



Progressive, Cleveland, Ohio

OFFICES WITH A VIEW

The works of American photographer Lois Conner, known for her platinum print landscapes, are showing at Hanart TZ Gallery this month. Titled *Life in a Box*, the exhibition is the fruit of Conner's years of travel in the US, China and Hong Kong, applying her unique perspective to the inside of offices. The 59-year-old New York resident, who has taught at Stanford and Yale and currently lectures at Princeton, was a visiting professor at the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou in 2004. Her works are collected by the world's major museums and galleries.

Interview Karen Yan

BACCARAT: Why did you become a professional photographer?

LOIS CONNER: Photography has always been an important part of my life. My earliest memories were of my father photographing our family, and as children we all poured over the photographs he took during the Second World War in Egypt, Morocco, France and Italy. When I was six, I knew that I wanted to be an artist. I was given my first camera at nine and pointed it at virtually everything I saw.

It took many years to realise that photography was my medium. It was the photographer Philippe Halsman who inspired me to take up the profession. After two years at university I transferred to Pratt Institute [in New York City] and majored in photography. I was later accepted onto a master's programme in fine art at Yale School of Art. It became my life!

What are your inspirations?

I moved to New York to become an artist when I was 20 and have lived in downtown Manhattan ever since. In the early years, I worked at the United Nations by day and studied at night. Lunchtimes became my photo sessions. The camera gave me permission to stare, to study and to look more closely. The world was suddenly alive and allowed me to watch.

My subject is landscape as culture. I'm not interested in an untouched, untrammelled world. What I am trying to reveal through photography in a deliberate yet subtle way is a sense of history. I would like my photographs to describe my relationship between the tangible and the imagined, between fact and fiction. I'm a born traveller and adventurer, and an obsessive collector and observer of the landscape, attempting to twist what the camera faithfully describes into something of a fiction.

Where have you travelled in China?

My exploration of the Chinese and Southeast Asian landscape has lasted more than 20 years. The geographical area that I initially explored has changed, as

have my perceptions. Guilin has become familiar, and the river that flanks it, scarred by modernisation. The mountains retain their sublime beauty. I have photographed in Beijing, along the Yangtze River, the lotus on Hangzhou's West Lake, along the Silk Road, in the western provinces and Tibet as well as Vietnam and Cambodia. I have used the rooftops as a horizon in cities such as New York, Beijing, Hong Kong and San Francisco.

Why did you choose *Life in a Box* as the theme for this exhibition?

I began this project several years ago inspired by the man-made landscape of New York and one office in particular. Photographing offices gives an abstract effect of landscape. From these interiors, the office becomes the palimpsest on which the city is observed. It is a privilege to be able to walk through each one and explore with my camera. I think of offices as another form of landscape.

How do offices vary from the US to China?

Every office is different, offering a range of space, light and people. There are hundreds of stories. People tell me their stories and make suggestions about spaces within their offices or other offices that I might find strange or beautiful. Culturally, the things that people surround themselves with at their desks change, though there are some things in common such as family portraits, stationery, computers and electronic devices.

Why do you like to shoot large, panoramic black-and-white photographs?

I work with a large panoramic camera (18cm x 43cm) that sits on a tripod; this extended rectangle embraces a cinematic experience within the space of a single frame. It produces a narrative that draws the viewer in, moving them through the frame. The fact that the camera rests on the tripod gives me permission to pause, to observe with more care; the world is laid out in front of me. A black-and-white photograph is really a myriad of greys, in which the chiaroscuro of the tones never seems limited.



Shell Lubricants, Beijing



Golden Concord Holdings, Hong Kong



“I’m a born adventurer and an obsessive observer of the landscape, attempting to twist what the camera faithfully describes into something of a fiction.”

Lois Conner – photographing landscape as culture inside offices in the US and China

Do you use any special camera, lighting or composition techniques?

My one-of-a-kind specially built panoramic camera weighs 75 pounds, which is extremely heavy to carry at work. For more than 20 years, I made platinum prints, whereby I hand-coated drawing papers with salts of platinum. I’m thinking of working with glass negatives for a landscape project in New York. I am always learning, expanding what I know.

Has being a teacher had a great influence on you and your work?

Initially I thought I would like to teach when I was 60, when I was wise and experienced. The opportunity presented itself much earlier, when I was only 23, at a small university. I thought it was an impossible task, but I accepted the challenge. I still do today. My job is to change the way my students see, to open their eyes, to make them use the camera’s rectangle to be their canvas.

Teaching photography has made me clearer and more articulate about my own work, as that is what I expect from my students. I take teaching very seriously and give it a lot of energy and time. The reward is seeing my students develop their own voice. However, it does not influence my work in general. Teaching is not a nine-to-five job, so it allows me more time to be out in the world photographing. Time is a valuable commodity.

What was the most challenging part of completing this series?

I began this project in 2002 and have been working on it ever since, though more intensely in the last two years. Getting access to the offices is the most difficult task. Then, possibly, working in the extreme lighting conditions would be second hardest. This is still a work in progress.

What are your future goals?

I have almost completed a series of photographs on *Beijing: Contemporary and Imperial*. The cityscape of Beijing depicted in my work during the past two decades is a meditation on the historical context. It shows the city and culture of Beijing as being the core of the nation’s identity, and celebrates contemporary energy and the exuberance of economic change. I also hope to publish books of my *Lotus* and *American Tree* photographs this year and to continue my exploration of the American West.

Lois Conner, *Life in a Box*
 Hanart TZ Gallery
 2/F, Henley Building, 5 Queen’s Road, Central, tel: 2526 9019,
 email: tzchang@hanart.com, website: www.hanart.com
 Until April 30



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