



World between times, caught in contrast

■ PHOTOGRAPHY

CHINA DREAMING

Olivia Martin-McGuire
Customs House
January 17 until February 24
Reviewed by Robert McFarlane

THE China revealed in Olivia Martin-McGuire's photographs is only distantly related to the popular image of the economic and military giant. Like a classic photojournalist – which she asserts she is not – Martin-McGuire approaches China through the epic and personal, photographing new skyscrapers and young citizens with equal emphasis.

Martin-McGuire also employs the familiar myth of the sleeping dragon as a central metaphor for her pictures of the rapidly changing country, sometimes directing her subjects to simulate being asleep in public places and even meticulous, orderly Chinese classrooms.

She is now doing her masters degree at the College of Fine Arts, the University of NSW, on waking and dreaming states,

“exploring our [human] obsession with memory and fantasy. Everyone seems to spend a lot of time looking forwards and backwards.”

In China she discovered a society divided by time.

“No one was [living] in the present. There was a massive forge toward the future by half the country – with the other half holding on to their history. The future and the past were rubbing up against each other . . . And there was a whole middle generation that had been skipped.

“[But] China was not stuck in a rigid way of doing things. They're open to anything – new ideas – change. The Western way involves much more of a hierarchy. China doesn't have that at all.

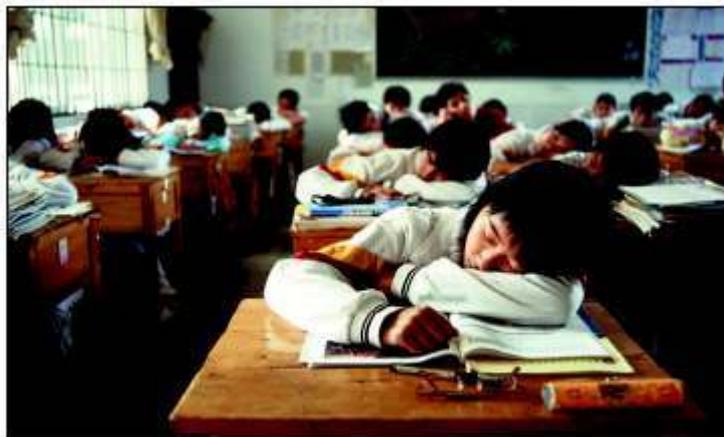
“I had the sense I was where history was being made. The sleeping dragon had opened its eyes and discovered it had become very powerful. Young people looked futuristic, wearing wild, garish fashion. And if I left the city – people were uninfluenced by contemporary change. It wasn't balanced.”

Martin-McGuire used a Hasselblad camera with the unfashionable square format for

her Chinese observations, capturing life in city and country with apparent ease. Her colour compositions are simple and economical, with little sense of an imposed vision.

Three different Chinas are suggested in one memorable photograph: an attentive, well-dressed child stands next to an old man who sits on a stool, looking amiably at the photographer. To the old man's left a younger man in a business suit turns away and purposefully walks toward a candle-lit ancestral shrine, just visible in the background.

In another important image two soldiers in long magenta overcoats with neat, matching caps guard a vulgar, futuristic Shanghai skyscraper that evokes Ming the Merciless far more than the Ming dynasty. Martin-McGuire's artless approach seems well suited to conveying this 21st-century example of China's appetite for immense, wildly populist architecture. Olivia Martin-McGuire's *China Dreaming* appears at Customs House with a companion exhibition, *China Diary*, featuring videos and photographs by the artist Liu Xiao Xian.



Nap ... Olivia Martin-McGuire's *somewhere else* 9 waking dream states.