

# HAYDEN HUANG

Hayden Zimeng Huang is a visual artist based in Langley, British Columbia whose work is primarily based in photography and drawing. He is interested in urban living and space, and often likes to explore texture and dimension. He has a strong passion for street and architecture photography, but he also brings his interest in photography to bear in his mixed-media work.



ART ON DEMAND  
**EMERGE**  
HAYDEN HUANG

03.25.21 -  
05.08.21



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- <sup>1</sup> Meir Wigoder, "Some thoughts about street photography and the everyday," *History of Photography*, 25:4 (2001): 368.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 376.  
<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, "Walking the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

ABOVE: *LONELY CITY* #6, 2020,  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT, 24 X 18 IN.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

GRAPHIC DESIGN BY CAMILLE CANDIA

## FROM THE EARLIEST ORIGINS OF THE GENRE, STREET PHOTOGRAPHY HAS CAPTURED MOMENTS THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE GO UNNOTICED,

such as a fleeting glance, a momentary reflection, or the swing of a skirt. For its ability to capture the ephemeral phenomena of everyday life in the city, street photography has long been closely associated with the practices of photojournalism and social documentary. The trademark shoot-from-the-hip style of street photography was to a great extent a product of the camera's increasing portability in the twentieth century; freed from the constraints of bulky, large-scale camera equipment that required carefully staged scenes arranged in a studio, photographers made the practice of photography portable, in the process capturing spontaneous and fleeting moments with the new technology. It is within this historical context that the carefully composed street photographs of emerging, Langley-based artist Hayden Huang challenge some of the most common assumptions about street photography.

This is particularly evident in Huang's series *Lonely City*, where the need to obtain proper exposure and clarity while shooting at night requires the artist to adopt a highly methodical approach. The result is still a series of images that capture particular moments in time, but here the moments seem frozen and still, almost extracted from the flow of time rather than one instant in an unfolding procession of movement. Huang's images also carefully attend to the composition of the street's architecture, emphasizing the magnitude of the city and its inhabitants' diminutive place within it. In doing so, Huang also uses the idiom of street photography to respond to the public isolation that defines our current historical moment. Created over a

period of several months in 2020, the *Lonely City* photographs were taken by Huang as he walked the quiet streets of Vancouver at night. The relatively deserted streetscapes that he encountered were in sharp contrast to the busyness of city streets at night in Nanning, China, where Huang grew up. These images—especially those of Vancouver's Chinatown—therefore carry a particular uncanniness for the artist, but they also resonate with anyone who has experienced the unusual emptiness of a city environment during COVID-19.

The *Lonely City* photographs are not completely devoid of the human figure, however. The figure of the pedestrian has often been noted as an essential element of street photography, and a reflection or stand-in for the photographer, who is also a pedestrian. Photographic historian Meir Wigoder notes that the term street photography “define[s] both the subject (the street, the people in the street, the shops, the neighbourhood and urban photography in general), and the activity of the photographer, acting either as a social documentarist or a free-roaming spirit projecting his/her own artistic inclinations on any movement in the street that stimulates his/her associative mind.”<sup>1</sup> This is part of the reflexive nature of street photography, and therefore how the human figure is portrayed in street photography tells us a great deal about the photographer.

In *Lonely City #1*, a lone figure on the sidewalk is silhouetted against storefront facades by a street lamp that illuminates the scene, casting the shadow of a nearby tree on the road below.

The harmony of colour gives this photograph a painterly effect: the yellow and red-trimmed building is echoed in the fall leaves and a parallel-parked vehicle. Colour coordination, combined with the straight-on composition and the great depth of field, makes this image perhaps more akin to an Edward Hopper painting than a photograph. Here, the presence of the pedestrian “is like the effect of a semi-colon in a long descriptive passage that enables us to pause before moving on to read the rest of the vivid inventory account of the way the street performs from the point of view of a bystander.”<sup>2</sup>

The notion of “reading” the street like a passage of text is a recurring concept in cultural theory about the city. Michel de Certeau for example connected this idea with the act of walking, suggesting that walkers inscribe their own meaning on the “urban text” of the city. In his seminal text *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau writes, “[t]he act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.”<sup>3</sup> This suggests that the city is an interconnected whole, shaped by the daily practice of walking, and that the vitality of the city is determined by the movements of its inhabitants over time. In this context, it is important to note that all of Huang's photographs are taken at street level—walking level—where the movement of the city is observed. The viewer



can imagine seeing the street through the eyes of the pedestrian figure in *Lonely City #1*, for example, while *Lonely City #5* presents their possible perspective. In the vanishing point of this image, another person crosses the street just out of focus, but leaning in as though to see what is around the corner. The viewer's eye is drawn to a pattern of light filtered through an ornate gateway on the side of a brick building. Here, the photograph is like a film still, capturing the moment before an event takes place.

Tents can be seen in several of Huang's photographs, including *Lonely City #7*. Here a blue tent is set up in front of a series of large, bright orange garage doors. The contrasting colours heighten the juxtaposition of these two elements: tall and looming versus squat and provisional. The image suggests the forces of gentrification that resulted in such a scene, the paradoxical but ubiquitous scene of a camping tent intended to be used in nature pitched instead in the urban core. Huang's *Lonely City* is a city of such juxtapositions—a complicated city.

Street photography, as with all photography, is as much a projection of ourselves onto the world around us as it is a documentation of people and places. *Lonely City* posits itself against traditional street photography by presenting only echoes of human activity at night in Vancouver from a variety of narrative angles, leaving us to decipher what we might see, and what we suspect Huang is trying to reveal.

- CALVIN BERGEN,  
EMERGE CURATOR

FRONT COVER: *Lonely City #7*, 2020,  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT, 24 X 18 IN.

LEFT: *Lonely City #1*, 2020,  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT, 18 X 24 IN.

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.