



Stephen Wilkes at ClampArt

Stephen Wilkes here showed two striking groups of color photographs: selections from "Ellis Island" (1998-99) and from his more recent, ongoing "China" series, begun in 2005. As "Ellis Island" has been widely seen and discussed, I will focus on the China pictures, which offer visually ravishing views of a society in a state of dramatic flux.

Wilkes first visited China as a college student, in 1978, only two years after the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution. He saw civilians dressed in blue and soldiers in green, children waving red scarves, everyone riding bicycles and almost no cars. When he returned to China 27 years later, he saw a radically transformed society. In a chance encounter I had with him in the gallery, he reported that towns and cities he had previously

visited are now unrecognizable. "Places are vanishing, farmland is disappearing and history is being erased." These mesmerizing and somewhat terrifying developments lie at the heart of "China."

Wilkes uses 4-by-5 film or 4-by-5 digital camera backs to record his images, which are then printed with archival pigment. (He makes them in three sizes; those discussed here are the medium-size prints, at 30 by 40 or 40 by 30 inches.) He manipulates the images by draining the color from certain areas of his compositions so that they stand out significantly in relation to the rest. In *Lanswe Sock Factory: Girls in a Row*, the female workers, shown in profile, stand at their machines in two rows that precipitously recede toward the vanishing point of a lit doorway. The workers are arranged at equal distance from each other, performing the same repetitive tasks. They are dressed nearly alike in saturated orange shirts, white caps and dark pants, interchangeable except for small details, such as the fashionable sneakers through which they express their personalities on the job. This meticulously composed image provides a suitable metaphor for a society being strenuously rebuilt. *Lanswe Sock Factory: Lone Girl*, expresses alienation in a different way. Just a woman's head and shoulders can be spotted amid an all-over grid of machinery.

An illusion of boundless depth is once again striking in *Tower*, showing an interior view straight up into spiraling balconies rising one above the other to an opening of sky—a maelstrom optically splintered and confounded by the reflection of the balconies on gleaming glass. Perceived from this viewpoint, the architecture evokes a turbine. This configuration, in light browns, white and a touch of blue at the tower's pinnacle, suggests both unlimited possibilities and the annihilation of anything standing in the way of achieving the new.

—Michaël Amy

Stephen Wilkes: *Tower*, 2005, digital C-print, 40 by 30 inches; at ClampArt.

