In 2001, the British-American photographer Sze Tsung Leong, equipped with his eight-by-ten view camera, began travelling to countries around the world in search of the horizon. Leong, who studied architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, is interested in how three-dimensional space translates onto a two-dimensional surface—an illusion that is achieved by the horizon line. From Masai Mara, Kenya, to Toledo, Spain, Leong assumes a consistent vantage point and places the horizon line in precisely the same position across all frames.

Placed side by side, the photographs offer a uniform view of dissimilar terrains—an opportunity to consider the ways in which the landscapes equate and depart from one another. Above is a selection from the series “Horizons,” which will be on view at Yossi Milo Gallery, in New York, starting on Thursday, May 15th.

All photographs © Sze Tsung Leong, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.
A Common Line, True Still Lifes & Moving Parts

Sze Tsung Leong: Horizons

Sze Tsung Leong’s ‘Lake Michigan’ (2012), at Yossi Milo

All 29 of Sze Tsung Leong’s images have the same composition: Whether a landscape, a cityscape or a seascape, the horizon is one-third the way up from the bottom. The 28-by-48-inch chromogenic prints are hung side by side, so the common horizon line homogenizes Venice, Paris and Toledo, Spain; Antelope Valley, Calif., and Flaajökull, Iceland; the Bolivian salt flats and the Ganges River. The pictures also tend to have overcast skies and a similar scale, making it easy to move from one to the next. The effect, however, can be whimsical: The horizon in “Garonne, Bordeaux” (2009) is occupied with the grand late-18th-century buildings that line the river; it abuts the tacky tract housing in “Victorville, California” (2010), which is situated above an area that has been stripped of vegetation and appears to be eroding.

The pictures are also interesting in themselves. The bottom third of “Baa Atoll, Maldives” (2007) is taken up with the Indian Ocean, whose waters are several shades of blue and disappear at a hazy horizon above which the sky is a light gray. The water and the sky in “Lake Michigan” (2012) are both a pale gray, but between them is the skyline of Chicago, with individual buildings such as the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower) sharply distinct. The yellowed grass of the savanna stretches far to the distance in “Masai Mara I” (2009), one of Kenya’s natural reserves, with large herds of zebras and wildebeests grazing peacefully toward the horizon.
In this weekly series, T’s photo editors share the most compelling new visual projects they’ve discovered.

In his ongoing and aptly named series “Horizons,” the photographer Sze Tsung Leong captures images of the farthest reaches of the world. And they’re fitting for a time when the world seems to become increasingly smaller. Leong’s growing body of work connects vastly different landscapes thanks to its single, uniform vantage point: a wide, panoramic view of various remote territories. Each shot is taken from a similar distance, which lends an ironic uniformity to the collection, though no two views are ever the same.

Above is an exclusive first look at his latest set, which will be on view next week at Yossi Milo Gallery. Experiencing them hung together, lined up side-by-side, is almost like viewing the world from outer space.

“Horizons” will be on view from May 15 through June 28 at Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 10th Avenue, New York. yossimilo.com.
EXPANDING HORIZONS
SZE TSUNG LEONG'S PARED-DOWN VISTAS

THE PHOTOGRAPHS from Sze Tsung Leong's series "Horizons" offer a powerfully minimalist antidote to clichéd, all-you-can-see overfiltered panoramas. On view May 15 at New York's Yossi Milo Gallery, the series's vistas were shot on film over the course of ten years at more than 100 sites around the world. By reducing the field of vision down to two parts—land (or water) and sky—while embracing its sublime enormity, Leong redefines what a landscape can be.

Whether looking out over Bolivian salt flats or at Shanghai's industrial waterfront, the light is even, often overcast, and the palette consistent. The peculiar, bifurcated compositions allow for breathtaking games of scale: A group of Braziens wallowing their feet at Mont Saint-Michel at low tide (bottom), a herd of wildebeests in the Masai Mara (middle) and the Chicago skyline (top) are all similarly flattened by the expansive—if elusive—horizon line.

The stripped-down vision makes life in foreign parts appear more familiar than we would usually imagine. "People tend to recognize places they've never been in (in my images), thinking they're places close to home," says the Mexican-born British American lensman. "In a way, despite the scale, the photographs make the world seem smaller." — Maud Doyle

"Horizons" runs through June 24; 265 Tenth Ave; yossimilo.com.
GLOBAL DRIFT:
SZE TSUNG LEONG

The architectural configurations of the modern metropolis have obsessed the eye of many a photographer, as the works of Andreas Gursky, Stephen Shore and Thomas Struth show. Sze Tsung Leong is similarly preoccupied by city skylines, but his lens is particularly attuned to the way these structures can overwhelm their inhabitants. In his Cities series (2002–), urban centres appear devoid of life, while History Images (2002–5) powerfully captures the brutal reworking of China’s cityscape under rapid industrialisation.

In the latest work from his ongoing Horizons series (2001–), Leong continues to explore human relationships with surrounding geographies, but in a way that borders on the elegiac. By using the same composition in every photograph, Leong threads the horizon line through each panorama, allowing surprising patterns to emerge across diverse landscapes: a file of highrise flats in Beijing coincides with the circles at Stonehenge; crop furrows in an Avebury field pick up the curving scars of a Mongolian riverbed. These ambiguous overlaps create an indeterminate, drifting terrain, an effect compounded by the way each image seems to teeter on the brink of dissolution, lost in mist or a bleach-white haze. Through this floating world, Leong seeks to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of political boundaries and geographical distinctions, yet Horizons refrains from forcing the issue. It offers instead a beautifully suggestive series of fragments, and a chance to meditate on the construction of personal geographies. Catherine Spencer

HORIZONS, SZE TSUNG LEONG
3 APRIL – 17 MAY, YOSSI MILO GALLERY,
NEW YORK, WWW.YOSSIMILO.COM
Sze Tsung Leong: History Images
Who Controls the Past Controls the Future

NIGEL WARBURTON

A city such as London or Edinburgh has grown organically. Even where urban planning is extensive, as in the London Docklands or the Georgian New Town in Edinburgh, the old sits alongside the new. Recent additions to the city in London surrounding St Paul's Cathedral and Tate Modern is an example of how modern architecture can inhabit an older building and transform it. The spirit of the city's past seeps into our consciousness from medieval street names, Wren churches, older buildings absorbed into modern redevelopments, or an ancient wall overshadowed by a glass and steel post-modern tower.

"Unplanned beauty emerges out of an organic process of growth where a city or town reaches a state of aesthetic and structural harmony, not through any willful design, but through the slow accretions of time."

(Leong from 'The Authority of Beauty'

In today's China, in contrast, urban planners usually begin with a blank sheet of paper and a blueprint vision of 'the beautiful city'. They have the power to erase the haphazard city developments of the past and replace them with structured realisations of modernist dreams, and this is what they are now doing on an unprecedented scale. This is the Chinese version of modernisation, and it leaves little room for the accretions of the past. The building machine rolls onwards like a huge mechanical glacier. China is responding architecturally to capitalism and to the need to provide living and office space for the millions of its inhabitants who are drawn to the cities. The result is the systematic annihilation of the physical history of cities to make way for new ones built on the ruins of the old.

Sze Tsung Leong's History Images are at one level poetic records of this process of change and the destruction it involves. From 2002 to 2005 he photographed these sites in transition using a large-format view camera with a wide-angle lens. He has visited most of the major cities in China including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Chongqing. The accumulated effect is haunting. Tower blocks emerge from the rubble of a newly destroyed past, always seen from a distance; low rise horizontal sprawl gives way to the planned vertical future. Where human figures are in frame, they are so distant as to appear as impersonal markers of scale, like a geologist's hammer alongside a fossil.

A first glance images such as Wargxiing Xin Cheng, Chaoyang District, Beijing, 2003 (opposite), or Tiangtong Xiyuan Third District (North) Changping District, Beijing, 2004 (on the cover of this issue of Portfolio), are photographic exercises in form, symmetry and repetition. But in the context of the series, they are also records of the expression of power and the destruction of past accretions now no longer visible.

"One of the things I have hoped to convey in History Images is the effect of this imposition of a single order by a single ideology, and the narrowing effects this has."

(See Tsung Leong, email to the author, March 2007)

Leong exploits the haze of grey-white skies and muted colours to imply a mood of melancholy. Although ostensibly cityscapes, they invite metaphorical interpretation: accumulated history is being systematically overwritten with a new version of the present. As Leong puts it:

"Present-day China seems to be simultaneously playing out its versions of Haussmannization, the Industrial Revolution, wartime destruction and post-war reconstruction, all within a very compressed period of time. It's these relationships to other places and other points in history that to a large extent informed my work."

(See Tsung Leong, email to the author, March 2007)

The repetition within the frame of buildings with minor or no variation between them suggests a regime that values the collective above the individual. Most cities have memories apparent in the fabric of their architecture, some more legible than others; but this may not always be so in China. Without its physical presence some aspects of the past life of a city may vanish. In Xinjie Kou, Xuanwu District, Nanjing (photograph opposite), two phases of China's history represented by crumbling houses from the imperial era and pre-fabricated concrete housing blocks from the communist period, are next in turn for obliteration, already surrounded and overshadowed by office and residential tower blocks of the present capitalist phase.

The erasure of history is not a situation unique to China. Most authoritarian regimes rewrite the past. Leong's eloquent written statements make clear that he interprets the building sites of China as expressions of political power.

"The motivation for erasing history is ultimately rooted in the drive to shape and manage society. A principal tool of this drive is the design of cities – an activity that involves demolition as much as construction."

(from 'A History of Erasure' p.139)

Such urban erasure long predates China's seduction by capitalism. Leong describes a Chinese tradition of demolition and large-scale restructuring. He identifies its three main features in this tradition:

"...large-scale destruction and replacement of urban fabrics to inaugurate changes of emperors or dynasties; massive relocations of populations; and highly planned urban configurations enabled by centralised and challenged forms of authority."


So, paradoxically, the current wave of site-clearing and redevelopment which results in the removal of historical accretions, has deep traditional roots in China. There is a cyclical history of those in power replacing the physical past with their visions of the present and the future.
have for three years refused to yield, spurring offers of relocation or financial compensation. The authorities have dubbed Wu Ping “the stubborn nail” for her resistance. Meanwhile, the bulldozers have excavated the area around their two-storey property, leaving it stranded as an island in a pit and no longer inhabitable. This brave and symbolic act of defiance is doomed to fail. Elsewhere residents see no choice but to succumb and to begin their lives anew somewhere else, never to return to the villages and suburbs they know so well.

Leong is aware of the personal stories, but keeps his camera at a distance that allows us to see the larger movement of history:

“When an area is developed, it is almost always cleared of all traces of the past: buildings, streets, residents. The result is an absence of history, within which the components of China’s new cities are built out of nothing: luxury apartments, shopping centres, supermarkets, widened roads, tennis courts, office blocks, parking lots.”

(Leong ‘A History of Erasure’, p.139)

Yet perhaps this large-scale and brutal reorganisation is a prerequisite of China’s survival in its new free market role. If services and transport to cities are inadequate, how else can China sustain such rapid industrial and economic change? The victims in this process, though, are the poor and the disadvantaged who are forced to leave their family homes for an uncertain future at the edge of the new city, or else to uproot and attempt a completely different lifestyle in a new place. The wealthy elite inhabit the new, more or less interchangeable cities with their modern services and, presumably, flourish. The poor, as ever, are marginalised, physically and economically.

Born in Mexico in 1970 to parents from England and Malaysia, with Chinese ancestry, and now living in New York City, Sze Tsung Leong is more of an outsider to China than his name might imply (he first visited China in 1994 and worked on History Images over a three-year period from 2002, living in China for much of that time). He has, though, an artist’s instinct for avoiding closing down interpretations of his photography:

“I want my work to be read in as open a way as possible, and I tend to be wary of defining things in a way that might limit the reading of the work.”

(Leong, email to the author, March 2007)

The themes of power, history and erasure are not confined to China’s present and very recent past: they are universal. Nor should Leong’s History Images be seen simply as interpretations of what has happened in a particular place at a particular time, although many critics, perhaps overcrowded by the scale and speed of Chinese urban development, have read them as such. The photographs have a dual aspect. Each image is a trace of an extended moment in a specific place that becomes a symbol for the transformation that is happening across China, the part standing for a wider whole. At the same time what is happening in China is itself an instance of the more general expression of power through destruction and erasure and the re-making of people’s lives through the built environment. These poetic aspects of Leong’s work emerge through the cumulative effect of the series with its repetitions and recurrent motifs.

There are many photographic parallels between Leong’s approach and those of other photographers of cities, such as Andreas Gursky, Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore and particularly Thomas Struth. The rectilinear, centrally composed shots; the use of a large-format camera and the inclusion of focussed detail throughout the image are familiar devices in contemporary city photography as is the systematic repetition with variation. Yet many of the photographers Leong admires and whom he mentions enthusiastically as influences are from the nineteenth century. He has, for example, found inspiration in the work of the early war photographers Matthew Brady, Timothy O’Sullivan, Roger Fenton and Felice Beato. Unable to record movement effectively because of the limitations of film speed, these photographers represented battle through landscapes that contained the traces of action. In Roger Fenton’s The Valley of the Shadow of Death the Crimean battlefield is littered with cannon balls; in Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, the landscape is strewn with corpses, the ‘Human Harvest’. Felice Beato, who was probably the first photographer to visit China, also made images of the aftermath of skirmishes during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. I like Leong, these earlier photographers recorded the fragments and debris left behind in the wake of powerful forces at turning points in history. Momentous events have occurred before the arrival of the photographer with his tripod.

In History Images the legible remnants of architectural destruction have a monumental stillness and a sense of foreboding. The new blocks that grow out of the rubble of the past are ominous. The book of History Images ends with a photograph of Tiananmen Square taken in 2002 (page 15). Here for the first time human beings, though still in the distance, take precedence over architecture. For Leong this square, cut into the centre of the former Imperial City, is an expression of state power:

“How the square was created, its symbolic significance, and its history suggest that the greatest and most valued power of the state is the authority to erase.”

(Leong ‘A History of Erasure’ p.141)

China viewed through Leong’s lens is a place that George Orwell would have recognised and for which Big Brother’s party slogan might have been written:

“Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”

(George Orwell, Nineteen-Eighty Four, Penguin edition, 1948, p.37)
Sze Tsung Leong
BY NORMAN BRYSON

I have chosen Sze Tsung Leong’s remarkable series of large-format photographs portraying the dramatically changing urban environment in the People’s Republic of China. In terms of the sheer number of new buildings, their scale, and the transformation of social, economic and cultural life that they represent, urban development in China is unmatched anywhere in the world. Documenting the destruction of the previous fabric of Chinese cities and the sudden emergence of entirely new cityscapes, still in pristine condition, is a major undertaking, impossible in its entirety: but Sze Tsung Leong’s selections and emphases are astute. When, in the future, people look back on this traumatic period in modern Chinese history, these photographs will be an indispensable reference point, a treasure house, comparable to the work of the nineteenth-century photographers who captured the look of medieval Paris on the eve of its replacement by the modern metropolis.

Nowhere else is the double-edged nature of power so clearly represented: as the capacity to summon, almost out of thin air, an entirely new order and scale of architecture, and as the capacity to erase and obliterate, to rewrite history according to the perspective of the (present) victors.

Norman Bryson is Professor of Art History at the University of California, San Diego. His publications include Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting, Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix and Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze.

Sze Tsung Leong’s extraordinary “History Images” series, 2002–2005, documents the human habitats of the new China. Taken mostly from elevated viewpoints, the photographs command large vistas; basic to all of them is a sense of great space, which they need every inch of to encompass the gargantuan construction projects and freshly built housing developments that they describe. This framing of distance is one device through which Leong’s work develops its visual power. Another is the frequent repetition of geometric forms, in the columns and rows of identical windows and terraces, vertical tower blocks and their horizontal stories, that make up the countless units of the new architecture’s visual and physical grid. In several photographs, Leong observes the dwarfing closeness of these numbingly regular, frighteningly pristine arrangements to older buildings, making China’s imperial, Communist, and current histories abut. Here debris, demolition, and the abused earth of urban spaces in forceful transition often appear as corollaries to the rigid order they are intended to produce—and the modest low-rise housing of former times in any case seems heartbreaking in proximity to the massive new. The skies in today’s China look mostly whitish gray, and the farther parts of Leong’s C-prints often dissolve in haze: There is no clear air, no view through.

The urbanist and the economist, the statesman and the historian, would all find news in these photos. Nothing I have seen or read conveys more vividly the enormous change that China is undergoing: And the news is bad—the images are grandly disturbing, arguing for the new society as a place of inhuman scale, erased history, and enforced, anonymous uniformity. On a larger level still, the work makes you worry for the world, and for its ability to tolerate the accelerated rates of consumption and waste in the global economy that is coming into being.

It should be said, though, that Leong’s China is very clearly an aesthetic construct. (I suspect that the “History Images” title announces this right from the beginning; history painting, we remember, was at the ambitious top of the premodernist Beaux-Arts aesthetic hierarchy.) It’s not just the contrivances of framing and perspective; more obvious still is the decision to work almost entirely without human subjects. Leong’s cityscapes are largely vacant. Some photographs must have been shot in early morning; others show figures so remote and small as to be almost invisible—though the contrast between these pathetically tiny individuals and the mighty planar structures surrounding them is not lost on us. The contrast is weird: Implicit in the photographs is the presence of an enormous population, the grids whose regularity and size are so emphasized being made up of boxes, each one of which is the container for a family. Another photographer would have shown these places crammed with the busy life that must be there—but Leong arranges artfully to show them empty.

The sense that most overtly results is of a social space waiting to be lived in, waiting to be born. That feeling is ambiguous, though—we could equally be seeing the aftermath of disaster. In fact, Leong’s images kept reminding me of a more explicitly tragic and strange group of photographs, very different in manner and subject: the albumen silver prints that Felice Beato made in Lucknow in 1858, after its ruin in what the British still call the Indian Mutiny—scenes of a city made desolate, inhabited by living ghosts. Inserting that kind of vision into views of the present, Leong questions the future of the cities of China, and of the world.

—David Frankel
HISTORY IMAGES BY SZE TSUNG LEONG

The common perception is that the rewriting of history takes place on the page, but all around us history is being rewritten by changes made to the built environment. The photographs in this series trace the diverse ways in which history is manifested, destroyed, created, and revised in China’s built environment. The photographs are taken at a time of sweeping change—so often experienced in China’s history—as the country shifts abruptly from one system of authority to another. This change revolves, as it has so regularly in the country’s past, around the constant of a highly centralized authority that has the power to structure and shape both its population and its built environment.

The majority of China’s history has been defined by changes from one dynasty to the next. The present-day shift to the market economy can be seen as a parallel to these cycles of upheaval. Just as emperors destroyed conquered cities and built new cities to demonstrate and legitimize their power, today’s urban centers in China are being restructured according to the authority of the market. As a result, traditional areas that are no longer relevant in the workings of the new economy are being wiped away on an immense scale and replaced with new environments. The photographs in “History Images” depict a spectrum of time that includes the remaining traces of the old, the destruction of built history, and the onrush of the new—revealing a country caught in the tenuous period after the end of one history and at the start of another.

The images presented here show four different periods of China’s history manifested as built environments: Tiananmen Square, a spatial expression of state power carved as a blank slate out of the former Imperial City, suggests that one of the greatest powers of the state is the authority to erase; a historical rural landscape in Shanxi Province survives more by neglect than by intent; a traditional neighborhood in Beijing, once part of the city’s unique identity, is being eradicated to make way for new developments; and newly built speculative housing in Shanghai anticipates a history yet to unfold.

Inherent in the design of cities is the belief that the power to shape the built environment is analogous to the power to shape history. This is particularly the case in China, where a centralized authority—whether in the form of an emperor, a chairman, or a Politburo—has made the tradition of rewriting and redefining history an integral part of its structure of power. The reshaping of cities in China today is essentially the rewriting of history on an urban scale.
Sze Tsung Leong's gorgeous, abundantly detailed, medium- to large-size photographs of Chinese cities undergoing cataclysmic change fuse Edward Burtynsky's synoptic aerial views, Elger Esser's blanched palette, and the patient attentiveness evident in underappreciated Japanese photographer Ryuji Miyamoto's mid-'80s "Architectural Apocalypse" photographs. The works included here, from "History Images," an ongoing series begun four years ago (and exhibited at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in 2004), were taken in Beijing and Pingyao, Xinjiekou and Xiamen, yet each tells roughly the same story, in which a rush to transform society—whether during the midcentury socialist revolution or more recent capitalist expansion—inevitably and irrevocably transforms the landscape. Low-slung, tile-roofed, imperial-era houses give way to drab, midrise, concrete apartment blocks, which are in turn supplanted by more-or-less shiny skyscrapers bearing corporate logos—sometimes all in the same picture. The nostalgic tint of the series title, which evinces a preservationist documentary impulse, is offset by Leong's eminently rational compositions, in which new structures encircle old, or radiate outward symmetrically like a Rorschach blot. Two pictures in a second room lift the veil shrouding this hyperdevelopment: One depicts a construction site, curiously devoid of the machinery necessary to erect a tall building, in which workers stand in holes dug for concrete pylons; another shows horses, certainly anachronistic workers in an urban environment, carting trash bags on rickety wooden carts. Their inclusion adds an important counterpoint to the exhibition's deceptively seductive force, reminding us that individual lives play out both in the crumbling shacks and behind the steel-and-glass façades.

—Brian Sholis
Sze Tsung Leong

History Images
Yossi Milo Gallery
525 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through May 13

As images of raw economic and political power in action, Sze Tsung Leong’s panoramic color photographs of Chinese cities in the throes of modernization are hard to beat. They are beautiful, frightening and sad. Taken in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and elsewhere, they mostly offer detailed views of the new vanquishing not only the old, but also any sense of human scale. Shiny skyscrapers and enormous apartment blocks tower over great expanses of crumbling, partly demolished traditional houses. In some pictures the old has been completely swept away, and the new buildings stand on barren swaths of land or amid manicured recreational facilities. Occasionally there are strange tributes to the past: an unfinished elevated highway in Chongqing becomes an elevated park, with the addition of a railing, whose fretwork probably descends from Chinese furniture designs, and a little pagoda. In other photographs the future has not yet arrived. Two show old structures, untouched, stretching as far as the eye can see. A third, of a village in Shanxi Province, is one of the few in which people are visible; they are using a horse and cart.  

ROBERTA SMITH
SZE TSUNG LEONG

There are almost no people in Leong's broad photographic vistas of Beijing, Nanjing, Chongqing, and other rapidly expanding Chinese cities, but their dwellings crowd the frame. From his elevated perspective, these ghost towns reveal layers of ancient, modern, brand-new, and still unfinished buildings, the oldest often no more than flattened ruins or half-demolished structures surrounded by towering, anonymous apartment blocks. In the relentless, heartless thrust of progress, history gets crushed, along with hundreds of modest brick homes from the imperial period. Leong records their passing with great care and pained resignation. Through May 13. (Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370.)