

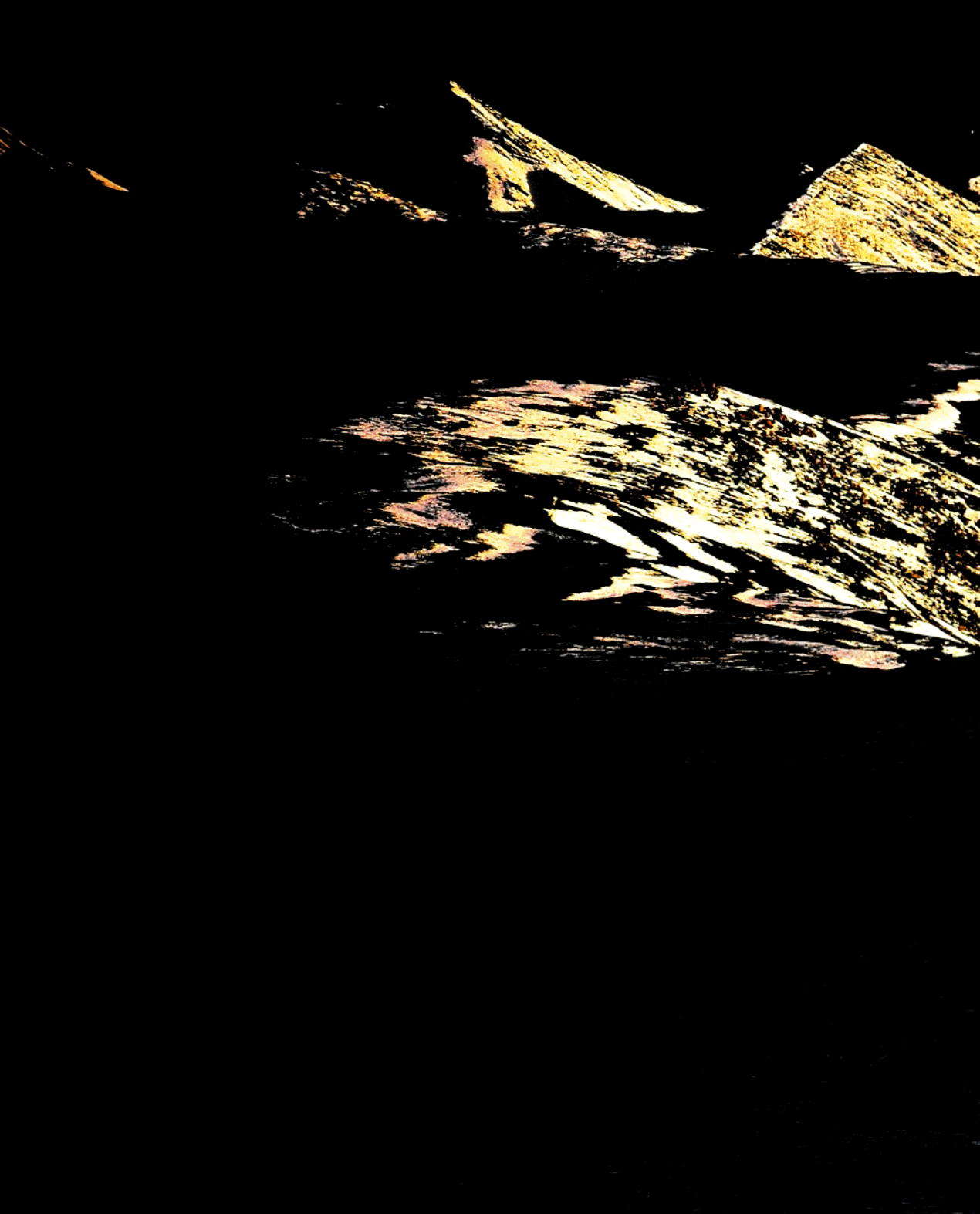
L A N D U N S P O I L E D

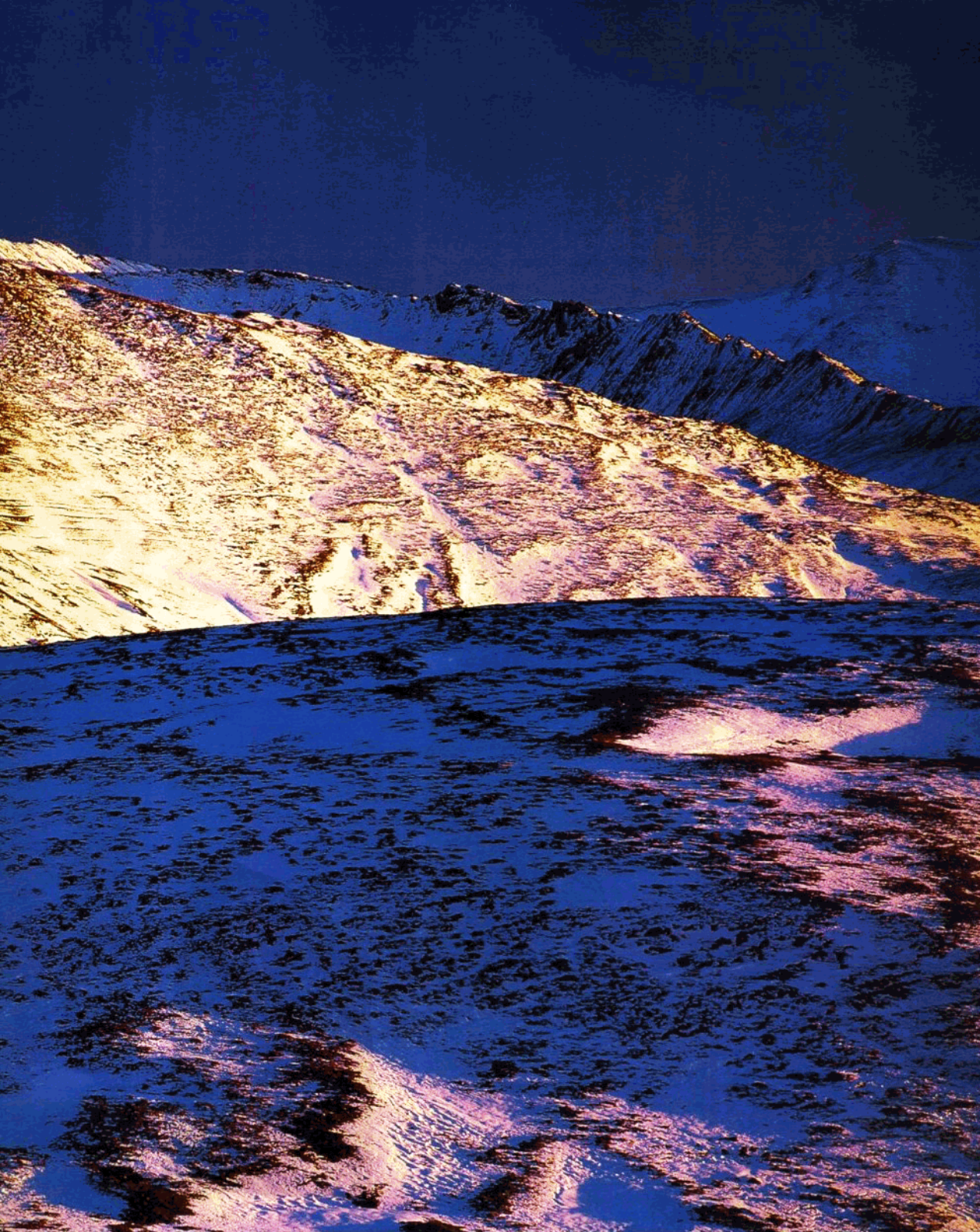
Photographs of Chinese Scenery by Niu Bendong

牛犇东·中国风景摄影集

澄 净 的 大 地











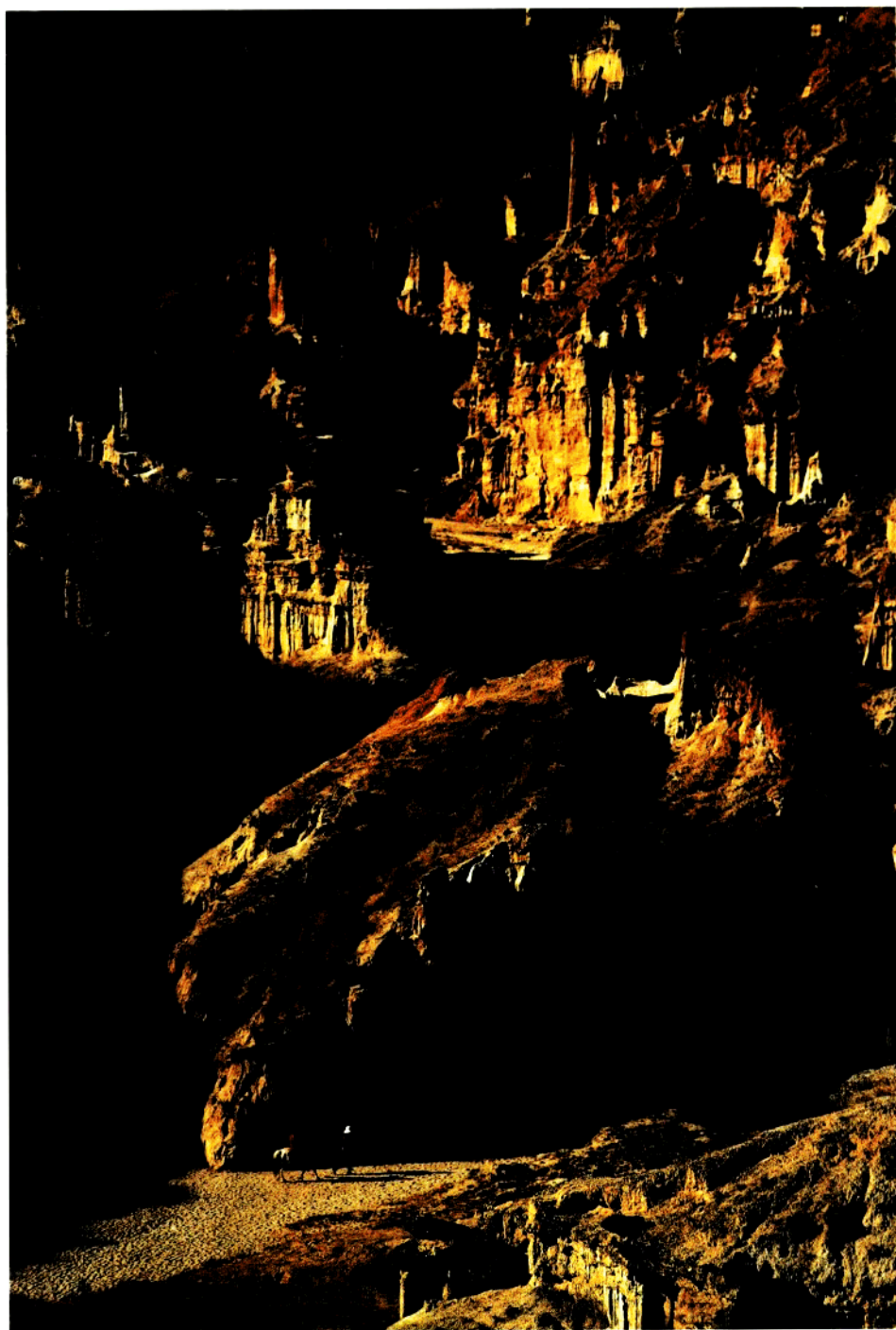
国的庄子说：“天地有大美而不言，四时有明法而不议，万物有成理而不说”（《庄子·知北游》）。既然美的终极就是宇宙的终极，都隐没于天地自然之中，那么，山水风光必定是开启这一终极领域的最直接、然而也是最艰难的艺术题材。大自然先于人类存在并且是我们生命的根源，她的每一种姿态和面貌，本身就已经是美和宇宙本体的最好显露。西方的歌德（Goethe）对他的学生爱克曼（Eckermann）说：“美其实是一种本原现象，它本身固然从来不会出现，但它反映在创造精神的无数不同的表现中，都是可以目睹的，它和自然一样丰富多彩。”爱克曼进而补充道：“我听说过，自然永远是美的，它使艺术家们绝望”（《歌德谈话录》）。

不过，牛犇东从不对自然绝望，因为自然先给了他希望。他对风光题材的选择并不出于对美学原理的事先接受或是艺术技巧上的敏感。此前，他在静物、人物以及摄影技法上都有过探索和成功，但他却一直以业余爱好者的身份出现摄影界。做一个摄影家不是他的梦想，通过摄影追寻一种理想的人生和终极的意义才是他坚定的目标。在时下这个已经号称后现代的时代，如此富有古典和浪漫色彩的人生和艺术理想多少显得有些唐·吉珂德。但牛犇东属于这样一代人：在他们年少的时候，多少有些幼稚地认为人生只有一个价值，那就是谱写时代的诗篇。所以，尽管在荒唐的年代里，他只追求到荒唐；尽管历经了许多起落和挣扎，他又生存在一个什么都有唯独诗意失落的时代，但挥洒人生的豪情和追求完美的精力依然如故。比唐·吉珂德幸运的是，过了而立之年的牛犇东终于在大自然中找到了唯一真实的诗篇。他很少从艺术的角度品评自己的作品，而热衷于讲述出没于深山幽谷和洪荒巨流中的难忘的际遇和难得的体验，乃至性命攸关的历险。他说这一切“往往比得几幅精采的影作更有意义。”

中国自有真正的山水诗人起，即分为两类。一类是农夫式的，如“采菊东篱下”的陶渊明，他们吟咏和自己朝夕相处的山水田园，在平淡和朴素中品味诗意。他们的诗往往厚真自然，充满了陶醉和忘我。另一类是猎人式的，如“扬帆采石华”的谢灵运。他们不断地跋涉在长河大川和峻岭荒原，在奇遇和壮观中捕捉诗意。他们的诗往往奔放华美，充满了渲泄和升华。牛犇东明显地属于后者。这些作品，是他多年来奔波大地，追逐山水的足迹：长白山、黄山、祁连山、西藏阿里、新疆帕米尔、川西北、黔西南、云南、广西、海南……值得我们注意的是：这些地方都是中国古代文化覆盖区域的边缘和极地，在古代的山水诗和山水画乃至游记中，仍是绝少被描绘的对象，也就是说，这些地区的风光还没有被历史驯服，当然也没有被现代文明摧残，那里的人们大多数过着天人合一的生活。澄净的大地，傲然而充分地表现出自然和原始的大美，超越古今，永恒闪耀。他们的广阔、奇绝、激荡、奔腾让人们领略到豪情、冲突和神圣。这一切让牛犇东心驰神往，不能自己。

牛犇东自称其摄影手法是写实的。他喜欢扛着支上沉重三角架的林哈夫相机跋涉，用4"×5"或8"×10"的反转片拍摄大场面的风景。他喜爱用最直接的手法，最直观的视角逼现当下的景物，不好炫耀技巧或作过多的修饰。当大地的景物真切、原始、澄明、纯净地出现时，世界的本体便显露出来。于是这种纯粹和终极的真实便具备了美和超越的力量，突破了日常经验中的真实。在哲学话语中，这种真实干脆被称作真理。也只有在这样的写实中，摄影才真正地成为独立的最具有表现力的艺术。1995年秋天，美国大都会博物馆的著名艺术鉴赏家王己干先生在纽约端详了牛犇东的数幅影作后，意味深长地对他讲：“我看你也是抽象的。”

由个性、经历与题材凑泊而成的浓烈的抒情意味，加上直接、纯粹的写实手法，构成了牛犇东作品的风格主体，这在牛犇东九十年代的作品中表现得尤其充分，记录着他探索的经历和达到的境界。不难发现，八十年代的作品中，他的主要兴趣在于自然风光中色彩的谐调对比、质感与视角造型。比如《黄龙寺》（四川松潘；1985）、《五彩池》（同前）、《丹云峡》（同前）、《石林》（云南路南；1987）、《土林》（云南元谋；1986）中和谐而瑰丽的色彩；《陡坡塘瀑布》（贵州安顺；1986）、《坠连瀑布》（同前）中清晰涌现的质感；《横断山之晨》（云南德钦；1987）中独特而明净的视角；而到了九十年代的作品中，他的主要兴趣转向了单纯的色调、光感与全景气势，对景物本质的把握更加直观，构图更加博大，冲突更加强烈，气魄更加雄浑。



比较一下1985年和1995年拍摄的《天鹅海》(四川九寨沟),前者显示的是华丽的色彩,而后者则显示了洗炼的色调。在黄山、张家界奇灵异秀的峰峦中,造物主激烈迸发的阳刚力量被黑色凝固,云水雪雾妩媚纯洁的阴柔姿态在白色中飘动。柯克亚山的一体的浑柔、腾格里沙漠起伏的细腻,在土黄色的温暖中达到了饱和。四川油菜花葱郁无边的黄色,舒展地延伸着春天的生机。云南元阳的红土,在曙光之中燃烧着南方的烈焰。

再比较一下前后两次拍摄的《岷山》(四川松潘),前者让人们真切地感知到了雪山的存在姿态,而后者却让人们感动。这种感动完全来自光感。暗影中的雪山,被一片夕阳照耀,显露出舒缓的轮廓。草色透过冰雪在夕阳中获得生命的光泽。这一切有如神圣的微笑,抚慰着你的心灵。这种微笑在《金山岭长城》、黄山《天都玉屏》等作品中仍然流露着。

不妨还可以比较一下1986年和1997年拍摄的《祁连河谷》与《红沙河》(甘肃酒泉),前者的美主要由河谷的视角和地貌的质感构成。而后者则将红沙河推置在一个带有神秘色彩的宇宙全景之中,红沙河在厚重的暗影中闪烁,又在明初的光亮中隐没,至此,她的生命意义完全地敞开。而云南元阳哈尼族的梯状水田与村寨风光,在牛犇东的作品中几乎超越了色彩和视角,只有水光闪烁在重重的群山和飘渺的浓雾之中;俯瞰下的山坡梯田,只有在平面上活泼流淌的曲线。这里所表现的甚至仅仅是一种气象,但却是所有和全部。

西藏和川西等地的风光,大都是在冷暖、明暗和视线的冲突中展开的。这里的圣山、草木、城堡、寺塔、村寨、人群、牛羊、鸟兽往往隐没在无边无际的阴影之中,一片纯净的蓝黑色调。而当白炽的阳光、月光从天外洒落,被照亮的景物就显得格外的鲜明、清晰、生动、绚丽。画面中的视线,或是推向无尽的幽深;或是向前奔骤簇拥;或是截然空旷的苍穹,汹涌、徘徊着云影;或是截然广袤的大地,流淌着来自远古的河川。当色调、光感和构图的平衡与谐调被打破的时候,这块土地中古老、神圣、浪漫的气质便流露了出来;作者惊讶、赞美、自由的激情也宣泄了出来。

这些作品不仅是在艰辛的跋涉中完成的,更是在坚毅的等待中捕捉的。耐心是猎人最重要的素质之一。在山巅幽谷之上,在狂风大雨之中,他常常独自久久等待着凝视着大地神采显露的那一瞬间。在西藏阿里等生命难以生存的地方,作为一个人能够屹立着,并且用艺术构建着诗意的世界,让牛犇东感到骄傲和沉醉。机敏是猎人的另一个重要的素质。在拍摄途中,他随机捕捉到一些带有小品色彩的传神写照的作品。一棵小草、一串红辣椒、一群村头孩子、老人、青年、家庭……只有在他们的性格和神采上,才能体会到这里的阳光、空气、水草是多么的澄净;这里的幸福和憧憬是多么的真实。让我们从一个生动的侧面,理解了他所拍摄的风光。

牛犇东坚持认为,世界上最美的风景在中国。这是由衷的赞美更是由衷的自信。因为他广泛地揣摩过西方的风光摄影作品,并且有过在南北美洲进行风光摄影的经历。当然,随之而来的还有深切的忧患。他感受到了这些澄净的大地所面临的危机:破坏性的工业采掘和粗俗的旅游开发。有些地方在他故地重游时已经面目全非。他的个体所承载的艺术行为中蕴涵了现代最重要的社会文化思考。在中国的诗歌传统中,忧患是一种更加深刻的诗意。

尽管牛犇东甚少发表他的作品,他的作品仍散见于有关中国风光的大型画册和一些专业杂志,或是制作精美的年历。这些作品,无论是被艺术的还是被商业的保存或传播方式凝固着,宁静而自持地呈现在你的面前时,你都无法以一个鉴赏者或是占有者的姿态面对他们。他们的宁静与自持说明其中聚合并持续着一种达到顶点的动荡,由此而产生的强大吸力,摄取你,震撼你,让你依恋于这种被动,不愿自拔。苍苍莽莽的大地、附着于其上的芸芸众生、飘荡于其上的云影天色、耀眼而逼迫的阳光、冷凝而遥远的月光,是一个自在涌现出的整体,他们不可分析但可以真切地感受,他们揭示了神圣只能够皈依赞叹。作者在创作过程中留存在作品中的那种极度的动荡,持续在皈依者的心灵世界而不仅是回荡在展厅或凝固于书籍。他们赋予你超越的力量,让你离开了因习以为常而失去了意义的现实,走进了真实的时空,看到了澄净的大地——我们的家园和天堂。

Master Zhuang¹ in China once said: 'The nature is silent in its astounding beauty, the seasons never discuss their established laws; all the things in the universe have underlying but untold reasons.' (Zhuangzi, *Journey to the North*). Since the ultimate of beauty is that of the universe, which is concealed in nature, the landscape must be the most direct yet the most difficult motif to access to the final sphere. Nature precedes our human beings and she is the source of our human life, with every of her demeanors and appearances in her own right existing as the best revelation of the beauty and universe proper. Goethe once told his student Eckermann that 'Beauty is actually a phenomenon of origin— it itself, though, never appears, its reflections can be seen in myriads of representations of the creative spirits, as colorful as nature herself.' Eckermann further added that: 'I've heard that nature is eternally beautiful, making artists desperate.' (Dialogue of Goethe)

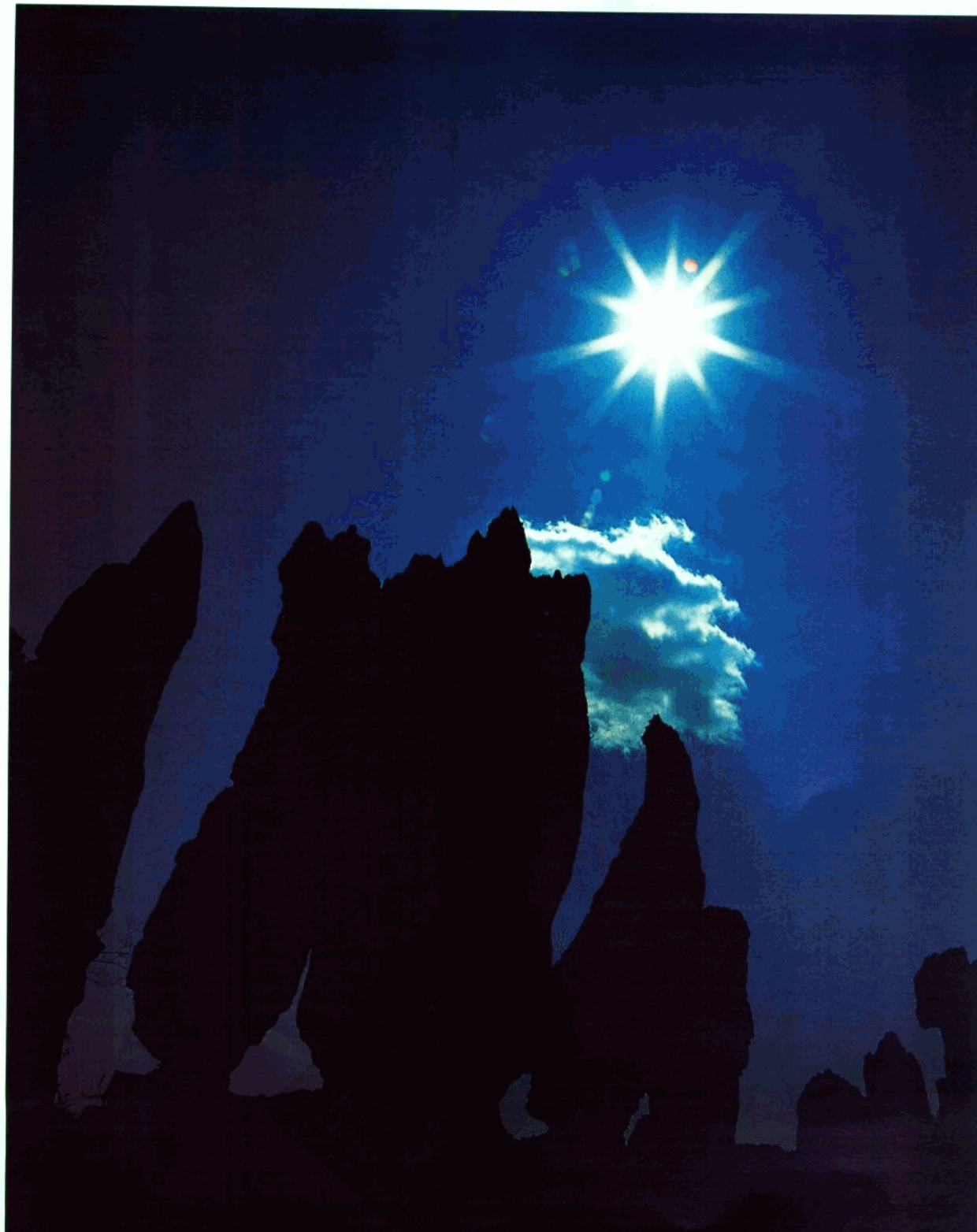
However, Niu Bendong never feels desperate towards nature, because she gives him hope first. His selection of the landscape motif is not necessarily the consequence of his pre-acceptance of any aesthetic theories or the sensitivity in artistic skills. Rather, he has been successful in his exploration of object and portrait photography and the relevant techniques, and active in the photographing circle as an amateur. To be a photographer is not his dream; to pursue an ideal life and the ultimate meaning through the act of photographing is his steadfast aim. Nowadays in such an age, which is already labeled as 'post-modernism', his life and artistic ideal so rich in classic romanticism more or less seem to be Don Quixote. Yet Niu Bendong belongs to this generation: when they were young, they somehow naively believed that there existed only one true value in life, that is, to compose the grand poem of the time. Therefore, in that ridiculous period of time, he only found ridiculousness; although he has experienced many ups and downs, struggles and conflicts and now lives in an age with everything but poeticness, his passion for life and the zeal to pursue perfection remains the same. Luckier than Don Quixote, Niu Bendong, now over 30, finally found the only true poetry in nature. He seldom comments on his own works from an artistic perspective; he is only keen on relating those unforgettable and extraordinary experiences in the remote mountains, valleys, wilderness and rivers, even those adventures which almost claimed his life. He spoke of all these as 'more significant than simply producing several excellent photographs'.

Chinese poets, since the appearance of real hermit poets, have been categorized into two groups. One includes peasant-like poets, such as Tao Qian² who 'picked chrysanthemums under the eastern fence'. They chanted about the pastoral life and beautiful landscape in their close company and savored the poetic flavor in simplicity and plainness. Their poems are natural and sincere in style and full of intoxication and self-oblivion. The other group consists of hunter like poets, such as Xie Lingyun³ who wrote the line 'hoisting the sail I long to see the beauty of rocky mountains.' They incessantly waded in big rivers and remote waters, climbed the high mountains and explored into waterlands, to capture the poeticness in adventure and spectacular views. Their poems are untrammelled, bold, free and magnificent in style, full of unboomed and elevated emotions and sentiments. Obviously Niu Bendong belongs to the latter. All his works are evidence of his tireless steps trodden on the land and water for so many years: Mount Changbai, Mount Yellow, Mount Qilian, Nagri in Tibet, Pamir in Xinjiang Aut. Reg. the northwest Sichuan Province, the southwest Guizhou Province, Yunnan, Guangxi and Hainan Province, etc.. What might be worthy of our attention is that all these places are marginal and remotest areas beyond the reach of ancient Chinese culture, which even in archaic Chinese landscape poems, paintings, essays and travels are seldom depicted. That is to say, the scenery of these areas has not been tamed by history and hence not destroyed by modern civilization, and most inhabitants there are still living a life in harmony with nature. The unspoiled land proudly and richly displays the great beauty of nature and the origins of life, transcends the

¹ Master Zhuang (369-286 BC), also known as Zhuang Zhou or Zhuangzi, was a premier Chinese Taoist philosopher.

² Tao Qian (365-427AD), a poet in Wei Dynasties, is one of the leading literary figures in Chinese history, who advocated and practiced recluse after he was disappointed by the darkness of Chinese politics at that time.

³ Xie Lingyun (385-433AD), a poet in Southern Dynasty.



past and the present, and shines permanently. The vastness, unrivaled uniqueness, unrestrained passions and freedom there impress people with the lofty aspirations, conflicting wonder and breathtaking sacredness. All these fascinate Niu Bendong, leaving him in uncontrollable awe and yearnings.

Niu Bendong called his photographing style most realistic. He likes to carry a big Linhalf camera with a heavy tripod in his travel and shoots grand-scale scenery with 4" × 5" or 8" × 10" reversal films. He loves the most direct way of shooting with the simplest and clearest perspective to represent the scenery at the moment and never flaunts his skills or adds too much ornamentation. When the earth shows itself in a true, sincere, simple, clean and pure manner, the world-in-itself is unveiled. Therefore, the authenticity of such purity and ultimateness is endowed with beauty and the power of transcendence, far beyond the reality of daily experience. In philosophical discourse, this kind of authenticity is simply called truth. Only in this kind of realism, can photography become an independent and most expressive form of art. In the autumn of 1996, having seen Mr. Niu's works, Mr. C. C. Wang, one of the most distinguished art connoisseurs of the American Metropolitan Museum, said one sentence full of understanding: 'I also see you as abstract.'

The style of Niu Bendong's works features in strong expressiveness molded by his character, experiences and choice of motifs, along with the direct and pure realistic techniques fully exhibited in his works of 1990s, which record his explorations and the realms he has reached. It is not difficult to discover that in his works of 1980s, his major interest was in the chime and contrast of colors, the texture, the visual perspective and the shape of the natural scenery: for instance, the harmonious and radiant colors shown in *Huanglong Si (Yellow-dragon Temple)* (Songpan, Sichuan Province, 1985), *Wucui Chi (Five-color Pond)* (ibid.), *Danyun Xia (Rosy-cloud Gorges)* (ibid.), *Grand Stone Forest* (Lunan, Yunnan Province, 1987), and *Soil Grove* (Yuanyang, Yunnan Province, 1986); the explicit texture clearly exposed in *Doupotang Waterfall* (Anshun, Guizhou Province, 1986) and *Tinlian Zhuitan Waterfall* (ibid.); and the unique and distinct visual angle exemplified in *The Dawn of Hengduan Shan (Mt.)* (Deqin, Yunnan Province, 1987). While in his works of 1990s, his main interest turns to simple color, light and the panoramic momentum of the scenery with a deeper understanding of the nature of the subject, more extensive frames of composition, increasingly intense contrast and more imposing grandeur.

To compare his two pictures with the same title *Swan Lake* (Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, Sichuan Province) shot in 1985 and 1996 respectively, it can be found that the former displays the brilliant color while the latter conveys a simple and clear tone. In the supremely beautiful mountain ranges of the Mount Yellow and Zhang Jiajie National Forest Park, the mighty force of the creator of the universe is solidified in the color of black; while the pure and elegant shapes of the clouds, drizzles, mist and snow drift tenderly in the white. The quiet majesty of the Kokya Mountains and the delicacy of the undulating Tengger Desert, reach their greatest splendor in the warmth of the color of loess. The endlessly shining golden Chinese cabbage field in Sichuan Province extends the vitality of spring to a far distance. The red soil in Yuanyang, Yunnan province, blazes with the warmth of southern China in the first glimmer of dawn.

Another comparison can be made between the two pictures both entitled *Min Shan (Mt. Min)* photographed in 1986 and 1996. The former can bring the viewers to home the grandeur of the snow-capped mountains; while the latter touches their heart, which is totally due to the effect of light. The snow-covered mountains in the darker shadow glow gently in the sunset, revealing their attractive and smooth contours. The grass above the icy snow glistens when the setting sun breathes into it the breath of life. All of this is like a sacred smile, consoling your heart. The similar kind of smiles are also betrayed in the photographs *The Great Wall on Jinshan Ling (Golden Ridge)* and *Yupin Tower on Tiandu Feng (Peak)*.

To view the photographs named *Qilian River Valley* and *Hongsha He (Red-sand River)* (Jiuquan, Gansu Province) in 1986 and 1997, it can be found that the beauty in the former lies in the selection of the viewing angle of the river valley and the texture of the configurations of the land features. The latter puts the Red Sand River in a cosmic panorama with a mysterious connotation, in which the river flickers in the thick shadow and vanishes into the brightness of light. In this way,

its meaning of existence completely unfolds. In other works, the scenery of terraced water fields and villages of the Hani nationality in Yuanyang, Yunnan Province, almost departs colors and viewing angles, with only water glinting in ranges of mountains and thick mist. The terraced fields on the hillside, pictured from above, assume the sole form of lively floating curves on the photo plane. Here, even what is represented is merely an atmosphere, but it is the all and the whole.

The conflicts between the cold and warm, the bright and dim, and the varied perspectives frame the scenery of Tibet and regions in western Sichuan Province. There the sacred mountains, grass and groves, castles, pagodas, temples, villages, crowds, cattle, birds and animals often submerge into the endless shadows of pure dark blue. When the incandescent sunlight or moonlight sheds from the sky, the lit objects appear to be exceptionally clear, distinct, vivid and splendid. The perspective on the photo plane is directed either to the infinite remoteness or pushed to the nearest fore. In the abrupt blank sky, the clouds are moving with force and on the vast land float the rivers from antiquity. When the balance and harmony of color, light and composition are broken, the ancient sacred and romantic ambiance of the land is revealed and hence the photographer lets go his passion of amazement, adoration and freedom.

All these works are not only completed during arduous treks, but also captured in persistent waiting. Patience is one of the most important qualities of a hunter. Standing in the mountains and searching in the valleys, wild winds and heavy rains, he always waits alone for the moment when the land shows its splendor. In Ngari and the other places on the Tibetan Plateau where a man has to invest his life to exist, Niu Bendong can stand upright as a human being and construct a poetic world in art. This makes him proud and fascinated. Alertness is another important quality of a hunter. During his journey of photographing, he randomly captured some vivid portrayals as artist vignettes—one grass, a bunch of red pepper, a group of children of Uygur nationality in front of a village, a Tibetan old man, youths and families.... Only from their characters and complexions can a viewer experience the purity and cleanness of the sunlight, air, water and grass there and the verity of their happiness and longings. This helps us to understand the scenery in his pictures from a lifelike facet.

Niu Bendong believes that the most beautiful landscapes in the world are in China. This is a genuine praise and further genuine confidence, since he has extensively studied western landscape photography and once been to South and North America to take photographs. However, on the other hand, what is followed is a heart-felt concern. He is aware of the danger the unspoiled land is facing: destructive industrial development and vulgar tourism exploitation. Some places have totally changed when he went back there. His individual artistic behavior is imbued with social and cultural pondering most important in modern time. In Chinese poetic tradition, sullen concern is even richer in poeticness.

Although Niu seldom publishes his works, they are occasionally seen in some folios of Chinese landscapes and art journals or exquisitely wrought calendars. But when all these works, eventualized either in artistic or commercial form of preservation and communication, are picturesquely and restrainedly displayed before your eyes, you cannot face them as a connoisseur or owner. Their tranquillity and composure explicate that, there, within themselves, accumulates and continues an uttermost upheaval which produces a powerful magnetism, so arresting and shocking that you are attracted to it unconsciously with no will to leave. The vast and lush land, all the living things, the clouds and sky above them, the blinding and pressing sunshine, cold and distant moonlight, turn out to be a natural whole which cannot be analyzed but truly felt, revealing that sacredness can only be turned to and worshipped. The extreme upheaval in his works the author has preserved in the process of creation, continues to linger in the heart of the converted rather than remain in an exhibition hall or any books. They give you the transcending power, enable you estrange the meaningless reality since you have been so used to it and step into a real space and time to see the pure land—our home and paradise.



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