

Roar power

Photographer Peter Bialobrzkeski earns his stripes with surreal images of the tiger economies, writes **Yenni Kwok** in Hamburg



Hong Kong 2001, left, and Shanghai 2001. Photos: Peter Bialobrzkeski (www.bialobrzkeski.de)

Asia's so-called mega cities tend to share a certain look. They're studded with steel-and-glass skyscrapers, cramped apartment blocks, glaring neon lights and concrete flyovers and viaducts that swirl like roller coasters.

Yet Hamburg-based photographer Peter Bialobrzkeski throws a refreshing light on these mundane urban facades. In his *Neon Tigers* photo series, on show at the Goethe Institut until May 19, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Shenzhen look bizarre and surreal. The title of the show is a reference to the so-called tiger economies that emerged in the 1970s.

Through Bialobrzkeski's lens, the urban landscape is bathed in dreamy, soft neon lights. It's a space nearly void of nature. Human existence is either dwarfed by its own creations or reduced to blurred spectral apparitions.

Bialobrzkeski got the idea for a series on Asia's megacities when he was in Bangkok in 1995. The Thai capital was a stark contrast to some European cities, where buildings were restricted to the height of church towers. Moreover, as he was zipping along the city's elevated motorways, he was struck by the life that emerged below: food vendors and cloth peddlers occupy the spaces underneath the concrete structures.

”I was reminded of the works of [futuristic novelist] William Gibson, who created the world of hi-tech and lo-life,” says Bialobrzkeski. “I told myself that I had to return to this city, one day.”

The *Neon Tigers* project began in Bangkok in 2000. During the next couple of years, Bialobrzkeski travelled to different cities in the region, ending up in Singapore in 2002. With imposing skyscrapers, dense populations, bright lights and giant billboards, Asia's mega cities have often been likened to Ridley Scott's cult film *Blade Runner*. But unlike the dark dystopia portrayed in the movie, Bialobrzkeski's interpretations of these cities glow with the strange illumination of sweet pastel hues. “The cities seem to be unreal,” he says. “They're like computer games. I wanted to recreate these animated images in my photographs.”

He says he deliberately left out Tokyo, the mother of all megalopolises. “I wanted to focus on the economic centres that have been transformed in just one generation,” he says. “And, Japan, which had a much early start in modernisation, doesn't fit the bill.”

The 45-year-old photographer insists that he hasn't used any computer software to manipulate his photographs. His only equipment is a camera and tripod. He also relies on intuition, patience (“loads of it”) and luck. He never knows when the right moment will come along. Out of six attempts, he might get one good shot. “The pictures of Shenzhen and Shanghai were taken on very dusty days,” he says. “I overexposed the film and in the end I got some unreal-looking images.”

His work bears the influence of Otto Steinert, whose so-called subjective photography uses long exposures and out-of-focus images. But Bialobrzkeski pushes the manipulation of light further. The unusual colour palette and light effects are achieved by shooting in the twilight, between 4pm and 7pm – just when the sun is disappearing and the street lights take over. “I tried to balance out the artificial light and natural light,” he says.

Born to a Polish-German family in Wolfsburg, the sleepy hometown of giant carmaker Volkswagen, Bialobrzkeski was drawn to Asia after reading a travel book on India written by a colleague at *Tempo* magazine. *XXX Holy: Journeys into the Spiritual Heart of India* is the fruit of his long trip in the sub-continent, tracking the route of Hindu pilgrims.

His next project, *Neon Tigers*, gave him international recognition, winning first prize in the arts category at the World Press Photo Awards in 2003 and book awards in Germany. After being shown in Hamburg, Frankfurt, New York, Jakarta, New Delhi and other Indian cities, the exhibit finally reaches Hong Kong – the first *Neon Tiger* city to display the works.

Bialobrzewski, whose photos have graced the pages of *GEO* (the German answer to National Geographic), *The New York Times* and other international publications, insists he's doing photo-art, not journalism. "Photography can be used in magazines," he says. "But documentary photography will be a better term to describe what I'm doing. I'm very interested in the outside world, and I want to communicate it through emotional and abstract qualities of an image."

But the photography professor at an art academy in Bremen says that doesn't work in journalism any more, "where the caption becomes more important than the picture. Moreover, in an art context, I have complete control about presentation in a book and in an exhibition."

Last autumn, Bialobrzewski published his third photo-book. *Heimat* (German for homeland) focuses on the natural scenery of his home country: snow-covered mountains, green forests and tranquil rivers. It also marks a shift in his camera work, employing a panoramic, bird's-eye view that's been compared to the photography of Andreas Gursky and Walter Niedermayr.

His current project, tentatively titled *Lost in Transition*, documents changing places around the world, from cities in Asia, Germany and Eastern Europe, to Dubai and New York. "It will include 12 to 15 countries," he says. "It will be exciting because the moment the book is published, the places will have changed already."

He says most changes are likely to happen in the East. "We have green trees and many of our buildings are 100 years old," he says as he looks around the old, leafy Hamburg district of Altona, where he has been living for more than 10 years. "Development is often impossible."

Neon Tigers, Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm; Sat, 2pm-6pm, Goethe Gallery, Goethe Institut Hong Kong, 14/F Hong Kong Arts Centre, Wan Chai. Ends May 19. Free

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