

THOMAS SAUVIN

GALERIE PARIS-BEIJING

Beijing Silvermine

| Thomas Sauvin from the Archive of Moderne Conflict

Beijing Silvermine started in May 2009 out of my meeting with a man called Xiaoma, who works in a recycling zone north of town, where part of the city's garbage ends up. Over there, some specialize in plastics, some in beer bottle caps, but he solely concentrates on trash containing silver nitrate, which essentially means hospital x-rays, cd-roms, but also negative film. Before drowning it all in a big pool of acid in order to collect this precious silver, he agreed to sell me negative film by the kilo, and that's how the Beijing Silvermine project was born.

Ever since, I have been repeating this collecting process every month, and the archive now counts a little more than half a million negatives. These rice bags filled with thousands of rolls of slobbery, stinky, dusty, scratched, crumpled and humid negative film, have allowed me to access a highly codified visual universe, where the subject is always standing up straight at the center of the image, looking into the objective. In these photos, there is a paradox between this total absence of spontaneity on one hand, and on the other hand the inherent complicity between the photographer and the photographed; in China taking pictures is always a ritual, it always involves posing and necessarily consent. The results are these unpretentious, often quite funny, and undoubtedly endearing images.

Beijing Silvermine is a unique photographic portrait of the capital and the life of its inhabitants following the Cultural Revolution. It covers a period of 20 years, from 1985, namely when silver film started being used massively in China, to 2005, when digital photography started taking over. These 20 years are those of China's economic opening, when people started prospering, travelling, consuming, having fun.

While reviewing this archive several times, I was constantly looking for these few clichés which stand out in this artform that is souvenir photography. I'm thinking of a man sitting on a crescent moon made of stone looking out towards the city, or a woman in an apple green dress standing in the middle of a deadly fight between a shark and an octopus, or another hidden in a field of 15-foot-tall daisies. Also, a number of unexpected series naturally started standing out. For instance, at the end of the eighties, as Beijing households started modernizing, it was quite usual to be photographed next to your latest purchases... I therefore have a tremendous amount of portraits of people posing next to their refrigerator... With these photos we enter people's homes only to discover posters of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Sylvester Stallone... at a time when China is only starting to open up to the West. Through all these souvenir snapshots taken by the anonymous and everyday Chinese, we're in reality witnessing the birth of post-Socialist China.

Naturally, it is fundamental that this archive is able to live through the outlook of others. One year ago, I invited the young Chinese artist Leilei to come check out my garbage. He offered to generate an animated film from these images. His idea was to create a stroboscopic film at a rate of eight images per second, showcasing a certain number of series with a common denominator. This could for instance be a similar pose, or a horizontal sealine, a sunset, Ronald McDonald, or even Chairman Mao's portrait on Tiananmen Square. From there, Leilei organised these pictures – a colossal task – to produce a sort of imaginary and slightly psychedelic stroll. His approach was radically different to mine, wanting bulk and repetition, rather than distinctiveness.

The latest collaboration is with the London based contemporary artist Melinda Gibson. Delving into such an enormous archive will be the first step. Working through the layers of time and history, both culturally and physically play a fundamentally important starting point in this collaboration. Her initial examination will be searching for imagery that is abstracted by the formal qualities of the medium. Scratched, partially destroyed and chemical ruined negatives that offer up a new way to see this archive and of a medium that has become defunct and talk of the historical and technological changes that continue to help and hinder our tool. Using this as a starting point, she will examine these formalist qualities, pulling apart the very essence of these images, using mixed media, pencil, paint, and etchings to reassemble images that were saved and can now be brought to light in a new way.



Thomas Sauvin & Melinda Gibson, *Lunar Caustic*, 2014
Exhibition view at Galerie Paris-Beijing, Brussels, Belgium



Thomas Sauvin, *Archive State*, 2014
Exhibition views at Chicaco Museum of Contemporary Photographye, Chigaco, USA



Thomas Sauvin, *Beijing Silvermine*, 2013
Lianzhou Photo Festival, Lianzhou, China

Since 2009, the French collector and artist Thomas Sauvin has embarked on an unusual adventure: salvaging discarded negatives from a recycling plant on the edge of Beijing that were destined to destruction. Undertaking one of the largest and most important archival projects in China, he buys by the kilo, taking away rice bags filled with thousands or rolls of slobbery, dusty and scratched negative film. Once closely examined, images are consistently selected, digitized, and classified. Today it encompasses over half a million of anonymous photographs spanning the period from 1895 to 2005, reconstructing then a large part of the history of popular analogue photography in China. This coherent and unceasingly evolving archive allows us to apprehend negatives in different ways. It constitutes a visual platform for cross-cultural interactions, while impacting on our collective memory of the recent past.

THOMAS SAUVIN

EXHIBITIONS

2016

Hand-Colored, Singapore International Photography Festival, Singapore
Hand-Colored, Festival Images, Vevey, Switzerland
Beijing Silvermine, Promenades photographiques, Vendôme, France
Retrieved , SF Camera works, San Francisco, USAe

2015

Clap your hands, Hubei Museum of Art, Wuhan, China
Until Death Do Us Part + Beauty and the Beast, CAFA, Beijing, China

2014

Silvermine + Lunar Caustic + Recycled, Gallery Paris-Beijing, Brussels, Belgium
Silvermine: by the water, Festival Images, Vevey, Switzerland
Archive State, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, USA
Beijing Silvermine, 4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia

2013

Beijing Silvermine, Salt Yard, Hong Kong
Beijing Silvermine, FORMAT Photo festival, Derby, United Kingdom

2012

Beijing Silvermine, Singapore International Photo Festival, Singapore
Photographic Oddities from the AMC, Caochangdi Photo Festival, Beijing, China

2011

Beijing Silvermine, Dali Photo Festival, Dali, China

AWARDS AND SHORTLISTS

- Until Death Do Us Part / 双喜
- 2016
Nominated for the Best Photobook at the Fotobook Festival, Kassel, Germany,
- 2015
Selected as one of the Photo-Eye Best Books, 2015
Selected as one of the New York Times Best Photobooks, 2015
- Silvermine Albums
- 2014
Nominated for the Deutsche Börse Foundation Photography Prize
- 2013
Nominated for the Best Photobook at the Fotobook Festival, Kassel, Germany
Shortlisted for the Paris Photo Aperture Foundation First Photobook Award, France
- Quanshen / 全身
- 2013
Selected as one of the Photo-Eye Best Books, 2013

PHOTO BOOTH

THOMAS SAUVIN'S BEIJING SILVERMINE

By Amy Connors, OCTOBER 20, 2014



VIEW FULL SCREEN

Untitled, from the Beasts series

Last week, we handed over *The New Yorker* photo department's [Instagram feed](#) to the French photographer Thomas Sauvin and his archival series [Beijing Silvermine](#). The project began, in 2009, when Sauvin, who has lived in China for more than a decade, discovered an accumulation of 35-mm. negatives in a recycling plant on the edge of Beijing. Buying the negatives in bulk by the kilogram, he has become a curator of what he calls vernacular Chinese photography. He estimates that he has sifted through more than half a million images, taken by ordinary citizens, between 1985 and the early aughts, that depict everyday life, leisure, and travel, both in China and abroad.

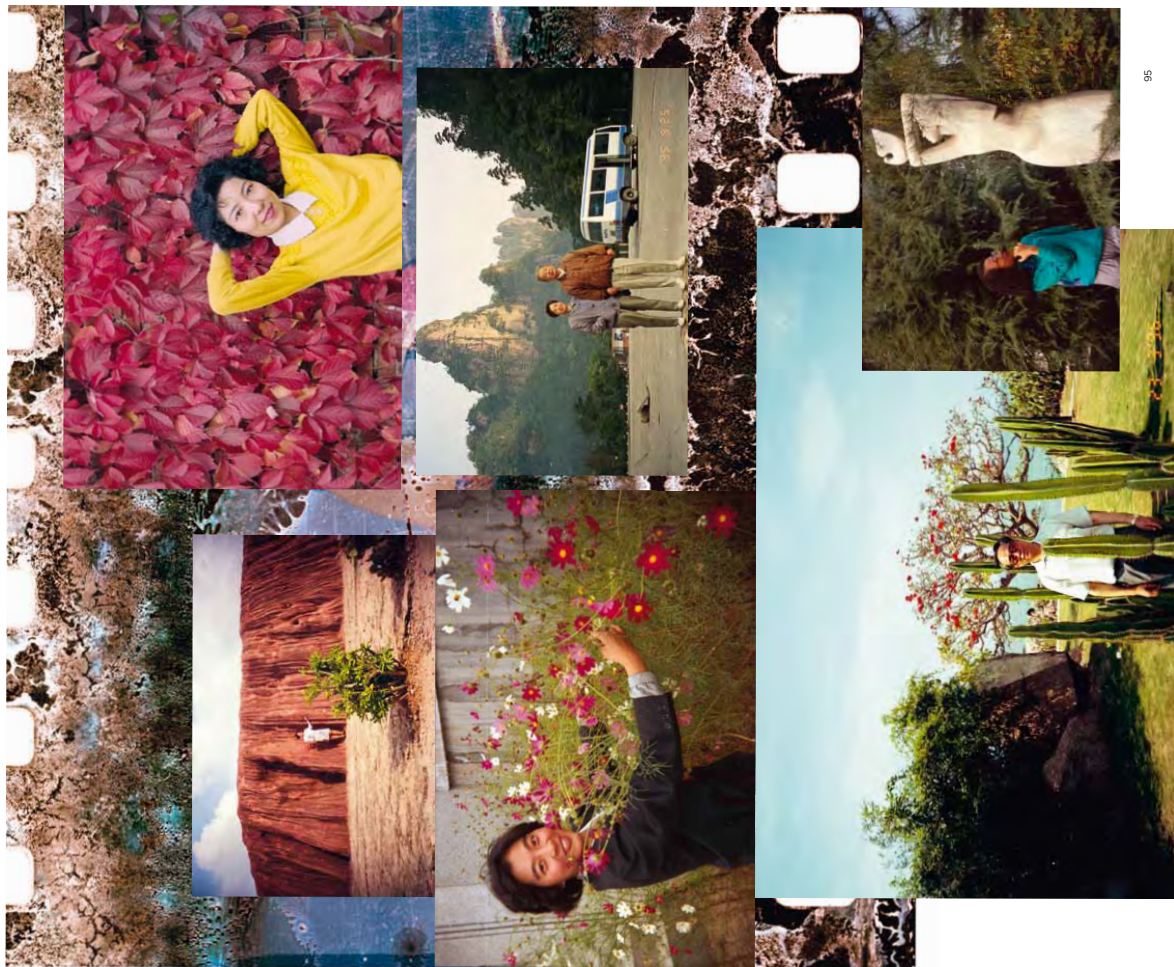
Sauvin created an Instagram account for his project just six weeks ago. "I find it quite interesting to post solely analog photos from the last century onto a platform that is so much about the present and the digital," he told me in an e-mail. To select photographs to feature on [@newyorkerphoto](#), he reviewed about two hundred thousand images, grouping them in series with themes like *Man and Nature*, *Afternoon Around the World*, and *Suns and Moons*.

Le Portfolio

Quand la Chine s'éveillait.

Une femme qui sourit fièrement devant son frigo, une famille qui prend la pose sur la plage... A travers le demi-million de négatifs récupérés par un jeune Français, Thomas Sauvin, c'est la Chine des années fastes (1985-2005) qui se révèle. Celle de l'ouverture au capitalisme, de l'arrivée des téléviseurs, des loisirs, et des modes venues d'Occident.

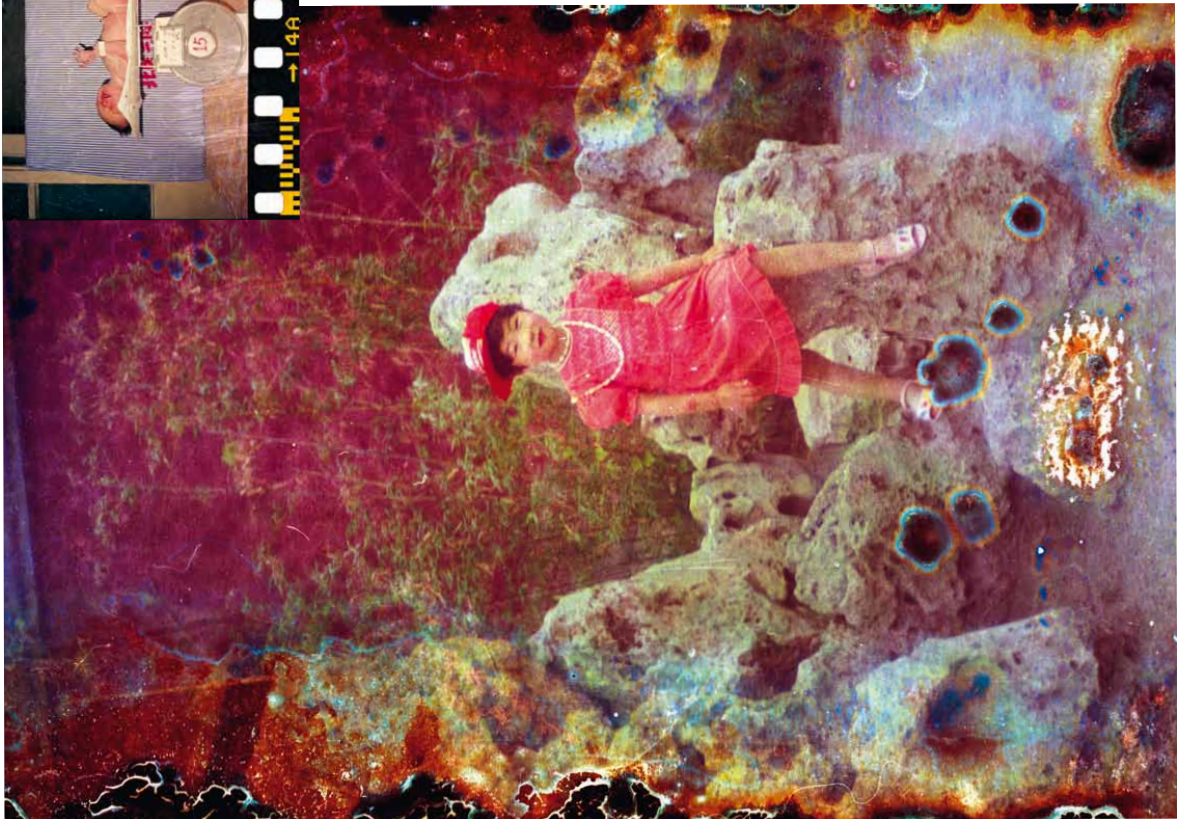
**Par François Bougon/Photos Silvermine/
Thomas Sauvin**



Le portfolio.



Depuis 2009, le Français Thomas Sauvvin a pu recevoir de dizaines de milliers de négatifs, hors du commun, nourrit de plus en plus de projets d'artistes.



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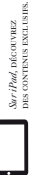
UNE GÉNÉRATION à peine, les Chinois sont passés, de Mao à McDo, de la fermeture de la Révolution culturelle à la modernité occidentale. Après la mort du Grand Timonier et la chute de la Bande des quatre, en 1976, le socialisme chinois ouvre au capitalisme sous l'égide de Deng Xiaoping. « *Pau importe qu'il attrape les souris, affaîne ou blanc, pourvu qu'il attrape les souris* », affirme le peintre timonier, rompanant avec l'idéologie marxiste selon laquelle c'est « *le rouge qui prime sur l'expert* ». Les jeunes se mettent à porter des jeans et à s'intéresser à ce qui vient de l'Occident, on écrit des textes obscurs, bien éloignés de la littérature révolutionnaire. Les appareils électroménagers se popularisent. L'Ontent n'est plus rouge, il se veut de toutes les couleurs. Il est enfin possible d'écouter les reingates romantiques de la chanteuse taïwanaise Teresa Teng sans être taxé de contre-révolutionnaire. Cette effervescence – que le cinéaste Jia Zhangke a si bien capté dans son film *Platform* – est perceptible dans le fonds d'archives de photos amateurs constitué à Pékin par Thomas Sauvvin. Depuis 2009, le jeune Français a acheté un demi-million de négatifs de photos prises pendant les années fastes chinoises, entre 1985 et 2005, avant que le numérique et les smartphones n'imposent leur loi. Vous à la décharge, il les a survécus de l'oubli.

Arrivé en Chine en 2003 après des études de chinois et de management, Thomas Sauvvin, 29 ans, se met à travailler pour le Festival international de photographes de Lianzhou, dans le sud du pays. C'est là qu'il rencontre le Britannique Timothy Prus, fondateur du fonds d'archives de photos de l'AMC (Archive of Modern Conflict), un projet d'enquête qui a débuté par la collecte de photos d'amateurs prises à partir de la seconde guerre mondiale. Il devient son correspondant, démarchant des photographes chinois. Ces derniers lui conseillent de se décarier des festivals

foyers pékinois, devant lesquels, les femmes prennent la pose; l'ouverture à l'Occident sous la forme des posters de stars américaines, comme Marilyn Monroe, James Dean et Sylvester Stallone; la non-eauté du McDonald's. Plus récemment, Thomas Sauvvin a commencé à rassembler les images devant, les tableaux dans les musées, au Louvre ou ailleurs. « *Il y a un point commun : la petite palette blanche brille. C'est le flash. Cela crée un fil directeur, c'est une série amusante.* » Dans cette masse, quasiment aucune photo ne mentionne le séisme politique de 1989, avec la répression du mouvement de Tiananmen. Certes, une femme se fait prendre en robe sur la place, avec au loin des étudiants manifestant. Mais, sur la planche-contact, on la voit dans d'autres lieux, de Pékin. Les manifestations n'étaient que la toile de fond d'une vie ordinaire, loin des préoccupations politiques.

Le fonds commence à nourrir les projets d'artistes. Le spécialiste du film d'animation chinois Lei Lei a réalisé une courte vidéo qui fait ressortir des constantes, comme des paysages, la ligne d'horizon au bord de la mer, les statues de Ronald, le clown de McDo, la place Tiananmen... Un webdocumentaire, *Pékin sans transition* (1), commenté par l'urbaniste Jérôme Descamps, a été monté à partir de sept photos issues du fonds Silvermine. La prochaine collaboration se fera avec l'artiste-photographe anglaise Melinda Gibson. « *J'ai ma lecture du fond d'archives, mais je suis conscient que ce qui le rendra intéressant, c'est ce qui en fera les autres* », juge Thomas Sauvvin. ☐

(1) Vidéo de Lei Lei sur www.960.com. Francis Collange (Doc en Stock), voir sur lemonde.fr et www.960.com. Francis Collange (Doc en Stock), voir sur lemonde.fr et www.960.com. Francis Collange (Doc en Stock), voir sur lemonde.fr et www.960.com. Francis Collange (Doc en Stock), voir sur lemonde.fr et www.960.com.



Sur www.960.com.

PUBLICATIONS

2015

Until Death Do Us Part, published by Jiazazhi

2013

METV, in collaboration with Erik Kessels

Quanshen, published by The Archive of Modern Conflict`

Beijing Silvermine, published by The Archive of Modern Conflict

2010

Happy Tonight, published by The Archive of Modern Conflict