

## Zhang Kechun: The Yellow Desert

30 January – 28 February 2026



*Imitation Longmen Grottoes, 2025*

Huxley-Parlour are pleased to announce *The Yellow Desert*, an exhibition of new works by photographer Zhang Kechun. Presenting eleven works from the photographer's latest series, which he began in August 2025, the exhibition explores the desolate sands of the Gobi Desert and the rich, complicated history of Chinese-Mongolian life.

Venturing far into the dunes and among the mountains of Northern China and Southern Mongolia, remnants of bygone human activity can be found scattered on and below the desert sands. Kechun sees in this landscape a condensation and inversion of time and space, juxtaposing sublimity with artifice, history with contemporaneity, and desolation with life. The Gobi Desert, which has become a popular tourist destination, possesses an intrinsic surrealism through its haphazardly dispersed reconstructions of ancient religious sites which were once film sets, the remains of abandoned towns and oil extraction plants, and graves as old as the Han Dynasty under the feet of holiday makers. Kechun augments this surrealism: restricted palettes and compositions that isolate landmarks accentuate the vastness of the desert and the strangeness of the abandoned human products it contains. At other times, the photographer turns his lens onto swathes of tourists punctuating the dunes and admiring the relics of forgotten enterprise and human life.

Kechun works within the canon of topographic photography, exemplified in his elevated viewpoints, pastel palette, and 5x4 format. However, the photographer's referencing of Chinese traditions of landscape art (particularly from the Song and Yuan Dynasties) pervades throughout this series. Long, sweeping lines created by mountains rising from the sand evoke the gentle, calligraphic washes of ink that thirteenth and fourteenth-century Chinese artists were so adept at applying to silk, and diminutive figures punctuating the desert likewise recall those early painters. The Yuan Dynasty was formed after the Mongol invasion of China in the fourteenth-century - Chinese literati took to landscape painting to express their desires to escape this new reality, returning to and harmonising with nature in accordance with Daoist philosophy. While calling on this tradition, *The Yellow Desert* centres the human footprint in the Gobi desert (through which the Mongolian armies arrived), reminding the viewer of the ever-increasing ubiquity and inescapability of human life.

Inversion of concepts and histories forms a central theme in this project. The photographer returns to the landscapes depicted by antiquated Chinese painters, but with a large-format camera; echoing this modernising homage to antiquity, he photographs falsified ancient monuments built in the previous century; and he juxtaposes the fields of buried tombs with fields of tourists. The Gobi Desert is, in Kechun's photographs, a place of supple and fragile reality, where the chronology of the loss, the ossification, and the reception of history is laid bare.

Zhang Kechun was born in 1980 in Sichuan, China. His work has been exhibited at Photoquai, Paris, the Beijing Photo Biennale, China and the Delhi Photo Festival, India. In 2018, Kechun's photographs were featured in a major exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography at the Museum of Photography, Berlin. Photographs from his series *The Yellow River* were exhibited at the Bangkok Contemporary Art Biennale in 2020. Kechun won the Discovery Award at Les Rencontres d'Arles for *The Yellow River* in 2014. He won the National Geographic Picks Global Photo Contest in 1998 and was shortlisted at the World Photography Awards in 2013.

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