A New Wave of Responsive Images

A triangle exhibit of Malaysian contemporary photography will be held at three different countries. April 2nd Istanbul, Turkey – Sabanci University / Fass Art Gallery, from May to June at Nikon Ginza Gallery, FujiFilm gallery and Kodak Gallery, Tokyo, Japan and finally these work will be rotated to Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Given the task to put together this exhibition, I have limited the scope of works to emerging practitioners; those who have continue to exert a powerful influence upon contemporary practice, to those who are embedded in the practice of the present moment and reaching backwards in time to some degree of noteworthy individuals.

These recent works deals with the actual act (straight) of photographing, some are experimental, and or rather some a disparate approach in using the medium, the techniques used are meticulous to photography and they embraces each of the subject matter or object with respect. The range of photographic processes, techniques and approaches used include camera less techniques, archival retrieval, manipulated processes, long ended films and straight photography apparently objective approaches with regard to space, in which the subject matter or object is respected and regarded supreme. Such course of actions pushes the subjects and approaches to the untapped or possibilities of the medium can offer.

This freedom and possibilities have produced these recent self-motivated works of Malaysians in this era of photography in the country. In addition, in a simple way these works may address or open up more discourse on the question of what photography is and how we can understand it.

Azril K. Ismail, often looks at the un-photographable side of things, his works often captures the ‘truth’ and nakedness of his subjects, revelling the medium’s transparency. In his body of works PUDU JAIL: Aesthetics beyond the Prison Cells, beyond the walls, he documented and revel the process of the inner self negotiation, the dealings with self struggles, fear and the desire of acceptances and repentance within each prison inmate. His present works remains us of the power of the medium to engage, his systematic and pain staking documentation persuade us to look beyond the walls of the subject. In addition, Azril’s respect for the many individuals’ personal diaries that have served their time in these cells makes the works outstanding. No matter how much emotions have being invested in taking and getting these pictures, the result is often quite detached and objective.

“The is how documentary works...It defies comments: it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis on the evidence; the facts themselves speak...since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium...The heart of documentary is not form, style, or medium, but always content.

Documenting her strong subject of people with her analogue camera, Bernice Chauly records the gaze and moments of the people, she set to work on. In this series of black and white portraits, the ‘actors’ and ‘actress’ of the many Chinese opera performers, Mak Yong dancers, she recorded that exchange of trusts between the subject and her camera. For a portrait, the result of a consensual process often depends upon the subject’s agreement to be photographed. It assumes a level of trust. The subject usually faces the camera and the contract between her subject and her hangs transparently in the air that separates them. It is across this agreed distance that all sorts of power relationships and tensions between or among the people involved are negotiated. Her pictures recorded these exchanges.

The photographic portrait is at once the most reactionary of photographic forms, constituting an absurd place to look for photographic truth and it is the best place to find a first hand and apparently authentic encounter with the trace of another human being.

Often her subjects are photographed under poor lighting conditions, giving her stories a gritty rural reality. Her ‘poetic’ style and often needed quick responds to the fleeting moments on dancers, couple her ability to evaluate a good picture instantly, thus at the same time allowing her photographs to generate a form of truth in representation. It truly speaks of Bernice’s decisive pictures.

The following photographers adopt a ‘deadpan’ approach in their works, a type of art photography that has a distinct lack of visual drama or overstatement. Often their works are flattened out noticeably, where the result of an intention watch of the subject rather than the photographers’ perspective on top of it is paramount. The works of
Eiffel and Pang provided us a look at today’s contemporary photographers in these recent years, a trend to include objects and spaces that we may ordinarily ignore or pass by. Their photographs maintain the ‘thing-ness’ of what they describe, such as playgrounds, street lights in parks, abandoned rooms and buildings, conceptually altered because of the visual impact they gain by the act of being photographed and presented as ‘art’.

The sharp, saturated tones, clean, linear and spontaneous aesthetic of the “straight” photography in the images of Pang Khee Teik, would call for an expression that would seen as “fast and varied, in style, earthy, common and yet startling.” Pang peripherises the lonely and inviting public spaces of contemporary urban peripheries, playgrounds, pedestrians’ walks, gardens, parks, with melancholic clear-cut, unexpected as it is emotionally precise; seen at night, the essential vacancy and anguishes of these sites are revealed. Like an invisible guest, using a slow shutter speeds to capture such scenes using the available light of street lamps, he discloses an unnoticed colour world about his subjects. The grounds are aware of being constantly watched, his subjects are looked upon under constant surveillances that is a basic unpleasing fact. It reminds me of the 1940s, when Walker Evans photograph subways in New York with a concealed camera. He characterized himself as “an apologetic spy”. He questioned whether rightfully he earns the rights to photograph the arrangements of objects, as the true ‘artists’ will never surface and as such he is like a camera on a observation post.

Pang’s works also offers sensitive, extended observations of public spaces, a photographic pause on a subject that will act as a go-between the energy and character of the places portrayed.

Over the recent years, Eiffel Chong’s work as a photographer has taken on increasing significance in his many exhibitions. Reflecting the same attention, aesthetically and conceptually, the careful framing of place and time as is obvious in all his images, his photography uses curious images to convey a condition of disorientation, often requires a negotiation of location, time and perception. The vagueunuess of Eiffel’s images is achieved through a process of withholding or ‘distorting’ information such that a sensorial and intellectual uncertainty results, that can draw out the unexpected or unconditioned response. Images of unpopulated buildings, uncomplicated lighting poles, cemeteries and deserted terrains often purposefully remain unidentifiable and could have been taken anywhere overseas or back at home. For looking out such evidently exchangeable sites, his works suggests not the endless sameness of our contemporary city or landscapes, but rather calls into question of our very desire to locate, define identity, comprehend and thereby make certain assumptions about the perceived image. Freed from the normal process of arresting, viewers are drawn to examine the odd vagueness of his images, projecting potential meaning and made to be aware in due course of our unoccupied, daily belief that “what we see is what we see”.

In some of his images, a deliberate distortion of an area of extreme light been made available to the subjects, intensified the overall elusiveness of his composition even more, the colours unsettled the sense of depth in the image, always produced a sense of unfamiliarity aggravated by the absence of human beings, which he continues to do so.

Tan Chee Hon takes fascinating vague photographs that demand to be understood but resist easy explanation in his isolated series of closely related human subject exposed by long terminated films. Even as he depicts similar subject matter, each photograph is singular. Just as his imaginative labour starts anew with every picture, he takes; he demands the same engagement from us for his work. We are often compelled to figure out each image, yet given very few conventional cues to help us. Chee Hon prefers to title all his works short i

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read as pure surface. The stark contrast between the skies and the structures she choose to emphasis of the city
scapes she portrays (some historical others stylistic) are subsumed in equilibrium and perspective. She closely
focuses on the structures themselves, instilling with them a life of their own. Shot devoid of human presence or
activity that would animate the buildings, the photographs honestly show the juxtaposition of styles and scales.

Her night time images has an implied theatricality that might not immediately associate with the main subject, as it is
part of the deadpan photography’s presentation of things we cannot perceive with the naked eye. The tension
between the portrayed and the homogenous surface of the photograph, between reality of the cityscapes and the
reality of the image, renders mysteries, otherwise commonplace images.

Yee L-Lann’s images possess an indisputable ability to frame realities, construct identities and inform perceptions.
Her computer-generated photographs provided both rich content and critical technological components of her
practice. With her intense focus on new media and computer imaging, her works actively emphasize their own
technological production, allowing her to examine the multiple possibilities of visualizing both the internal
relationships between people, places and things within her pictures while also exploring how technology influences
people’s daily lives. She directs our attention towards the computerized images’ construction and make-believe as a
way of engaging ideas of power, boundaries, truth, reality and social differences. In all her works, she combines and layer images of ‘past’ and ‘present’ worlds, entrenched and gendered subjective, as well as symbols of history, power and the state of appropriating, altering and then cutting, splicing, pasting and
merging seemingly dissimilar parts within one frame. She uses perspective, a sharp demarcation between foreground
and background created by the visual disjuncture of these elements, to draw her viewers into her dynamic and
complex scenes. We are required to look carefully into what is before us. She makes little effort to hide anything in
her images, rather she leaves everything open and on the surface. She intentionally reveals her process, the small but
crucial details of her pictures and the ideas she wants to convey, her commentary on and critique of both aesthetic
and social-cultural issues.

Since its inception, photography has had an intertwined and difficult relationship with the belief of capturing truth.
Photographers working with the medium frequently play with an intrinsic vagueness, whereby the camera cannot
help but capture real things and yet at the same time an accumulated body of theory and practice has made us
unconvinced. As Richard Bolton points out in his introduction to the Contest of Meaning, Critical Histories of
Photography (1996), truth or meaning is not located solely within the image, but instead is “established through
interpretative meetings that exist outside of the image, meetings that are communally and institutionally
constructed”. Alex Wong positions his practice within this territory, it provided him with a rich vein of subjects, and
worked through in photographic form. His works displaces the emphasis on situations and objects to often -indistinct
statements on emotions, communication, alienation, human relationships and contemporary life. He also highlights
banal events as they happen day to day, suggesting that any single moment of our lives could be arresting. Maybe,
there is more than that as he said; ordinary objects can bring some sense of completion, meaning, imaginations, peace
and happiness.

Hock Seng, takes large-scale black-and-white photographs with a 8 X 10 or 4 X 5 camera to achieve extraordinary
detailed images that capture the way the world is “drawn”. In addition, in black-and-white it undermines a sense of the
photographs’ historical moment. Seeing the world in black and-white, let one feels a step removed from reality, so
it fits to invoke up memory or to blur fact and fiction. His works are printed meticulously marked by strict self-
discipline, overabundant details, amplified contrast between black and white, let one feels a step removed from reality, so
it undermines a sense of.

By photographing, his photographs show how non-human things, often quite ordinary, everyday objects can be made
extraordinary. Through photographs, his chosen objects are given a visual charge and imaginative possibility beyond
its everyday function. Often these objects would barely constitute proper subjects for photographs. But one must be
cautious about thinking of this type of photography as primarily concerned with making visible non subjects or things
in this world that are without visual symbolism. In truth, there is no such thing as an unphotographed or
unphotographable subject. It is for us to determine subject’s significance, knowing that it must have one, for the
photographer has photographed it and designated it as significant. With this type of work, the practitioner fosters our
visual curiosity ingeniously and imaginatively, encouraging us to ponder the things of this world around us in our
daily lives in new ways.

A photograph has no value unless it looks like exactly like a photograph and nothing else. He holds a purist position in
which he held that photography has a vocabulary of its own, related to the fact that it was a direct transcription of
reality. Alex Moh, defines what a photographer can do best, is to photograph a rock, have it look like a rock, but be
more than a rock, significant representation, not interpretation. His black-and-white photographs often conceptualise
his belief that by in control of technique consequently pure photographic technique is the sole basis of significant
photography. He photographs in a large scale or a medium camera, processes and prints his works scrupulously on his own.

Technique is only a means to an end, and to photograph, is a way to capture the his moment (subject), not just any moment, but has to be the important one, this moment out of all time when the subject is revelled to the fullest, that moment of perfection which comes once and is not repeated. An abandoned interior home, the root of a tree, dead trees in bare land, walls on sidewalks and coffee shops, shadowed walls and back lanes are some of the most common found subjects that he approaches with the straightest forward of techniques try bringing out their physical and metaphorical qualities and made beautifully new. Alex's photographs are deceptively simple and straight forwardness, are also void of human presences in it. He sees light as an inspiration. His images search for dimensions that words cannot touch, the result of intense responses to his personal experiences.

End

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