“I regret eating glass,” San Bao, the depressed young hero of Zhang Yuan’s “Beijing Flickers,” says in a voice-over, the bottom half of his face covered in a white bandage. More things he regrets: checking into a hospital, where he can’t pay the bill, and also checking out of the hospital. After all, life in the big city isn’t going so well. His girlfriend has left him (for a richer man), he’s lost his job, and his dog — Lucky, no less — has run away. He can’t even kill himself properly — a suicide attempt on a train track turns into a Buster Keaton gag.

In “Beijing Flickers,” presented at the Museum of Modern Art as part of Global Lens 2013, Mr. Zhang piles on the pain but then considers it with a deadpan gaze. That keeps his film buoyant as San Bao (Duan Bowen) and his pals — one parks cars, one is a transvestite singer — muck around getting nowhere: hanging out, drinking, absorbing life’s daily blows. And if Mr. Zhang’s Beijing is a city on the make, where, as one character says, “pretty girls run away with rich guys or get raped by rich guys,” his view of it — and of San Bao’s cohort — is fueled by romanticism as well as by social critique. San Bao and his friends experience moments of rapture, and their lives have a kind of familiar down-and-out urban glamour. (You can imagine them in Brooklyn, say, or London.)

“Beijing Flickers” often feels as if it were about to tip over into the too harsh or the too sentimental. But Mr. Zhang, whose wide-screen compositions have an unfussy elegance, mostly manages his balancing act. His measured style gives the film a steady-as-she-goes ballast even as it follows impulsive, unsettled lives.
Beijing Flickers

Opens on Thursday in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Zhang Yuan; written by Kong Ergou, Li Xinyun, Yang Yishu and Mr. Zhang; director of photography, Mr. Zhang; cinematographer, Cai Tao; edited by Wu Yixiang; music by Liu Yijun (Lao Wu); released by the Global Film Initiative. At the Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters, Museum of Modern Art. In Mandarin, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 36 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Duan Bowen, Lv Yulai, Shi Shi, Li Xinyun and Han Wenwen.