

The importance of Chinese ghost towns in the work of French painter Olivier Catté is a fascinating subject, as it lies at the intersection of social criticism, dreamlike images, and a reflection on time and space.

Olivier Catté, known for his urban landscapes, found in China's "ghost towns" a perfect subject to develop his favorite themes.

Chinese ghost towns (such as Ordos Kangbashi, the most famous) are the result of massive construction projects, often linked to rampant real estate speculation and centralized planning. For Catté, they are not just architectural curiosities, but become the ultimate symbols of the Anthropocene era, in which human activity is dramatically and often thoughtlessly altering the planet.

Catté depicts these immense skyscrapers, wide boulevards, and building complexes not as living spaces, but as empty shells, theater sets. This allows him to critique a dehumanizing form of modernity, where concrete takes precedence over human beings.

Catté paints "non-cities": spaces designed to be living spaces but which, through excessive planning and speculation, never acquire the soul of a community. They become non-places on the scale of a metropolis.

The very aesthetic of these cities, at once new and abandoned, perfect and empty, perfectly matches Catté's pictorial style:

- Playing with light and absence: Catté is a master of cold, raking light, which sculpts buildings and casts long, mysterious shadows. The emptiness of ghost towns provides him with a perfect playground to explore this very particular atmosphere, somewhere between strange calm and latent disquiet. Human presence is often suggested (by a light in a window, a distant silhouette) but rarely made explicit, reinforcing the feeling of solitude. Catté uses the real-life setting of these cities to create dreamlike, almost surreal atmospheres. The architectural precision is counterbalanced by an unreal light and an absence of life that give his paintings the quality of a waking dream (or nightmare).

By painting cities that are already modern ruins, Catté engages in a profound reflection on time.

Traditionally, painters depicted the ruins of Antiquity (Greek temples, Roman arches) to evoke the passage of time and the vanity of civilizations. Catté does exactly the same thing, but with the ruins of our own era. His ghost towns are ruins of the future past—remnants of a world we ourselves built and abandoned before it even aged.

His works act as a memento mori ("remember that you will die") for contemporary civilization. They remind us that our most grandiose projects, our faith in infinite growth and concrete, can be doomed to failure and oblivion.

For Olivier Catté, Chinese ghost towns are much more than a simple architectural subject. They are a powerful and multifaceted metaphor that allows him to explore:

- A critique of dehumanizing modernity.
- The creation of dreamlike and disturbing atmospheres.
- A reflection on time, vanity, and the ruins of our era.
- A dialogue between cultures and imaginations.

Ch.Freck 2018