis Bacon. There's not a lot of information in a lot of his pictures, and yet there are little sign posts in it – pages, screens, heads that turn down, heads that look away, heads that are covered that give you these ambiguous feelings that point very strongly to paradox. And I struggle with it myself, I don't really understand what it is that ticks my boxes, but since I was thirteen I've been photographing like this. Starting with photographing flies close up – very, very close up – so that all you could see were their muscles and eyes and somehow I was trying to make things uncomfortable. It's what I still do.

I made five trips to China and more and more so found myself feeling very uncomfortable there and very much like an outsider. I saw in my pictures that I was stepping back, that I was making people very small in the pictures. I think that this was very much alluding to my own feelings while I was there. So I think that most of what people read into these pictures depends on how people read them. If they want to read them with their heads, there's a lot of information about the river, about the bridges. And if they want to read them with their bodies and their hearts and their emotions, then it's probably more my doing that creates that.

WA: What were the reactions of the people you were photographing to you when you were in China?

NK: I think that sometimes people were ok with it. I think what was quite interesting is the hardship that my driver and translators always had. Each time I went, we went to different parts of the rivers so I would hire new people. But each time, people were obviously thinking that I would want to see the beautiful, pictorial view and that's where they would like to take me. They were pretty nonplussed as to why I would want to take the kind of pictures that they thought I was taking. That would often lead to mistrust and that would often lead to the society around them yelling at them. Usually after eight or ten days it would all implode and there would be tears. I would work quite hard at dawn, I would work at dusk, and I would like to see a lot - often after a while they just would freak out and want to go home.

WA: Your photo in which the local police or government officials are showing on a large ruler where the level of the floodwater is going to reach is particularly interesting and beautiful [Three Gorges Dam IV (Flood Level), Yichang, Hubei Province, 2007]. How did you get those subjects posed in that photo? How did you meet them? How did that shot come about?

NK: Oh, I like that one. Well I would just snoop around. That was the trip I went around the Dam wall, and I would just ask people to drive and just intuitively see a road and say, 'Would you try to go up there?' And they would go up there and I would get out. Some days you're in a car and you kick some stones around and it just doesn't seem to be working. You might look through your viewfinder and, I don't know, it's just not there. And ten miles on you might get out of the car and everything seems to work, the atmosphere is just perfect, and you make really good pictures. I can't explain it better than that.

But with those guys, I think they might have been wandering around there measuring for more building. At that time, 2007, the Dam wall had been finished being built but the surrounding area was just becoming a concrete jungle all the time. So I think that's what they were doing, they were sort of measuring where the water will be because it still has 70 meters to rise.

WA: Did you visit any places or any of the cultural relics that were to be submerged before the water rose? And then did you go back and see after the water had risen? Any experiences like that?

NK: Well there was one area certainly, the Old Fengdu, where that picture of that man is sitting with his back to me in blue underpants [Old Fengdu II (Looking at New Fengdu), Chongqing Municipality, 2006], reminiscent to me of a Caspar Friedrich painting. Where I went to the old Fengdu and saw how most of the town, certainly at a lower level, had been flattened already. As the water was creeping up, they were leveling more and more of the buildings rather than just vacating them and letting the water come around. They had to level everything because they were worried that ships might snag their hulls on buildings so they would bulldoze everything. It was a kind of cruel end to any village or any town that was in the Yangtze's way, in the rising of the Yangtze. So that was one place, that's called 'The City of Ghosts' because of folklore and ancestry they have. They feel that dead people inhabit that city. That was pretty much covered and they built opposite on the opposite bank, which is what that man sitting in his blue underpants is looking at, the new Fengdu, which was to house about 7 million and when we went and stayed there it was pretty empty.

WA: Did you get a sense of people's feelings about these changes to their lives?

NK: Well, yeah a bit. But it was really difficult to find out and you're never sure what the translation was so usually I actually got that people were quite happy that they were being re-housed in better housing. But a lot of the farmers weren't, because they lost amazing fields to water and weren't given a lot back for it.

But it wasn't my main thing, I was going around looking for pictures that would tick these boxes that looked exposed, that looked vulnerable, that had beauty and sadness within them, all the things that make up people's usual lives. I'm just not a news photographer so it didn't interest me that much.

WA: Tell me about the choice of using the quote by the ancient Chinese poet Du Fu in your book? I thought that was a very beautiful choice. How did that come about?

NK: I did quite a lot of reading for deeper understanding of the passages of time that have passed China by. He came up a lot and I love that, 'The State Is Shattered, Mountains and Rivers Remain.' It's really powerful. I think what tips its hat for me is how whatever happens to yourself, to humans, there's always a path onwards. Whatever the world can throw at you, whatever sadness you have, however difficult your life becomes, you can choose to go through this in a way that makes you grow. So it makes a lot of sense for me – it's almost Buddhist.

It makes a lot of sense for what I'm saying to you. And I do realize that all series of work, even if its intention wasn't documentary – any series of photographic work that isn't obviously Photoshopped – by human nature's trust in it, becomes a document. And I find that to be something that I can't ignore and something really interesting and that's why the book has so many facts in it. As I went along I learned certain things that amazed me and I felt it kind of irresponsible to not write about it and let a viewer know that if that's they want. But I put it all at the end of the book. I had hoped that people would look at the work without that and just get a sense of the photography and the emotions that might come up in them that might have nothing to do with China, that have to do with them, their childhood, how they are in the world. And then, sure, if you want to go into your head you can read all the stuff in the back and it's really interesting.

William Avedon is the son of Elizabeth Avedon.

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Nadav Kander: Yangtze - The Long River
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Flowers Gallery
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LINKS

<http://www.flowersgallery.com>

CONTRIBUTORS

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