

Broken social scene

Documenting social systems is no easy task, but Carl de Keyzer devotes his life to doing just this. He tells Jenni Retourné how evolution, collapse and corruption have all influenced his work.

Carl de Keyzer's shot of the Shenzhen skyline taken just before Hong Kong's handover to China – a time of rapid architectural development.

CARL DE KEYZER



Villagers in Lhundrup, China, extend a warm welcome to representatives of Doctors Without Borders, who travelled to the region to provide a clean water supply to poverty-stricken communities in 1998.

CARL DE KEYZER

“The person responsible for buying the miles and miles of pipeline and pumps had cheated us on a very high scale – everything we paid for should have been 30% cheaper, but he put it all in his pocket. We’re talking about millions of dollars.”

In documenting social systems, often unstable ones, Carl de Keyzer dedicates years of his own time to each project to get to the heart of its effect on society. “Every three or four years I think of a new large project that has mostly to do with social systems,” says de Keyzer, speaking from his home in Belgium. “These are always long-term projects; usually I need a year for research or to find funding, although I tend to pay for everything myself. Actually, one project pays for the next. Then I usually travel for one year. My work is always about big social systems – how they can change the way landscapes, cities and people look like. Very often I photograph systems on the verge of collapse, like communism or colonialism.

“Of course, one system comes after another and time makes these things change as well – that is what I am interested in.”

In 1997, de Keyzer ventured to Hong Kong to document its handover to China. Arriving a week early, he paid a visit to Shenzhen, which at the time was like a capitalist experiment by the Chinese government, to see how the Western economy could work in China. “They built practically an entire city next to Hong Kong from nothing in almost three years. The picture you see is actually the view from my hotel room on the 22nd floor, very simple,” he laughs. “I took that image on the first day I arrived and on the day I left my hotel room, the whole landscape was completely different because skyscrapers were being erected within two weeks.”

In stark contrast to this, de Keyzer’s next trip to China was to Lhundrup in 1998 with Doctors without Borders, to provide poverty-ridden villages with a water supply. “It was an enormous task – sometimes there

were 200 to 300 people digging holes and wells.” Upon meeting the organisers a year later, de Keyzer learned of the corruption that followed his departure. “The person responsible for buying the miles and miles of pipeline and pumps had cheated us on a very high scale – everything we paid for should have been 30% cheaper, but he put it all in his pocket. We’re talking about millions of dollars. It’s a terrible story, but that’s how it goes – I have worked with all kinds of non-governmental organisations and there’s a lot of corruption,” he says.

Upon completion of each project, de Keyzer then publishes a book of his work. Previous subjects have included religion in the US, communism in the Soviet Union and war and politics, while his most recent project documents the Congo. “I print my book designs using an HP Z3200 printer – I also use it for press prints and exhibitions.”