Manufactured Totems

By Raphaële Bertho, photography historian

The new Totems series by Alain Delorme plunges us into the core of contemporary China and its complexity. Under the blue sky of a highly colored Shanghai, men carry throughout the city unbelievable piles. These precarious columns made of cardboard or chairs appear as new totems of a society in complete transformation, both a factory for the world and a new El Dorado of the market economy.

Like Eugène Atget did in Paris at the turn of the century, Alain Delorme seems here to draw the portrait of the small workers in the Shanghai streets. While one is usually fascinated by the delusion of grandeur of Chinese society, Alain Delorme chooses to focus on the individuals running around the city. In terms of form, the author diverges from a documentary style and its affected neutrality, still adopting some frontality. The image is organized in horizontal strata, like in an archeological section. From the sidewalk to the building, the grounds are positioned at intervals and allow different urban temporalities to coexist: the everyday life, the ephemeral, the unceasing move of the passers-by, and the great transformations, building sites and new towers. Beyond the balance of these compositions, the author breaks the rules of the documentary genre, playing with the edit and the color to present us a type of “augmented reality”, bringing into light the paradoxes of the most dynamic city of China.

In these negatives, men perched on their bikes or pulling a cart carry tires, bundles, bottles… They are all different but have something in common: they cross the images as they cross the town, without ever settling in. These migrants coming from all over China are the heart of the new “world factory”. Required to fulfill all the chores, this “floating population” is the workforce of the Chinese miracle, the other side of the economic success of the Middle Kingdom. The author shows us the actors of a segregation altogether urban, social and economic. They seem misplaced in this sunny, bright-colored Shanghai. Alain Delorme turns upside down the order of the visible. These men become the heroes of this new world, whose force seems increased tenfold. We believe them able of all feats, maintaining the unpredictable balance of their bizarre burdens with dexterity.

Their loads indeed soar up dangerously towards the sky, ephemeral structures with instable balance. Like the new Realists, Alain Delorme shows subtly a part of reality and offers it a usually unnoticed meaning. These piles become sculptures, real works of art. Following the
process of fetishization, they lose their functional value and gain a symbolical one. These objects, by nature reproducible and interchangeable, seem to acquire an almost sacred status. But what are these “Made in” products the totems of? Their role is ambiguous, as they smother as much as they make visible the workers of the big city. On one hand the man is almost swallowed by the objects, he is their fervent servant; he’s submerged by this multiplication of the same object. The manufactured objects become the pagan idols of consumer society. On the other hand, these temporary sculptures seem to turn upside down the established order, the individual differentiating this way in the gigantism of the urban world. Identifying himself with this elevation, man isn’t himself interchangeable anymore and becomes singular in this multitude.

The vertiginous height of the piles echoes the incessant expansion of the city itself. By updating the proposition of the Becher, Alain Delorme seems to create a parallel between these manufactured totems and the buildings in the background, which have become themselves contemporary sculptures. The urban space is permanently under construction, developing relentlessly. The skyscrapers invade the city and rise always higher, such as new totems, always more remarkable, always more impressive. Stratum by stratum, traditional China rubs shoulders with the contemporary industrial superpower. The race here is not only the one of the men in the city, but also the one of the city towards its future.

With a look of humor and poetry, Alain Delorme settles us in the heart of the new “Chinese dream”. Far from a hymn to materialism, these images, putting forward the overabundance of the objects, tend to the absurd and let catch a glimpse of the complexity of a country reinventing itself. Between dream and reality, these pictures turn upside down the scales of values and blur the border between the visible and the invisible.