

Chien-Chi Chang

The Chain

Reviewed at Ffotogallery, Cardiff

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There seems to be something rather questionable about making portraits of the mentally ill. It is not just the explicit voyeurism of photographing those whose minds have been condemned as contrary and inferior, it is also a fairly effortless way to capture striking and extraordinary human expressions. It epitomizes Jean Baudrillard's observation that "the magic of photography is that it is the *object* which does all the work".

This seems to be the case with Chien-Chi Chang's series of twenty-four monochrome portraits collectively entitled *The Chain*. The series was made at the Lung Fu Tang Buddhist sanctuary in 1998, where seven hundred patients labour on the largest chicken farm in Taiwan, whilst chained in pairs, only unlocked to sleep. The theory behind this seemingly barbaric 'therapy' to which the Taiwanese government turns a blind eye, is that by linking the patients, the more mentally stable of the two will help the other, both in the work at the sanctuary, and in their progress with their illness. This project is the extension of Chang's thoughts upon human and social bonds as explored in his previous monograph, *I do I do I do*, a study of a more orthodox union of two people – marriage.

The treatment of this subject is, however, a more sideways approach to documentary photography. His method was to photograph the pairs as they were returning to work after lunch. The resulting images have a theatrical aesthetic, with an almost completely burnt-out background that renders the patients totally isolated on what appears to be a stage. Perhaps it is Chang's intention to exaggerate the subjects' social isolation, but it also seems quite an uncompassionate visual approach. The patients' expressions are equally – and predictably – dramatic. I found myself immediately comparing the work with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's portraits of patients at the Ren Vallejo Psychiatric Hospital in Cuba. However, the fundamental difference between the

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two pieces is that Broomberg & Chanarin's portraits were made in complete partnership with the patients (shutter release cables are visible in the patients' hands), whereas Chang's portraits were made by the photographer alone, and in some cases, without the subjects' cooperation. Some individuals were not completely in frame and appear cropped. As Chang admits: "You can see that some of them didn't want to [be photographed], that's why they're not even in the frame." I found these to be some of the more interesting images, as they punctuate an otherwise near monotonous aesthetic.

Chang's rigid and formal visual approach is a reflection of the series as a whole. The objectified patients are essentially anonymous parts of a collection. Presenting the images without individual titles or captions furthers this process, and also strips the subjects even more of their identity. Due to their rather classical form, photographed head-on and repeated, they are uncomfortably reminiscent of Nineteenth Century daguerreotypes of slaves and other anthropological photographs.

One cannot help but feel uncomfortable regarding human wretchedness in the art gallery. But one feels less voyeuristic leaving with some insight, however, *The Chain* does not educate its audience about mental health and it tells even less about the lives of the patients at the Lung Fu Tang sanctuary. Although in some of the images there is clearly an intriguing and benevolent relationship between the pairs, the sensitive nature of the subject is an inescapable distraction and it is difficult to learn Chang's intended meaning. A recurring theme in the exhibition comments book was a frustration at a lack of images contextualizing Chang's portraits. When one considers that he returned to the sanctuary over a period of six years, yet we are denied even a glimpse of how these patients went about their lives in a state of perpetual bondage, working amongst carcasses and the detritus and of a million chickens, *The Chain* is an unexpected conclusion to Chang's time spent at the sanctuary. The images are indeed a spectacular display of human emotions, however, it struggles to find a comfortable place between 'straight' documentary and the constructed image.