

LENS

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

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On a Bleak River, Seeing Compassion and Beauty

By KERRI MACDONALD



Nadav Kander

Chingqin Xi, Chongqing municipality.

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FULL SCREEN

"I like to photograph nakedness," said the photographer Nadav Kander, over the phone earlier this week from London, where he is based. Mr. Kander's portfolio includes a stunning group of nude pictures. But he was talking about a different set of images this time.

His photographs from China, "Yangtze — The Long River," will be exhibited in New York for the first time on Thursday at the Flowers Gallery in Manhattan.

While the two projects — the naked human body and a river in China — are very different, Mr. Kander, 50, has found similarities. Like everything he photographs, he said, both are templates from which he tries to understand what it means to be human.

"I showed China quite naked," he said of his Yangtze work, which won the Prix Pictet award in 2009 and has been shown widely, though never before in New York.

Finishing "Yangtze — The Long River" required three years and five trips to China, "a place that is moving and changing so fast that it can only be unnatural," he said.

In 2005, around the time Mr. Kander started thinking about the project, he was intrigued by the country's rapid growth and constant change. "It was a place that I wanted to stand in," he said.

The Yangtze, flowing for nearly 4,000 miles from Qinghai Province to the East China Sea, seemed a natural yet challenging path to trace.

"I love the metaphor of water," Mr. Kander said. "Like life, like humanness, it becomes a cloud. It's an ever-changing cycle. I find it comforting."



Qinghai Province II

Nadav Kander

He was stunned by the statistics that were associated with the river. That it's the third longest river on earth. That one of every 18 people on earth lives along the Yangtze. That the population along its banks, some 450 million, is much greater than that of the United States.

Yet for the most part, the images he made have a kind of emptiness. They don't show multitudes of people or towering buildings. "I found myself stepping back a lot," Mr. Kander said. "People were getting smaller and smaller in my pictures."

The photos have a distance that makes bleak scenes and industrial architecture look beautiful. They are quiet and contemplative.

Mr. Kander had to convince translators and drivers to bring him to the unlikely places he wanted to see: Young people picnicking beneath a massive bridge in the Chongqing municipality (Slide 3). Men gazing at a forlorn-looking monument, named for progress and prosperity (Slide 2).

"They were finding it very hard to get their heads around what I was looking at," he said of his various guides.

Because what he was seeing wasn't so much about China — grand structures or tourist vistas — as it was about compassion. He saw a beauty in the moments he witnessed, as people lived out their daily lives and traditions in circumstances so much different from his own.

"It's much more about what you don't show than what you do show," he said. "I think work that asks you to question what more there is much more interesting."



Nadav Kander

Old Fengdu II (Looking at New Fengdu), Chongqing municipality.

"Yangtze — The Long River" will be on view from Oct. 18 to Nov. 24 at the Flowers Gallery in Manhattan and opens Nov. 1 at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in Zürich. Follow @NadavKander, @kerrimac and @nytimesphoto on Twitter.

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Joe B. · Stamford, CT

Incredibly beautiful work. The haze of pollution is palpable and it softens the light so seductively. I'd like to see this show in person.

Oct. 19, 2012 at 4:55 p.m.

Ann Montgomery · Chongqing, PRC

I am a US Peace Corps Volunteer and teaching in Chongqing. While these images do capture a certain essence of the Yangtze River and river life, they seem intentionally

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