

Exhibition "Strange Planet" at Georgia State University School of Art & Design Gallery, 2004

Quote from "Strange Planet" catalogue  
By Chika Okeke

Xing Danwen's Sleep Walking (2001) examines the effect of dislocation from the homeland but also the disjuncture between imaginary past and lived present, between memory and experience, and between rootedness and migrancy. Born in China and residing in Beijing and New York, Xing is well known for her photographs of the emergent Chinese avant-garde in Beijing of the late 1990s (Personal Diary, 1993-98) and for her later large scale photographs of industrial detritus and production line accumulations resulting from China's overheated export oriented factories (disCONNECTION, 2002-2003). In Sleep Walking, however, Xing reflects on transnational migration and its effect on the constitution of memory and identity. Read as an autobiographical work, it is a commentary on the artist's experience of living and traveling in western metropolitan cities while still physically and emotionally connected to China.

Sleep Walking consists of two simultaneous video projections. A sound track and a large transparent Plexiglas faux-Ming style trunk. Projected on the gallery wall is a seamless stream of urban vistas, mostly scenes from New York, Paris and other European cities lived in or visited by the artist. The second series of images is projected on the bottom of the trunk suspended just above the gallery floor.

Accompanying the images are quotidian sounds of contemporary China complemented by music played with Chinese instruments. The installation, in bringing together sights of western cities sounds of China and an object that insinuates a historical past, is as much about dislocation as about the necessary confluences and tensions between east and west, hallowed past and hurried present. In its non-narrative sequence and deceptive soundtrack what you see, as in Breitz's work, is not what you hear. And the double projection that is impossible to observe simultaneously amplifies the disorienting power of the installation despite the alluring, poetic quality of the videos. Further we are not quite sure what to make of the puzzling Plexiglas trunk: is it a commentary on the eclipse of millennia of Chinese art and design by modern factories famed for their cheap, ubiquitous, plastic products? Or, does the projected image of the west remind us of the fact that Portuguese and Spanish Christian missionaries arrived in China in the early sixteenth century, during the period of the Ming dynasty, initiating the cultural contact that would by the late twentieth century result in the enigmatic, global industrial powerhouse that post-Mao China has become?

Traditionally, Ming-style trunks served as depositories for family treasures and heirlooms and as such were de facto memory vessels with holdings that

constantly reminded the living of their connection to their ancestors. Usually made of solid obdurate material, they were meant to resist unwarranted access to the owner's possessions, safeguarding them for future generations. Xing's trunk, surreal because of its transparency and emptiness, not only gives the spectator visual access to its interior, but reveals that the owner might have been disinherited or is without any family history worth safeguarding for the future. This imaginary owner thus is not only dislocated from an ancestral past, but also, by virtue of the streaming images of western cities and silhouetted, leafless trees in the trunk's bottom, is only tenuously connected to a fictive, fleeting, and disjunctive present. Despite its formal lyricism, *Sleep Walking* insinuates a sense of loss, of displacement, of contending values and memories---a meditation on the self caught between a past evacuated of meaning, and a transitory present/future in which cultures, values, and subjectivities collide---yielding unpredictable *realities*.