



# Lost and found

A selection of images taken from **Thomas Sauvin's** Beijing Silvermine Project is being displayed at Derby's Format Photography Festival. **Oliver Atwell** takes a look at what they can tell us about China's recent history

**LIKE** many art forms, photography can find itself subject to shifting parameters and social trends, with 2010–2011 seeing a heavy emphasis on the genre of street photography. A number of photographers, both amateur and professional, jumped on the street-photography bandwagon and began producing images that were both candid and strangely voyeuristic. Suddenly the everyday, mundane lives of the people who traversed the streets and walkways of otherwise unremarkable locations became viable – and sometimes absurd – subjects for art. On another level, it communicated the notion of observation and surveillance – a subject that is becoming an increasingly prominent issue on our British shores.

As we move through 2013, we can see another trend developing, although it is not a million miles away from street photography. Vernacular (or found) photography is big business right now. The term refers to lost and discarded images taken by amateur or unknown photographers who have photographed common everyday subjects. Themes can include such ordinary things as photo-booth images, family snapshots, mugshots and vintage portraits. Many of these images can be found in such diverse locations as flea markets, bins and old photo albums. It's a genre that has become increasingly popular with photography collectors and art dealers.

More often than not these images appeal due to the mystery they evoke. Who were these photographers and who are the people featured in their images? The gap in our knowledge allows us to create a narrative that is renewed every time fresh eyes gaze upon the picture. But, much in the same way that we can learn a lot about a culture through the art it produces, we can also look to vernacular photography to tell us something about a society at a particular time.

Thomas Sauvin's Beijing Silvermine is a genuinely fascinating collection of banal and intriguing images. Over four years, the Beijing-based French artist has amassed more than 500,000 negatives, all of which were taken by amateur photographers living in China's

capital following the Cultural Revolution. The negatives were due to be dropped into a vat of acid so that the resulting silver nitrate could be sold to chemists, but after responding to an advert, Sauvin rescued the negatives and began poring through the images contained therein. It's a collection that Sauvin is still adding to now.

What Sauvin found was a documentation of the birth of post-socialist China seen through the lenses of countless amateur photographers. The images span the period between 1985 and 2006, and reveal a culture adapting to its new political and social parameters. China gained access to portable 35mm cameras in 1985, which is a symptom of the culture shaking off its socialist politics and replacing them with Western capitalist ideals.

Nowhere is this idea more apparent than in the clear visual tropes that begin to reveal themselves within the collection. One particularly striking theme from the images taken in the 1980s is the recurrence of housewives posing with such objects as televisions and fridges. On the surface this may seem like an absurd motif, but dig deeper and you can see a country in social flux. You can see it again in the country's discovery of fast food – many shots feature people posing with Ronald McDonald. Holiday snaps are also a big theme within Sauvin's found images. As the culture changed, wealthy Chinese families began exploring the world beyond the borders of their native land.

The images run from the dawn of the Kodak consumer camera (1985) to the advent of digital photography (2006) and are provided a new context simply through the sheer act of collecting them into one overarching project. Perhaps that's the real virtue of vernacular photography. Through the preservation of seemingly mundane images taken by so-called amateurs, we can begin to develop a visual record of social history. And, with that in mind, perhaps vernacular photography, rather than being a passing fad, is genuinely one of the most vital genres functioning in photography today. **AP**

Images from **Beijing Silvermine** can be seen at the **Format Photography Festival**, Derby until 7 April. [www.formatfestival.com](http://www.formatfestival.com)