

Studio Mobile

Over the course of ten months, Shanghai-based artist Maleonn (aka Ma Liang) travelled 30,000 miles throughout China to photograph Chinese people in his mobile studio. He brought some of the results to Swansea for Let's See What Happens...

Ric Bower talked to him about this ambitious project.

The Studio Mobile battered black truck drove through 35 Chinese provinces, inviting over 1,600 to take part in a project that would put them at the centre of their own universe. Taking in 35 cities and 30,000 miles, the mobile studio was equipped with a staggering array of improbable props and scenery, to create fantasy landscapes that offer a surreal take on tradition Victorian family portraiture. While some of the portraits are humorous, they seem tinged with a certain pathos, perhaps because their subjects are being offered a brief glimpse of an unattainable dream.

Maleonn came to Swansea as part of Let's See What Happens, a Glyn Vivian off-site exhibition, curated by Karen MacKinnon and involving three Chinese artists and four artists from Wales. The richly variegated work in the show evolved from the conversations that occurred between the seven artists as they spent time together and visited each others working environments. An understanding of the difference in the conditions in which artists from China and Wales operate came out of the project and a recognition that the creative drivers are often similar.

Ric Bower: Why take your practice away from the security of a studio?.

Maleonn: I did have a very nice studio which was part of 696 Weihai Lu arts community, a huge old loft in a prime location in the centre of the city. I worked there every day for five years. Then three and a half years ago, the government evicted the artists working there.

RB: Around the time Ai Wei Wei's studio was flattened?

M: Yes, not far off that time. In China construction rate is very fast, everything is constantly changing. The location of the studio was in the very centre of Shanghai and therefore, very valuable. I think businessmen were keen to develop the site. I moved two hours' drive into the country;

I asked myself how I could make this situation work for me. I came to the conclusion that I wanted to move away from self-expression as an artistic approach and do something that was perhaps more socially useful. I wanted to make work of everybody, for everybody and for free. Everybody has a camera nowadays; my girlfriend is constantly taking her own picture on her phone. In contrast, I collect antique studio photos which are very different in character to the instant photography we are used to seeing now; they are not pictures of famous people, just of ordinary folk who have visited a portrait studio. I love this approach and I wondered if it would be relevant now in some way.

RB: Do you have the work of other artists in mind? Joel Peter Witkin for use of artifice, perhaps, or August Sander for his encyclopaedic vision... but they are both western, of course. I know you show in the West, but I am guessing we will understand your work somewhat differently.

M: Yes, I am familiar with Joel Peter Witkin. As regards an approach specifically for China, I don't know; human beings are essentially the same I think. It was suggested to me a long time ago that I should make work about and for Chinese people, work about Chairman Mao for instance. I decided then that I wanted to try and make work that looked for what we have in common as human beings, rather than what sets us apart. With this project, I started by asking people what they wanted, many of them started by telling me their story.

RB: When you meet your subjects for the first time, how do you initiate the process? Do you just introduce yourself, then point to the pile of props and outfits and tell them to 'get on with it'?

M: Yes, pretty much. My Father was a famous opera director in Beijing and my mother was a Shakespearean actress. Every night, after school, I would do my homework backstage at the theatre my mother was working in. The theatrical approach is in my blood. My parents wanted me to be an actor but I was more drawn to the directorial side of things. The subjects though, are all really happy to be involved; it is like a game to them.

RB: I guess in many ways, each situation is as new to you as it is to them.

M: Yes, but social networking helped with this; I have a big following on the Chinese equivalent to Twitter and Facebook. People who were familiar with my early work were constantly commenting

that they would love to be a part of it. Once the Studio Mobile project was under way, I would post that I was going to be at the next city 10 days in advance. People would contact me then with their stories. I would arrange to meet and photograph the ones I felt were interesting. I had never been to many of the cities before and I needed a 100 square metre space to work with when I turned up. I have a huge quantity of lights, props and backgrounds, a truck, a van and seven people working with me. It was a bit like a small circus. It was really useful therefore to have made contact with people who could potentially help out in advance. When we arrived back in Shanghai, many people were waiting for us; we shot over 300 people then alone. Two of the team were shooting a documentary film of the project.

RB: How do you go about the editing process? I guess you can't show all of the 1600 people you photographed, so what in your mind makes some of them work better than others?

M: In the end, I chose 260 images. My first concern was primarily with the aesthetics; they had to work visually. It was an intuitive process, there were no specific criteria.

RB: You have made some new work for Let's See What Happens. Did you have to change your working process to make it work in Swansea?

M: I rented 40 props from the Dylan Thomas Theatre and put them in a huge bag then I went to the subject's homes. This automatically made the work Welsh. People were more relaxed because they were in their own homes and that was a new thing for me.

RB: How do you go about funding a project like Studio Mobile in China?

M: It's harder there than here I think. There is no public funding. There is no Arts Council. Ten years ago, I was making advertising and music videos. I managed to save some money then, which allowed me to get started as an artist. For the first three years, of being a full-time artist, there was no income so, I lived off my savings. It was quite difficult. Artists in the end are powerless. They can only express ideas. They can change nothing—**CCQ**

For further information on Maleonn visit www.maleonn.com

Portrait: *Maleonn outside the Dylan Thomas Theatre, Ric Bower*

Images on following three spreads: *Studio Mobile, Maleonn*







