Emperor’s River: China’s Grand Canal – Philipp Scholz Rittermann
July 1 – November 30, 2014
Harn Museum of Art -- Rubin Gallery

Introduction
In 2009 and 2010, photographer Philipp Scholz Rittermann traveled along China’s Grand Canal to capture the country’s booming economy, and rapidly changing landscape and social structure. Rittermann’s photographic interests are largely focused on the built environment, and the way people and the planet are transformed by it. He traveled to China first as an invited artist and then on succeeding trips to document this massive waterway. Having mastered, in previous projects, the digital panorama—a format hungry for information—he found his ideal subject in the People’s Republic of China.

The number of bridges, boats, scooters, railways, and the subject of the series itself, the Grand Canal, speaks to Rittermann’s fascination with passage. This material manifestation of movement becomes symbolic of our collective human journey in the 21st century. Accelerated passage and progress are the means by which this particular culture, China, and subsequently the world, plunges headlong into the future. Rittermann wants to momentarily arrest these unprecedented changes to reflect on their ramifications. As we voyage out of one century into another, his photographs become lyrical topographical maps from which to chart the course of a brave new world.
— Carol McCusker, Curator

About the Artist & Series
To make his photographs, Philipp Rittermann handholds a digital camera, panning across a scene, making exposures every few seconds, anticipating what is about to happen in each frame. The specific needs of each frame (light, perspective, focal separation) must be understood in a fraction of a second while shooting. The individual images are then stitched together into a seamless chronology in postproduction. They are assembled vertically as well as horizontally, with high “bit-depth” maintaining rich tonalities that enhance the photograph’s overall dimensionality. The final prints may consist of up to 80 frames per finished image.

Through the resulting panoramas, the artist expands temporality—the essence of photography itself. And like the unfurling of a scroll, he creates a precise panoramic view that extends beyond normal vision, allowing a palpable and specific impression of life to unfold.

Emperor’s River arises out of a synthesis of Philipp Rittermann’s work from the past three decades in which night scenes of urban industrialized spaces in the U. S. and Germany dominate, alongside industrialization’s opposite—the remote, sun-drenched deserts of Mexico and the American Southwest. He applies these visual tropes to the Orwellian saga that is China. Shooting at night carves out dramatic spaces and shadows that cloak his subject’s in their personal reveries; shooting in daylight illuminates the vigorous commercial enterprise that is contemporary China.

Zoning regulations in China seem non-existent, as industrial development weaves through natural landscapes, those same vistas prized in the Orchid Pavilion scroll (seen elsewhere in this exhibition). The People’s Republic scrambles all distinctions between nature and city: urban expansion maroons a shepherd among cooling towers, vegetable gardens grow along congested highways, a traditional 18th-century musical ensemble is lit by purple and green neon.
Artist Statement

The story of China’s on-going economic expansion is told daily in the countless reports about run-away pollution, trade imbalances, land grabs, and corruption. However relentless, this stream of information only partially conveys the scale and depth of the enormous changes this country is undergoing. To gain a better understanding of the region, and our interdependent relationship to it, I travelled to China in 2009 and 2010 intent on capturing some of what is missing from standard media coverage.

Global demand for cheap goods drives China’s decades long economic expansion, creating unquenchable need for all manner of raw materials, human resources, and electric power. In addition to importing vast quantities of fuel, China meets its power needs by burning through its own dwindling coal reserves at an alarming rate. The results: appalling air quality, contaminated water tables, poisoned soil, and epidemic levels of environmentally induced disease.

The on-going expansion is also forcing dramatic societal changes. Low rise agrarian communities on the outskirts of expanding cities are transformed into towering apartment blocks and industrial parks, while farmers receive a pittance for their confiscated land. The ranks of the Chinese factory worker have swelled to over 110 million. For the most part, they live on factory premises, returning to their hometowns only once or twice a year.

Despite glaring inequities, there is a pervasive sense of pride that China is powerful again, and it persists even though the income gap between newly rich and working poor grows ever wider. The people are hungry for a modern life, willing at least for now to make enormous sacrifices to get an economic leg up.

To illustrate this complex dynamic, I followed the Grand Canal, along which many of these dramatic changes are predominantly visible. Also known as the Emperor’s River, it stretches over one thousand miles between Beijing and Hangzhou, traversing the Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers. Connecting cities large and small on a North/South axis, it is ranked as the world’s largest water project to date. For over two millennia it has been, and still is, a strategic economic, and cultural engine for China.

What I found during my travels was a breathtaking, fast-paced collision of antiquity and modernity; the newly rich vs. the long-suffering poor; and the strangest of bedfellows—unbridled capitalism and communism. The standard single-frame photograph felt far too limited for tackling such a varied subject, so I chose to work panoramically, assembling my images out of many overlapping exposures made within minutes of one another. This approach allowed me to craft expansive, temporally and spatially layered images capable of holding the complexities of the scenes I encountered.

These images conflate time, as China itself conflates its past with its future. They reflect the consequences of an un-checked economic explosion, and illuminate what opaque economic statistics fail to convey.

Philipp Sholz Rittermann
For All Works:
Philipp Scholz Rittermann
Medium: Pigment prints on Dibond
On loan from the artist (unless otherwise noted)

Stone Bridge and Lumber Barge, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, 2009
Museum purchase, funds provided by The Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund, with additional funds provided through a gift from Ed Petkus, Lorraine Kamper, Steve Petkus, Yvonne Petkus, and Suzanne Becker in honor of their father, Dr. Edward Petkus, 2014.9

Sand Mining Barges #1, Luoma Lake Pizhou, Jiangsu Province, China 2010
Passing a Coal Laden Barge Team at Daybreak
Hanzhuang, Near Tai’erzhuang, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Gravel and Sand Loading Facility Near Nanyang
Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010

House Barges near Zhuxi Rd. #2, Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, 2009
Lotus Leaf Harvest Near Pengzhuangcun, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Stripping Bark, Veneer Manufacture near Taiqiang
Liangshan County, Jining City, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Goat Herder on the outskirts of Linqing
Liaocheng, Shandong Province, China, 2010
Unloading Sand, Yuejin Port, Grand Canal, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010
On loan from Ron Miriello

Cormorant Fisherman at Coal Loading Facility
Weishan, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010

High-Rise Apartment Blocks under Construction
Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China, 2010
Man in Beach Chair, Coal Fired Power Plant
Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010
Philipp Rittermann’s panoramas conflate industrial scale with human scale. We see China’s enormous industry and daily life from street level. Through his lens, placed shoulder-to-shoulder with the Chinese, we are literally inside a recycling yard or on a barge, looking out, up, and into canals, fish markets, or hutongs (traditional urban neighborhoods) surrounded by human activity and unparalleled vertical construction.

Young Men and Qing Emperor, Red Pavilion
Yanliuqing, Tianjin City, China, 2010
High Speed Train Underpass
Dezhou, Shandong Province, China, 2010
Every event Rittermann records—a boat gliding under a bridge, a bullet train speeding past—is truthful to what was there, just not all in a single instant. He photographs numerous images from a fixed point, all in a matter of minutes. Each photograph layers multiple moments together, generating a highly complex portrait of a place. Time is stretched and becomes fluid.

Barge Repair #2, Weishan, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010
Barge Building #1, Weishan, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Sand Mining Barges #2, Luoma Lake Pizhou, Jiangsu Province, China, 2010

Train Station Construction and Street Sweeper, Tianjin City, China, 2010
Shops under Expressway, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China, 2010
Rittermann's working methods are not unlike those of photographers Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson, who build single photographs from multiple exposures. However, unlike those artists who stage their scenes, thereby having full control, Rittermann works in the real, erratic world. Making images in the unpredictable environment of China ups the ante.

Card Game & Coal Fired Power Plant Dezhou, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Neighborhood Music Performance, Grand Canal Park
Weishan, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010
Pedestrians on Bridge, Grand Canal Park
Weishan, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010

Industrial Park near Huai’an, Jiangsu Province, China, 2010

Overview, Night Fish Market, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China, 2010
As Rittermann’s horizontal photographs unfurl like Chinese scrolls, they weave a web of line, light, color, form and movement across their surfaces. These elements act as aesthetic grounders to an immense subject—here, the fish market in Jiangsu Province. Line takes the form of coiled and strung wire, a vertical electrical tower, gangplanks, barges and the Canal. Overhead lights, seemingly the strength of the sun, illuminate the rapid haul from boat to shore to market.
Barges Moored at Yuejin Port, Jining, Shandong Province, China, 2010
A long line of coal-laden barges slowly floats past an embankment of poplars at night; the boats and trees measure out a pleasing rhythm of vertical and horizontal lines. Since we are given the length of the barges but no destination at either end of the image, their passage feels neither like “leave-taking” nor “arrival” but simply the notion of duration—a valuable resource that defines China itself.

Related Works

Yongliang Yang
Chinese, born 1980
On the Quiet Water, Sunken Ship, 2008
Composite inkjet print mounted as a handscroll
Funds provided by friends of the Harn Museum of Art, 2009.14.2

China
The Orchid Pavilion Gathering
15th-17th century
Ink on paper rubbing of stone sculpture mounted as a handscroll
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Kathleen M. Axline Acquisition Endowment 2009.27