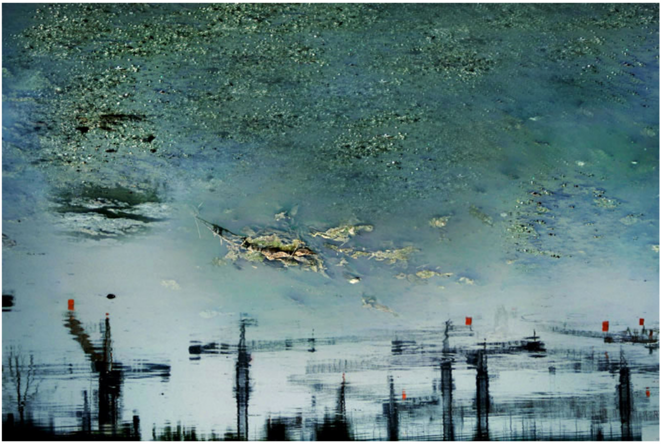
Urban Amber : Dedicated to the future of the times

In Urban Amber, Han Bing continues to ask us to question the nature of the prosperity being sought in China today, to investigate how a singular mandate to create a middle income, contentedly prosperous society can blind us to illnesses caused by a wonton, uncontrolled desire to consume the abundance of the modern cornucopia of plastics and industrial products. In the effluent engorged canals of Beijing, Han Bing captures in a single-exposure the promise of modern life, and its burden: the high-rises of dense, convenient living reflected in the waters polluted by convenience. The art of these photographs is in their beauty—they draw in the eye that cannot until too late realize that the content of the image is not clouds or fallen leaves, but garbage. It is in the moment when aesthetic desire repulses and seeks to draw the eyes away that Han Bing has succeeded in capturing the turmoil of progress in contemporary China. The awesome expansion of the cityscape out toward the horizon, the every-increasing density of human life and prevalence of human consumptive luxury comes at the cost of our own waste and pollution becoming the visible record of our progress.

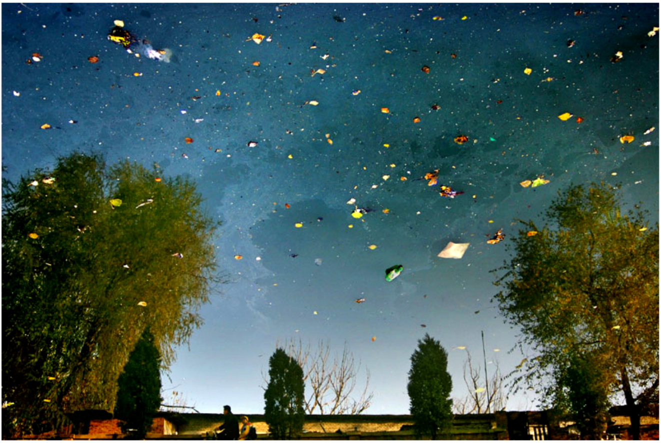
--- Shannon May   Seeing What is To Be Forgotten



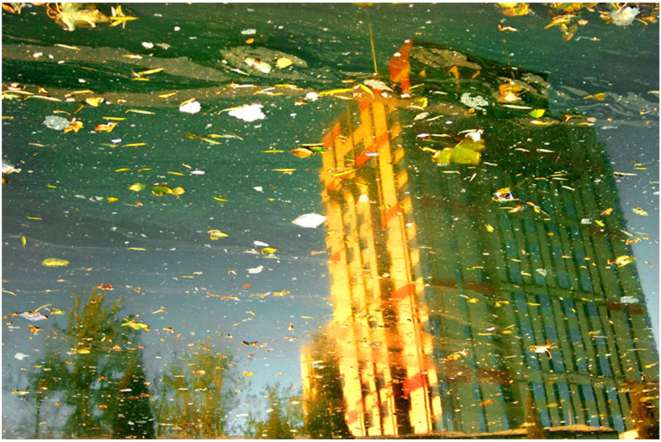
Red Flags Flying on Skylines Cranes 2005, C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

Han's visual interventions also raise questions about the paradoxes of desire. Desire for Han Bing is an irreducibly bifurcated modality, that is, it has powerful manifestations and effects that can be both beautiful and poisonous. In his conceptual photography series of single-exposure images, Urban Amber, this paradox takes on a different form.

The spectre of glamorous high-rises, those icons of middle-class China's dreams of home and a better life, are juxtaposed to the rundown, temporary dwellings of the urban poor living in their shadows. These fantasy high-rises appear resplendent and dream-like until you realize that their inverted images are reflected in Beijing's ubiquitous, industrial-waste and garbage-infested "stinky rivers." Like amber, these rivers capture the sediment of the times, showing us through a mirror darkly, the underbelly of China's fantasy of modernity.

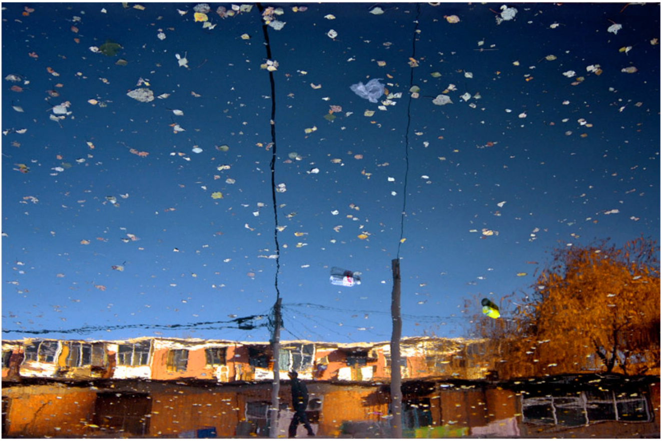


The Stars Light Our Way : Urban Amber, 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



Polluted Veil of Lace: Urban Amber, 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

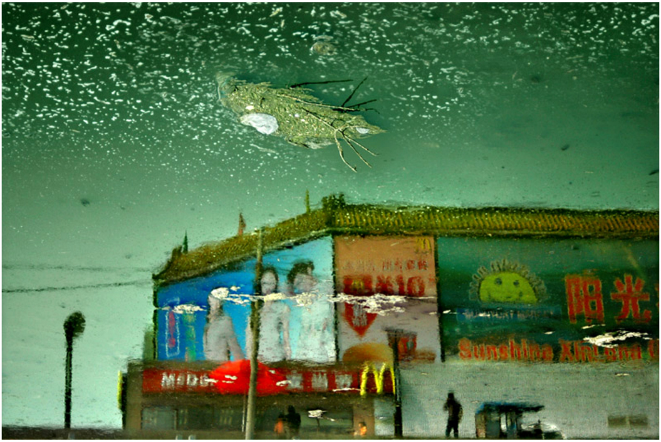
Han Bing fuses the aesthetic with the semantic, using the ubiquitous "stinky" rivers that criss-cross China's urban centers, as a mirror of modernizing China. In these rivers are choked with garbage and foul with industrial waste, he captures the reflections of glamorous, upscale high-rises, in juxtaposition to the crude falling-down shanty-town "ping fang" dwellings of the local poor, that still exist in the shadows of these new "dream homes." Just as amber captures, in perpetuity, the objects of a given era, these "stinky rivers" are urban amber for this era of reckless construction, desperate hopes for a better life, and often futile fantasies of escape from unfortunate lives assigned by birth and social status. The photographs of these inverted dream scapes are at once ethereal and heavy with the sediment of time, and they encapsulate a new dimension of public space—a space of contrast and juxtaposition, in which it is only through the distorting ripples of polluted water that we can see clearly who we really are.



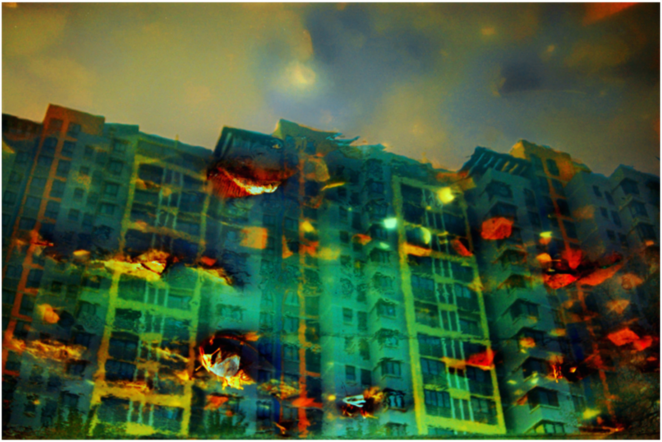
East Wind I ,2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

Han Bing uses these rivers of refuse, which abundantly accompany China's drive for modernization, as the filters that show us the true colors of the waste-products our dreams. What is the proper balance between the aesthetic and the semantic? How much of art should be about life, or even more so, for life, and how much should be for sensual and aesthetic stimulation? The boundaries are blurred as ever, and the answer to these questions as contentious. And so, as long as the dialogue continues, this contentiousness is certainly something to celebrate.

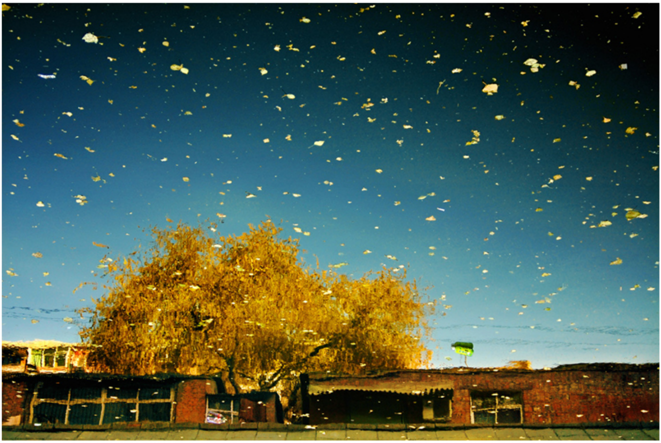
---Maya Kóvskaya



Plaza of Dionysus Bridge: Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

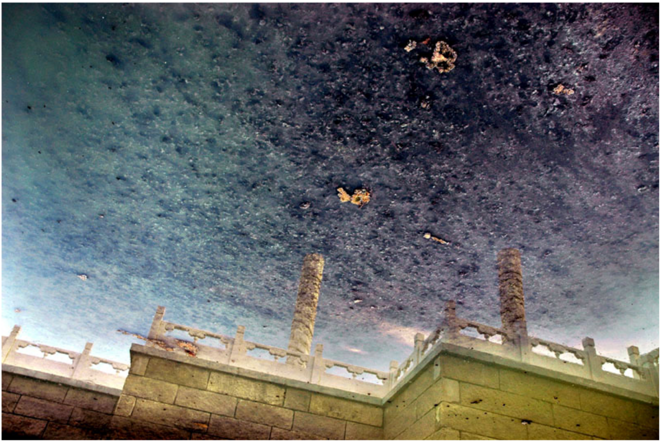


Twilight High-Rise 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

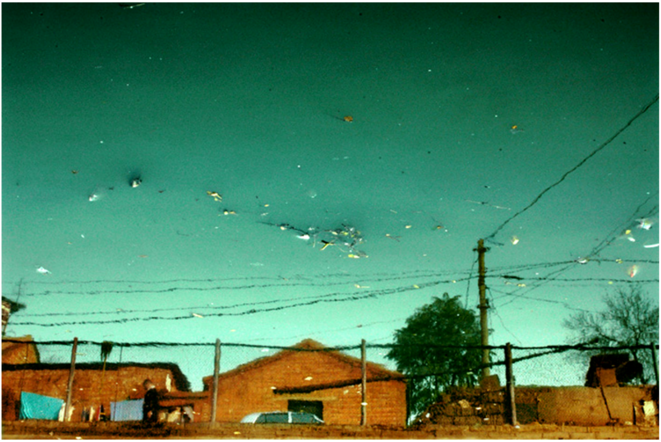


Gold Autumn:Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

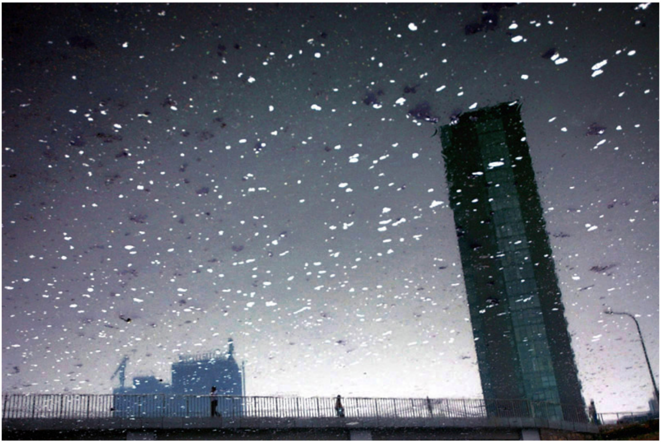
Raised in a small village in rural China, Han Bing is a Beijing-based multidisciplinary artist whose language encompasses photography, performance, installation and painting. Han Bing's main research is centred on the critical theme of modernisation in China today, and delves into issues caused by the frantic and dramatic urban transformation of the country. His work investigates the bifurcated reality of Chinese economic development, which if on the one hand presents progress and wealth for some individuals, on the other hand generates what art critic Zhuang Jia defines as "new capitalistic problems [⋯] such as soaring inequalities, increasing materialism and consumerism, a collective nihilism, and a lack of human care."



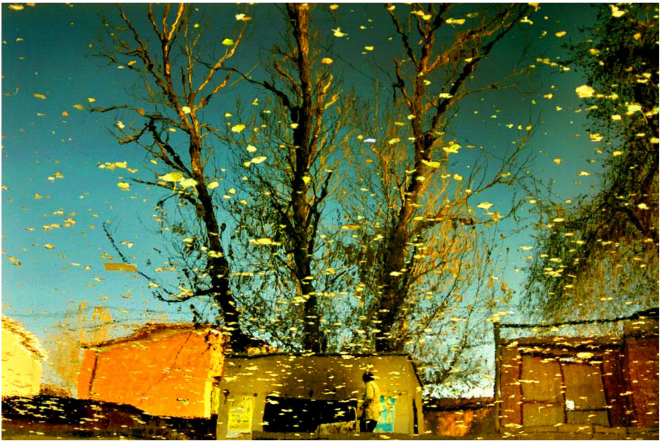
Coiled Dragon Pillars:Urban Amber 2007 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



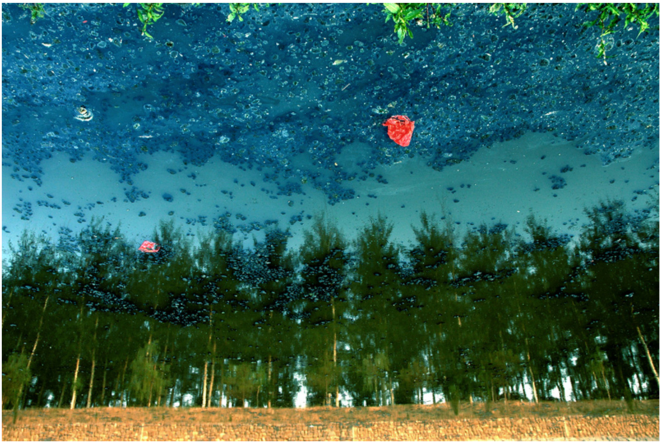
Shiliju Shantytown: Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



Bing River Bridge 1:Urban Amber 2007 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

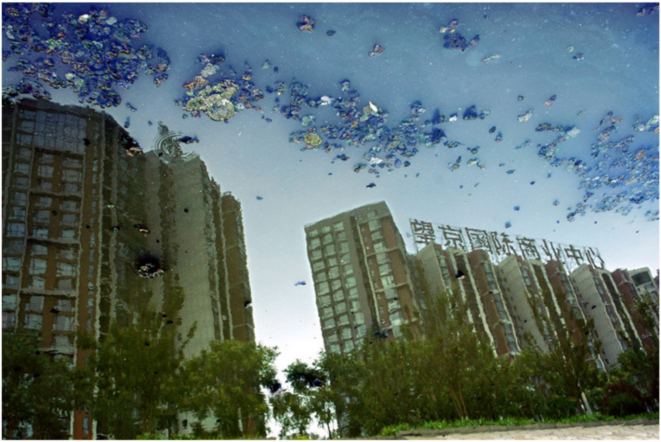


Dionysus Bridge Garbage Station 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

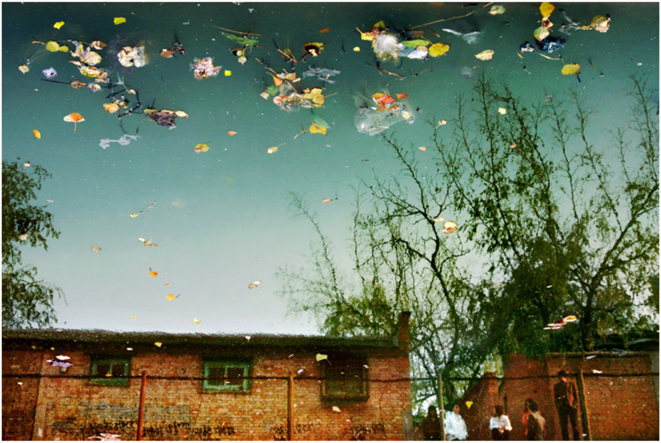


Grove I:Urban Amber 2011 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

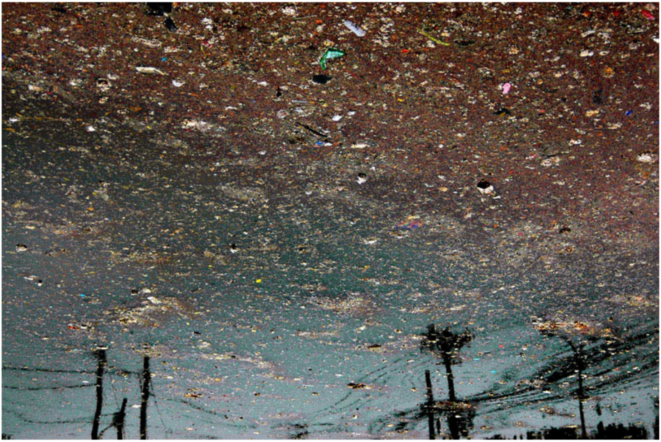
This duality of Chinese economic development plays a crucial role in Han Bing's conceptual photographic series 'Urban Amber'. The artist creates exquisite landscapes where the image of modern China is ambiguously reflected within resplendent and polluted fragments of urban transformation. Mirroring China's pursuit of modernity and its desperate desire to achieve a better life, the visions of these dazzling skyscrapers remain totally appealing until one becomes aware that they are embraced by rivers in which industrial waste and rubbish are gently floating. As art critic Maya Kovskaya notes “like amber, these rivers capture the sediment of times, showing us through a mirror darkly, the underbelly of China’s fantasy of modernity.”



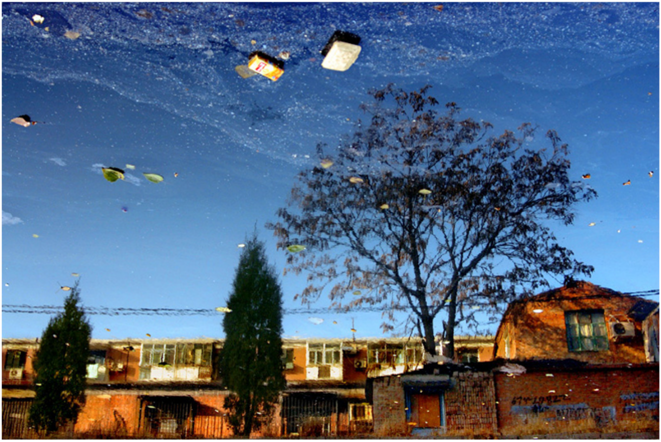
The commercial center on sewage river bank 2011 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



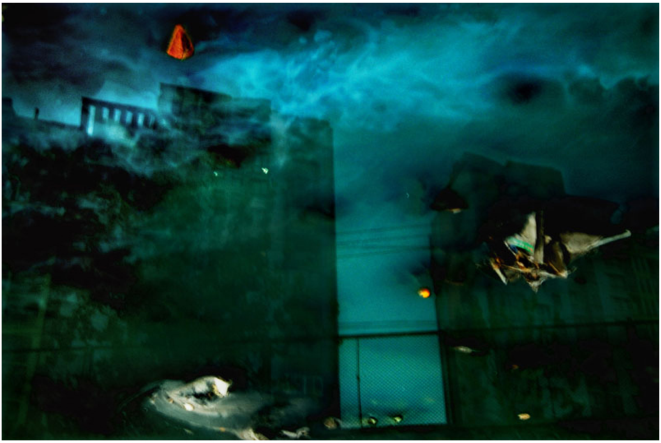
Fallen Leaves, polluted Water, Street Walkers and Johns 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



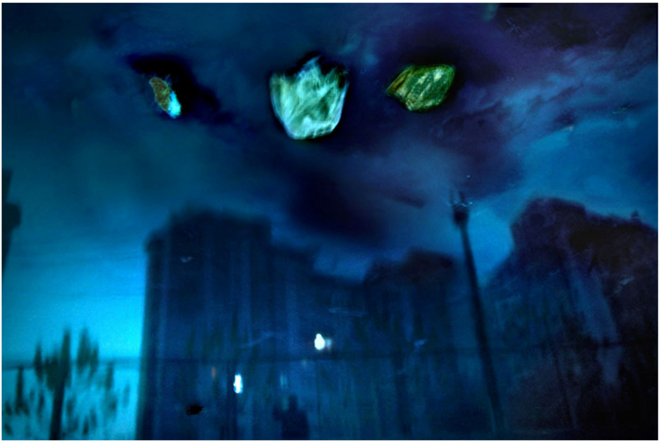
Endless Road:Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



East Wind II : Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



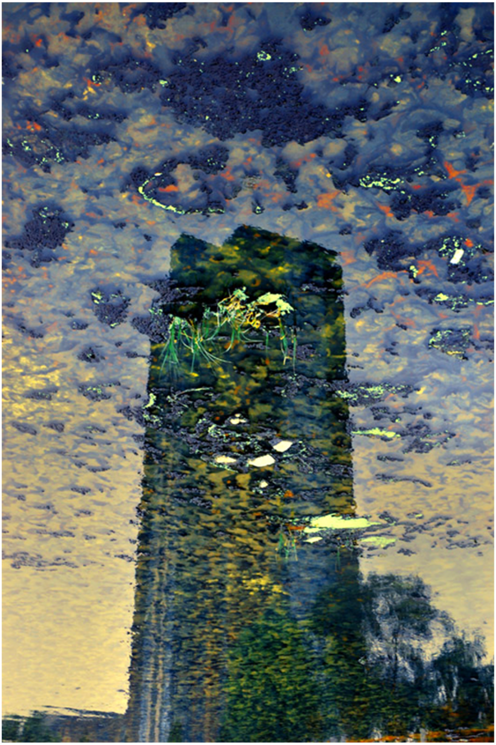
Moon Stained Darkness :Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm



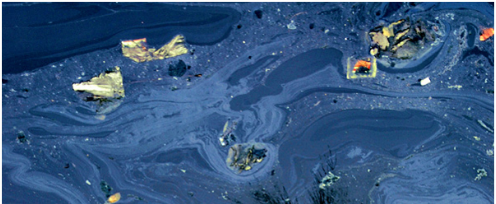
Indigo Night:Urban Amber 2005 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm

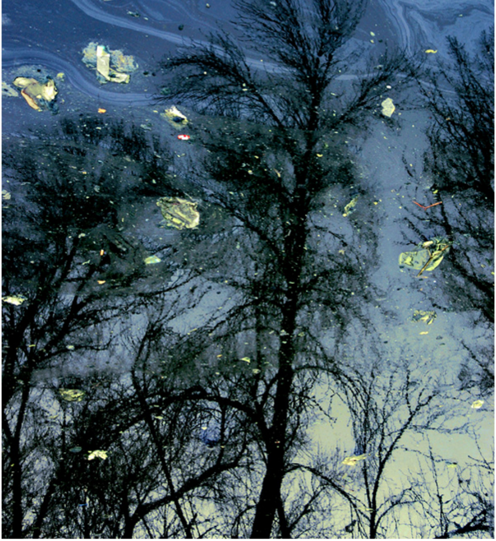
Han Bing's photographs, whose texture is reminiscent of Impressionistic paintings, encapsulate scenes of this era of frenzied construction, where the stunning reverie of urbanisation is intermingled with the polluted destruction of the environment. Both atmospheric and dense, exuding the beauty of a mirage and bearing the detritus of time, these images oscillate between pleasure and pain, taking their ultimate shape in reversed dreamscapes.

---Dagmar Carnevale Lavezzoli

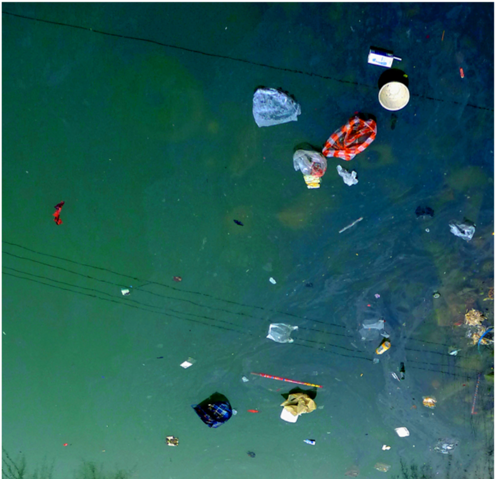


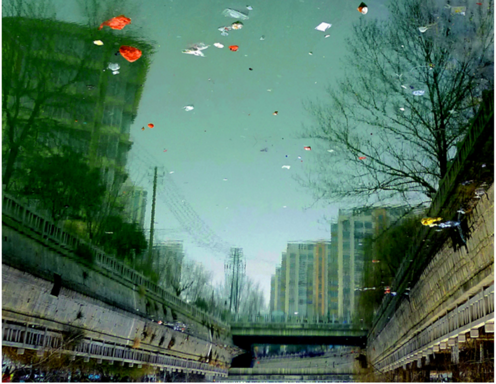
Tower : Urban Amber, 2007 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm





Black Grove: Urban Amber 2009 C-print, 100 x 150 cm , 60 x 90 cm





Rose River : Urban Amber 2011 C-print, 78 x 135 cm