

## EXHIBITION

# A CASE OF APPLES AND PEERS

Text: VANESSA YUNG

## ABOUT MY HOMETOWN

Blindspot Gallery

PHOTOGRAPHER ZHANG XIAO'S fondest childhood memory of his hometown, Yantai City in Shandong province, is of the carefree times he spent hanging out with his friends, catching fishes and bugs up the hill near the small village in which he grew up.

But ever since he left home at age 20 to study architecture and design at Yantai University before becoming a photojournalist for the *Chongqing Morning Post*, all his annual Lunar New Year homecomings brought him was an escalating sense of alienation and unfamiliarity.

"The surroundings of my village have been changing rapidly in the past years. There are so many new houses, factories and chemical plants being built, the air and water pollution is getting worse and worse," says the 34-year-old, who became a full-time artist in 2009.

"Villagers are becoming much more materialistic and money-minded. And as the salaries for working at chemical plants are higher, many don't mind taking up the jobs

despite the apparent pollution hazards."

Although Zhang sees the transformation as inevitable, considering the mainland's economic development, the Chengdu-based artist feels an unshakable urge to reconnect with his roots and memories. For the past three years, he has been visiting Yantai frequently, in an effort to capture the essence of his hometown.

From this, six series — *Shift*, *Home Theater*, *Eldest Sister*, *Relatives*, *Living*, and *Three Sisters* — will be part of the upcoming "About My Hometown" exhibition. It'll be his third show at the Blindspot Gallery, so audiences can expect to see works that are much different from his previous ones.

While his award-winning series *They* (2006-2008) and *Coastline* (2009-2013) are straightforward photographic portrayals of life in contemporary China, his latest works have been more intimate.

They are presented from a personal perspective and enhanced by a range of media and techniques.

"I first got interested in photography around the time I finished high school and found this unused film camera someone had given my dad as a gift. I started taking pictures of stills, landscapes and sunsets, and I fell in love with it," says Zhang.

"My style started off as direct, but it has become more refined, due to my love of reading photography books. I'm very interested in mixed media as I think it is more effective at showcasing my thoughts and creative process."

*Shift* is Zhang's first series under the "hometown" theme, which he





**SISTER ACT:**  
*Eldest Sister in Her Barber Shop* (left) from the series "Shift"; and *Eldest Sister No 5* (far left).

says is the most symbolic. The black-and-white photo collages are made by manually transferring and assembling emulsion lifts from instant film onto paper.

"The emulsion lifts, which were peeled off the instant film after they were soaked in water, are extremely delicate," says Zhang. "When I was introduced to this technique, I found that it represented my relationship with my hometown. For so many years, it has been in a shattered, crumbled condition."

The instant shots were all taken in Yantai and revolve around the everyday lives of the people there. They include old neighbours and their pets, portraits of Mao Zedong or Xi

Jinping from two different households, a hairdresser posing on a barber chair, and his father in various settings.

This series is also representative because a number of the images – including a fully loaded truck and an old apple-picker – serve as reminders that Yantai is a major apple producing district. "The fruit is the source of income for most of the families in our village. Their lives revolve around apples, which symbolise wealth," says Zhang.

*Eldest Sister and Relatives*, two series created with locals who helped with the photo editing, explore ever-changing aesthetics. *Living* features a series of self-portraits of the artist

holding a newspaper, which serves as a critique of China's requirements for the elderly to secure their pension.

Another series, *Home Theater*, evokes memories for Zhang as much as for anyone else. After acquiring a collection of video tapes of his favourite films and shows from the 1980s and '90s, Zhang created new labels for each tape using screen grabs of iconic scenes taken from each film or video.

"There are movies such as Hong Kong crime flicks, as well as Taiwanese and mainland movies, which many grew up watching," says Zhang. "There are also recordings of [China Central Television]'s *Spring Festival* gala and karaoke songs. The

series does not only stem from my personal memory, but also encapsulates the collective memory of a whole era."

Zhang, who will attend the show's opening reception on May 16, says he will continue to explore the theme of "hometown". He is keen to capture more of the abundant apple trees at the core of the city's livelihood, although he has yet to decide how he is going to approach this future project.

Blindspot Gallery, 15/F Po Chai Industrial Building, 28 Wong Chuk Hang Road, Wong Chuk Hang, Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-6pm. Ends June 27. Inquiries: 2517 6238