

TIBET: THE LAST SCREAM

Laurent Zylberman
A Journey in Tibet

Written by Ed Barnas



Courtesy Sous Les Etoiles Gallery and Laurent Zylberman

In their forthcoming book, *Tibet, The Last Scream*, photographer Laurent Zylberman teams up with journalist Eric Meyer to explore the interstices of Tibetan society, as witnessed shortly after the ethnic riots of March 2008. The seventeen monochrome images selected for display at Sous les Etoiles Gallery do not present a single view of Tibet, but rather focus on various facets of social, religious, and economic life during that period of heightened tensions under military control.

The exhibit opens with images reflecting a mix of regimentation and modern life – PLA soldiers marching in front of the Potala Palace contrasted with a phalanx of young female sales assistants in front of a department store. On entering the main gallery space, the mood changes. Contrasts between the old and the new appear - a car speeds past pilgrims prostrated on the road, the bottom of a high-tension electric tower is festooned with prayer flags. The landscape is rendered beautifully, particularly in an image of monastic ruins in a mountain lake (reminiscent in scale of Timothy O’Sullivan’s photos of the Western US). But there is also a trace of irony in the roadside souvenir stand shot against cloud-covered mountains. And the groups of people here - monks and pilgrims alike - are jumbled, not orderly, observed rather than engaged, often with only one face gazing warily at the photographer.



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These are photojournalistic images that must be viewed in context, not just as isolated pieces of art. While the website lists them as “untitled” they all have wall labels in the gallery. A group of monks scattered over a smoky hillside, one glowering in the foreground, may look like political demonstrators but the caption notes they are simply leaving after a religious ceremony. Another caption translates the calligraphy behind a smiling monk as, ironically, extolling Chairman Mao.

Tibet’s complex situation is visually summarized in a photograph of a fractured landscape shot amidst a profusion of prayer flags. This is a rather different place from the “Return to the Roof of the World,” Tibet photographed in 2003 by Nicholas Vreeland and seen at the Leica Gallery just last year.