



A VOICE THROUGH THE LENSES

Photography forms part of our everyday lives, yet we have such little appreciation of the tradition of capturing history, day by day. Tan Kay Ngee shares with JUDY CHEONG why, unlike aged film, his passion for photography will never fade.

A flourishing photography scene in London not only sparked an interest in photography, but also helped build architect Tan Kay Ngee's knowledge in the medium.

Tan, a prominent architect, first discovered his interest in photography from his days in London, where he lived for 25 years before his return to Singapore to work on Singapore Management University (SMU). His frequent interactions with photographers and enthusiasts of the art and the gallery he frequented, which held shows every month, got him involved intimately in the art.

"Photography is about that split moment," says Tan, "where the light changes and the shadows emerge. Movement is so important." He asserts that photography is not merely a medium for capturing daily life, but which serves as an aesthetic representation of a second message. This second message embodies thoughts about humanity, and gives the minority a voice. "It's like a stage play," he elaborates, "where the lighting, music and people are summed up in that one moment, before it disappears."

Some of Tan's favourite photographers from Asia focus on messages that highlight social causes and concerns. Most of these works are painfully poignant, and often carry a tone of mockery towards its subjects. One of Tan's admired photographers is Chang Chien-Chi. Translating from Mandarin, Tan describes the Taiwanese's

photographer's work as a process of "finding happiness in bitterness."

He further emphasises that the best of photography often carries that "human touch", and can often be told through visually unpleasant images. These images, he says, "define something we dare not confront."

Tan brushes the status of money aside in comparison to the value of excellent photography. It is something that cannot be quantified, he believes, even as the world of fine art commands an increasing monetary value. "Culture cannot be weighed by money," he says, seriously. "It's from the heart."

Tan's collection of photography reflects the moments he speaks poignantly of. He keeps these collections in his homes in London, Turkey and Singapore. The office, in particular, is home to several photographs, each featuring a distinctive emotional value. Two such photographs hang in his private office. One depicts a street in night-time Vietnam. The other, a shot of Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) flats as seen in the background, with an arrow on the ground of a carpark in the foreground.

Unfortunately, as Tan notes, photography has not always been appreciated in Singapore. Photography, he says, is a serious art. To cultivate an appreciation here, Tan believes in presenting the best of photography through good curatorship, good lighting and above all, a good environment.



"The power of the photo is that it can grow on you," he says of the medium's intrinsic attraction to people, and likens it to being an acquired taste. "You might not get the message [while looking at a photo] the first time, but one day you might."

ICON DE MARTELL CORDON BLEU

The ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu, launched by Martell, is the inaugural award to recognise Singapore's promising photographic talents. The award is partnered with Month of Photography Asia to connect industry luminaries with this burgeoning community of photography enthusiasts.

Martell, with its celebrated history and founding values of discernment and excellence, continues its rich heritage through support of the arts in this field. "We hope 'ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu' serves as an inspirational platform to local photographers to pursue their creative endeavours and harness their artistic visions," says Paul-Robert Bouhier, managing director of Pernod Ricard Singapore.

The award, however, seeks to recognise photographers who have had a minimum of 5 years in practice, as it does not recognise emerging artists. Following that, the nomination criteria require that participants must have participated in international, regional and local exhibitions. He/she must also have had at least one solo exhibition locally.

The competition comprises two phases and begins with nominations of suitable candidates. This process began in March and will conclude in April 2010. The nomination committee

includes Emmeline Yong (partner, Objectifs Centre for Photography & Filmmaking); Bridget Tracy Tan (director, Art & Corporate knowledge, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts); Lindy Poh (curator and partner of Silver Rue Art Consultancy); Tan Kay Ngee (architect of Kay Ngee Tan Architects); and Milenko Prvacki (artist and Dean of the Faculty of Fine Art at La Salle College of the Arts). The top three finalists will be selected on 16 June 2010.

Looking at non-commercial works, the committee's focus is on photographers who show originality of vision through thought-provoking ideas. They will also look at the photographer's process and exploration of new concepts in a bid to demonstrate their commitment to the medium. The award seeks to "honour the totality of the artist's body of work and his/her art practice, and is not awarded based on a single image alone".

Following the nomination process, an international jury comprising international figures in the world of visual arts and photography will select the final winner of the award. The jury includes Martin Parr (Magnum photographer, Great Britain); Kwok Kian Chow (director, Singapore's National Arts Gallery); Eugene Tan (director of exhibitions, Osage Gallery); and Agnes de Gouvion Saint-Cyr (curator of Photography, France).

The Month of Photography Asia festival runs from 17 June to 23 July 2010, the award ceremony will mark the festival's commencement. The winner will not only receive a cash prize of S\$30,000, but will also have his/her published in an art book. The two finalists will receive S\$8,000 as prize, each.