

ARTSCENE™

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Chinese photographer Chen Man is in her mid-30s, born and bred in Beijing and part of a generation that has grown up with American movies, magazines, and advertising. She shows two radically different sides of her artistic output: slick, large-format photographs that reflect the extreme divides between traditional and contemporary in today's China; and more sedate brush paintings and calligraphies. She took up photography while a student at the Central Academy of Fine Art, and worked her way into shooting for Vision Magazine, akin to Vogue with hipper street elements. One of the things she learned along the way was to do her own lighting and styling, and that has served her well in creating the striking images we see. The photographs are part of her personal, as opposed to commissioned, oeuvre. Some do appear to be pictures you would see in a fashion magazine. In "Long Live the Motherland, Beijing No. 1," a glamorous model dressed in bright red and holding a bright red flower stands in Tiananmen Square, the Gate of Heavenly Peace behind her. In "Long Live the Motherland, Beijing No. 5," a fashion model in a bright red dress and red high-heeled shoes poses among young men in striped T-shirts and bicycles in an alleyway in Old Beijing.



Chen Man, "Long Live the Motherland, Beijing No. 5," 2011, c-print, 51 1/4 x 74", is currently on view at L.A. Louver.

In two other series, she tries to express ancient Chinese philosophies using semi-nude female models — one depicts the seasons, the other the elements. These are over-the-top and fascinating for what she has crammed into them. In the elements series, the "Earth" goddess is set amidst an earthquake, while the "Wood" goddess emerges like a tree trunk, with wood fungus growing on her torso. These figures feel like whirlwinds of power. In the upstairs gallery, the brush paintings are the flip side of Chen Man. About a dozen works on paper are portraits of monk-like figures, and finally there's a couplet of calligraphy. This latter features the word "meng" (or dream) in Chinese, with a smaller character below saying "inner" and "outer." One can read all kinds of implications into those pairings of words, but one thing is certain, she is a very adept calligrapher, and her oversized rendering of the character "meng" has force and imagination (L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice).

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Scarlet Cheng