

# EYEMAZING



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# Olivia Martin McGuire

## Waking Dream States

Are you somewhere else? This minute, our bodies may be here, occupied –yours holding a magazine, scanning its pages. Mine –sitting behind a computer screen, fingers on keyboard. But our minds? Those unpredictable monkeys could be anywhere: in the past, remembering a conversation from yesterday or a social *faux pax* from ten years ago. Or they are in the future, fantasizing about a house in the country or what to have for lunch today. It's hard to escape this very human bind –we tend to live elsewhere, in our memories and fantasies, and have a hard time living up to that simple mandate from the 60s: "Be Here Now."

Olivia Martin McGuire, one of Australia's best young photographers, takes this question of duality in mind and body and plays with what it might look like photographically. Our bodies sit in the present while our minds madly time travel –how do you show this on film?

What's more, she takes the question to China –a setting that adds another layer of complexity to this universal human condition. Starting in Lianzhou in the south, McGuire sets out with her translator (whose Chinese name, much to McGuire's delight, means "Light" in English), to find people willing to play along with her, willing to enact what they think "being somewhere else" might look like. The result: a series of whimsical and compelling

images of Chinese people who all appear to suffer from narcolepsy.

McGuire knows China well. She recently was selected to be a featured photographer at The Lianzhou International Photo Festival and received a grant from The Australia China Council to work as a curator and artist in Shanghai. China proved to be a particularly intriguing place to pursue her running interest in the human obsession with memory and fantasy, as she explains, "The idea of being present was particularly interesting in China, down south, because it is booming at such an unbelievable pace –it is literally transforming before your eyes. So the present is a very transient thing in China. What is more obvious to the eye is the past rubbing up against the future. Buildings go up over night and the generation gap is unbelievable. It is like generations have been skipped or are missing between the extreme traditional past of the elderly to the extreme globalised capitalist future of the younger people."

For a study of human fantasy, the Chinese backdrop makes a particularly poignant contrast. China is a country of realism. Light, the translator, found McGuire's topic amusing because the Chinese worker culture discourages daydreaming or romanticisation. "I don't think people in China spend time daydreaming –they spend time working," McGuire surmises.













Regardless, McGuire and Light, armed with camera, perambulate the streets of Lianzhou asking the people they meet to dream. They approach diners in cafes, children in school, guys playing basketball. Their subjects, given the task to imagine themselves somewhere else, were often confused, but still amused and eager to oblige. "I am sure they did think I was completely nuts," McGuire writes in an e-mail, "I was literally one of the first Western women in Lianzhou at that time so the blonde hair and bizarre requests were of extreme entertainment." The results of her intrepid quest are images that invite

speculation. In one, four young girls in red track suits lean against each other with the ease of schoolmate camaraderie. Their faces are serene, eyes shut. Are they sleeping? We can easily access their physical world: white sneakers, pigtails, and what looks to be a surrounding of concrete and Chinese script. But on the inside, where might they be? While their bodies stay firmly rooted in their material conditions, where are their minds? What do young girls think about? A holiday from school? Their friends? Or are they just wondering about this foreign photographer and her oddball request?

This is the beauty of McGuire's project—we can never really know what's going on in another person's "somewhere else." We can observe from the outside, make a lot of assumptions and guesses, but we can never really know. McGuire doesn't ask her subjects where they go in their daydreams. That is the sole terrain of the individual—to escape and imagine as wildly as one's mind is inclined. Those internal journeys remain private, no matter how much other people may desire the power to know what lies inside. We can watch others, think we understand, but they may be dwelling in far away places we can never know.





For the universal human trait of being elsewhere, of letting the mind indulge in memory or fantasize about the future, of daydreaming and drifting in our imaginations, is not necessarily good or bad –it's just an inheritance of human consciousness. It can be very positive to have rich imaginings, to have the freedom to go anywhere in your mind. Conversely, it can be very negative to let your mind live too much in the past or future, a stranger to the present.

She comments, "I am not really making a negative or positive comment about not being in the present just

an observation of what shape it takes, what it looks like from the outside when someone is somewhere else –just a reflection of the concept. When I was in Lianzhou, I was particularly confused and bemused and lovelorn and seemed overwhelmed by my own romantic perspective, which seemed heavily tied up with looking back and forward. So it was a way of seeing what shape this takes."

Close your eyes. Where are you now?

TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

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