



*Mine disaster monument*, 2006  
chromogenic print

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Cang Xin.  
Photo: Jia De

In 2003, the People's Republic of China's premier-to-be Wen Jiabao descended a mine shaft to share dumplings with miners on the eve of Chinese New Year. Between then and 2006, when this photograph was created, more than 18,000\* coal workers were killed in mining-related accidents in China, according to official accounts (*The Economist*, 2015). The year of Cang Xin's photograph, *Mine disaster monument*, coincides with the peak in these deaths, which began to fall in subsequent years in step with China's development and ahead of the nation's 'coming out party' of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

The photographic print *Mine disaster monument* does not refer to any of these disasters in particular. A wide-angle-lens shot invites us to stare deeply into a still and aestheticised reality, only to have it punctured by various oddities: the industrial site is already long defunct; a woman in the foreground, shirtless like the rest of the miners, disturbs the masculine regularity of figures; the structure shown is not actually a mine, but rather a kind of loading dock. These inexplicable anomalies point to a deep strangeness in Chinese society over this period, as a set of policies introduced in 1978, known as Reform and Opening Up, precipitated widespread and disruptive social changes to all aspects of life.

Cang captures this mundane surrealism. Here, a group of labourers typically suggestive of collectivism is stripped of its sense of solidarity and an already deteriorating industrial site communicates an experience of displacement, from place and from identity. *Mine disaster monument* points to a new style of realism, one which resists the political idealism of socialist realism and attempts instead to convey the emotional tone of reality as it is actually experienced.

Genevieve Trail, 2022

Note:

\* The actual figure could be much higher than reported.

Reference:

*The Economist* 2015, 'Shaft of light: mining safety', *The Economist*, vol. 416, no. 8947, p. 36, viewed 9 February 2022, <https://www.economist.com/china/2015/07/18/shaft-of-light>.