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Patrick Wilson

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New urban developments in the growing city of Chongqing, China have captured the imagination of Artist Patrick D. Wilson, a Western Michigan University assistant professor of sculpture and integrated media, whose art work is often influenced by architectural imagery.

Wilson combines his architectural interests with various sculpting materials and photography to portray current events in his work. Through a Fulbright fellowship grant he received in 2012, he traveled to China to seek inspiration from the construction of buildings in a densely populated city. Wilson was particularly interested in China due to the rapid rate of urban expansion the country is experiencing. He also wanted to work in a city in which a dense population lives in high-rise buildings. Wilson first became interested in China in 2008 when he went to Beijing to do work related to the Olympics.

“I was working in the interactive media industry and my company sent me to do some artwork for the Olympics,” Wilson said. “I was intrigued by the rapid construction of new buildings and centralized art centers. There was one place called ‘798′ that is an art center in the middle of an old Bauhaus-style factory that is really amazing.”

These types of centralized art centers were very appealing to Wilson. He said many of the buildings in Chongqing are from an era of architectural planning influenced by a very particular mix of capitalist and socialist influence, which makes it so different from most major cities in the world.

Wilson arrived in China with 15 years of sculpting and 10 years of photography. He remembers connecting quickly with sculpting materials during his undergraduate days at Gustavus Adolphus College, especially with metalworking. Sculpting offered a good enhancement of Wilson’s interest in architecture that stemmed back to his youth: “Personality tests said I was supposed to be an architect, but I like the personal freedom of sculpting.”

Before Wilson could embark on the Fulbright project, he spent four months in Beijing taking language-intensive courses, where he claims he studied Chinese 24/7. With improved language skills, he was ready to travel to Chongqing, located in the Sichuan Province of southwestern China, which would serve as a “home base.” The city has a population close to 32 million, including the farms that surround the municipality.
“I applied for a Fulbright to be in Chongqing because it is so large, growing quickly, and it is sheltered from the outside world,” Wilson said. “Because the city has experienced less direct exposure to the west, as compared with other cities of its size in China, it showed me how ‘real China’ operates. Being there also gave me an opportunity to see an area that hadn’t experienced the level of foreign influence that cities like Shanghai and Beijing have experienced.”

When he arrived in Chongqing, he immediately realized that everything from the construction of buildings to the way people interacted was very different from what is common in the U.S. People need permission in order to do almost anything. For example, Wilson explains, the art schools he visited are run by one secretary and one chair affiliated with the central government. Students need to be connected with the secretary and chair to get things done at the school.

Wilson lived in two places while in Chongqing, the first of which was the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. The campus is 30 km from the city center and is surrounded by farmland and undeveloped mountainous areas. Wilson found the campus a beautiful, rather idyllic mix of nature, antique stonework, working farmers raising livestock, wooden walkways, and streams. Adjacent to campus was a huge commercial development offering low quality goods and cheap restaurants called, Sunny Village. “It was a stark contrast to home, to say the least,” Wilson said.

Three days a week, Wilson lived at a furniture factory in the Ba’Nan District of Chongqing. There, he made connections with the owner of the factory, Chen Li, and became friends with various professors from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Li granted Wilson access to whatever wood he could find in the factory for his sculptures and other artwork. Wilson was also able to travel around the area with Li, who became a close friend; they are still in regular contact.

“I must reiterate the importance of relationships in China—you can’t take a step there without having good friends and by reaching out to people,” said Wilson, who also connected with many of Sichuan’s students and teachers who wished to work with western artists. “It was a very valuable educational experience. Chongqing was an amazing place, but the environment was challenging because the air is very polluted, it’s rugged with the construction going on all over, and it is so densely populated.” His research work on Chongqing was later displayed as part of a solo exhibition in the Sculpture Department at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute.

Before leaving China, Wilson visited Kashgar, a city located in the far west region of the country. “It was an extraor-
is a huge urban development project,” Wilson said. “The scale is massive and there were dozens of apartment buildings that were empty. It was a really weird scene.” Xining was experiencing what Wilson termed, “over development,” because China has made a huge effort in recent years to encourage rural citizens to move into the city.

Wilson’s time in Chongqing and Kashgar inspired him to continue his artistic research with China as his muse. He applied for and received an artist residency in Shanghai for summer 2015, which allowed him to work in a private studio while living in the city for three months. He was interested in photographing distinctive Chinese architecture and developing new sculptures to expand on his research topics.

“Shanghai looks more like New York since it has more money and was modernized earlier than Chongqing,” Wilson said. “Shanghai has more western style bars and clubs that are, like the local Bell’s Brewery in Kalama-zoo, but the culture of friends and families in Chongqing is more focused on socializing over dinner, specifically hot pot.”

In Shanghai, Wilson explored nomadic structures to learn about Tibetan nomads and their hand-woven yak wool tents, which also served as artistic inspiration. “Most of the Tibetan herders in the Qinghai Province I talked to are semi-nomadic and live in two places—they live in tents in the summer months and in stone houses in colder months,” he said.

The art scene is also rapidly expanding in China. Many cities are building major museums; some of which Wilson said are the most beautiful art museums he’s ever seen. “Their contemporary art is expanding and it’s incredible, world-class art,” Wilson said. “We should expect a pretty large and continued influx of art from China.”

Wilson plans to return to China in summer 2016 to visit Yushu City, in Qinghai Province to conduct research during the city’s annual horse festival.