

First Prix Pictet Awarded to Quebec Photographer Benoit Aquin

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FIRST PRIX PICTET AWARDED TO QUEBEC PHOTOGRAPHER BENOIT AQUIN

By Veronica Redgrave



China
32" x 48" pigment print 40" x 56"
watercolour paper, made in an edition of 10.
Copyright: Benoit Aquin / Courtesy of
Stephen Bulger Gallery

Renowned for pictures revealing worlds that are either disappearing or mortally wounded, Quebec photographer Benoit Aquin is a spiritual artist who turns his talent to "humanitarian and ecological issues." His images speak with a sense of melancholy; a sense of a ruined Arcadia. Aquin has snapped shots for weekly and daily publications, so, in the tradition of LIFE magazine photographers, his photos are mini-documentaries. They speak volumes about the world as we knew it, showing the devastation after the tsunami, the once-powerful-now-barely there ice floes, and the damage done by pesticides to farmers in Nicaragua.

But it was for his series on the dustbowl in China that Benoit Aquin was awarded the first Prix Pictet, (100,000 CHF), the only photographic prize to focus on sustainability. Launched in April 2008, the Prix Pictet is a partnership between a private Swiss bank and the Financial Times. Former UN Secretary General and Nobel Laureate Kofi Annan is the honorary president. Judges were Francis Hodgson, Head of Photographs at Sotheby's; Richard Misrach, the American environmental photographer; Abbas Kiarostami, the Iranian film director; Régis Durand, President of Paris Photo and former head of the Jeu de Paume; Loa Haagen Pictet, Pictet & Cie's art consultant; Peter Aspden, the Financial Times' Arts Writer, and Leo Johnson Co-Founder, Sustainable Finance.

The Prix Pictet is awarded to a photographer "for art that

conveys a message of urgent global significance." For 2008, the inaugural theme of the Prix Pictet (c. \$84,000) was water. Curiously, Aquin did not use water as his theme. His series of photos, which won the Prix Pictet, document a lack of water: the drought in China. Through overgrazing and drilling for water, arable land in China has been over used and has turned to dust. "The land is now barren sand dunes." The Chinese government has initiated an exodus of "environmental refugees" in an effort to reverse this process as the wind drives the dust into "giant sandstorms that reach into Japan and Korea."

Benoit's photos show daily life in the dust. A solitary man walks across dried cracked ground, his navy suit the only patch of colour against an ashen landscape. High-heeled women stride as in any urban scene. They wear

protective face masks to breathe in the dusty wind. A man carries 2 baskets on a pole balanced across his shoulders, his timeless stance a silhouette against the landscape's bleached bones. One photo captures grazing sheep with unerring clarity, echoing pastoral landscapes of long ago. However, instead of cuddly white shapes against lush green trees, the tones are taupe. Colours are so muted by the dust that the image recalls the sepia tones of a daguerreotype.

But it is Benoit Aquin's trees in the series that bring a sigh of sorrow. They are dying. There is little greenery left. One particular photo is beautiful in its composition and tonalities, but haunting with its message of a land lost in the dust bowl of China. □

In 2006, the Federation of Quebec Journalists awarded Benoit Aquin the Prix Antoine-Desilet for an image called Tsunami.

In 2001, at *Régards du Québec*, he won the Grand Prix for Reportage d'actualité.

In 1996, he won the Grand Prix, the Prix du Jury and the Prix Le Soleil.

Benoit Aquin's work is in the permanent collection of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Musée des beaux-arts du Québec, the Canada Council Art Bank and the National Archives of Canada.

BENOIT AQUIN IS CARRIED BY:

Montreal – Galerie Pangée galeriepangee.com

Toronto – Stephen Bulger Gallery bulgergallery.com