

Benoit Aquin, *Far East, Far West, Outremont* : Éditions du passage, 2009

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Benoit Aquin

Far East, Far West

Outremont : Éditions du passage, 2009.

From time to time, a body of work emerges on the photographic scene with gale-force momentum. Such is the case with Benoit Aquin's timely depiction of the desertification relentlessly spreading across northern China. According to journalist Patrick Alleyn, Aquin's co-traveller and collaborator of choice, this scourge constitutes "one of the most severe environmental disasters of our time." In 2006, intending to raise public awareness, the two gained the sponsorship of the Canadian International Development Agency and made the first of three journeys to the affected areas.

Initially published in the October 2007 issue of *The Walrus*, their collaborative effort earned a silver medal from the National Magazine Awards Foundation. The following year, Aquin achieved international recognition as the first recipient of the lucrative Geneva-based Prix Pictet, a highly competitive, nomination-only award dedicated to photography and sustainability. Further disseminated by means of exhibitions, feature articles (such as the one in *Ciel variable* 81), and, most recently, an innovative multimedia webdoc produced by France 5, the work fully deserved a first-rate monograph, a responsibility that *Far East, Far West* aimed to fulfil.

Strikingly designed with an elegant layout making compelling use of diversified scale and placement to energize the flow of images, *Far East, Far West* is composed of two bilingual essays framing Aquin's port-

folio. Sadly, despite its well-intentioned pursuit of aesthetic excellence, the publication suffers from low-contrast reproductions on non-coated paper stock, a classic case of misguided design priority favouring the tactile quality of smooth paper over image quality. Anyone who has seen Aquin's vigorous exhibition prints cannot help but lament the tonal compression of the publication, which snuffs much liveliness out of them.

To set the stage, the book opens with an aerial view depicting a desiccated valley with a dried-up riverbed and a blowing dust storm. This is clearly desert country, but no identification is provided, so one cannot be sure whether this is a naturally occurring desert or one of the newly formed sandlands for which human activities are to blame. Despite this ambiguity, one senses in the drab, airless atmosphere of this barren land the looming disaster that gives this reportage its raison d'être.

This introductory image segues smoothly into Olivier Asselin's well-titled essay "Sous le voile de la poussière" (Under a Veil of Dust), which opens, like this review, by sketching the project's history, but without dating it. Surprisingly, no dates appear within the publication, save for a mention of the Prix Pictet on the dust jacket – which will likely disappear in many libraries, where dust jackets are customarily removed. Asselin's contribution boils down to a perceptive reflection upon the cause and effect of this human-induced ecological threat, the attempts being made to counter the situation, and Aquin's photographic treatment of it. Rightly characterizing the resulting images as "glim-

mer[ing] with intelligence, sensitivity, and philosophical profundity," Asselin also contends, though somewhat less convincingly, that Aquin knows how to resist conventional aesthetic forms.

The second textual contribution is an updated version of Alleyn's informative travel journal first printed in *The Walrus*. On the one hand, the narrative was expanded to reflect a later sojourn through Xinjiang Province in northwest China. On the other hand, it was substantially edited, a decision not without ramifications for the project's effectiveness as an environmental exposé. Consider, for instance, the numbers given in the original text, many of which have lost their specificity. Thus, "400,000 square kilometres of cropland and verdant prairie [transformed] into new deserts" now reads "thousands of square kilometres." Likewise, the number of people affected by the policy of ecological migration has been reduced from "tens of millions" to "millions of people." Other statements useful for grasping the scope of the disaster were cut out – for example, the fact that "in 2006, there were seventeen dust storms, the worst of which dumped 330,000 tonnes of dust on Beijing in one night," or the estimate that "from a mere 2 million in 1977, the number of animals grazing the Xilingol steppe had reached 18 million by the year 2000." References to the international community's global efforts to assist China with saving its soil were also excised.

Since neither version of Alleyn's lively journalistic account includes citations or references to outside sources, one wonders whether the change of context from magazine to monograph was taken into consideration during the editing process. For one thing, given the profound implications of this ecological disaster, the subject surely deserves recommendations for further reading. Another feature that would strengthen the publication is a map tracing the journey across China. This would be

especially useful for visualizing Aquin's photographs geographically, since they are most often identified by place-names.

Furthermore, one of the puzzling aspects of the book is the sequencing of the images, which, unlike the France 5 webdoc, does not mirror the narrative structure of Alleyn's travel journal. While it is perfectly conceivable that an alternative arrangement might prove more rewarding than a straightforward adherence to the textual narrative, the published sequence, as evocative as it is, occasionally seems lacking in purpose and cohesion. The main culprit may be a small number of images whose relevance to the project's central theme seems tenuous. Among them are scenes of pedestrians milling about urban civic spaces, including the infamous Tiananmen Square, a portrait of two Beijing teenagers staring from behind a plastic curtain, and a stylistically related image of two Uyghur boys seated in a van. The inclusion of such marginal images results in passages in which there is no discernible visual, thematic, geographical, or conceptual relationship between successive spreads, thereby weakening the overall sequence.

Ultimately, what makes *Far East, Far West* a worthwhile, though less than ideal, publication is the urgency of the warning that it conveys about the global threat resulting from the desertification of northern China. As laudable as was the publisher's intention to create a beautiful book, the endeavour could have been strengthened by an equally sustained concern for the editorial rigour that the environmental cause warrants.

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Benoit Aquin, *Lanzhou, Gansu*, 2006, impression jet d'encre sur papier archive/Inket print on archival paper