

Laurence Aberhart's Macau & China

by John Batten

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For thirty years Laurence Aberhart has methodically and single-mindedly photographed New Zealand. His perseverance borders on the admirable - for although he is now considered one of New Zealand's most accomplished artists, he struggled for some years to gain recognition for the particular documentary photography that he has pursued.(1) Refreshingly adverse to art trends, his ostensibly simple, almost mundane and uncontrived images are rooted in 19th century photographic practice.

Aberhart's first substantial body of work was a series of 8x10 inch contact print photographs taken in 1981/82 when he travelled by car throughout New Zealand and photographed buildings, monuments, churches, statues, memorials and *marae*.(2) Many were, he considered, 'under threat' and he consciously undertook this series of documentation surmising that some objects would not be in existence or in a similar physical condition ten years later. Indeed, many of the photographed objects from this period now no longer exist.

Over the last twenty years his oeuvre has considerably widened with overseas photography trips to the following locations: USA (while on a Fulbright Travel Grant, 1988), Europe (Moet & Chandon Fellowship, 1994) and on organised trips to Hong Kong/Macau (1997 & 2000), Australia (1997 & 2000) and Japan (2001). These trips have focussed and expanded his work and Aberhart, who had until recently, considered that he had almost exhausted the photographic possibilities of New Zealand has had his enthusiasm revived by two recent residencies: a six-week residence at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (culminating in his 2000 exhibition *Where Shadows Dream of Light*) and a month in Macau hosted by the Macau Art Museum where his recently concluded exhibition *Ghostwriting: Photographs of Macau by Laurence Aberhart* has had such critical praise.

Aberhart first visited the former Portuguese enclave of Macau in Southern China in 1997 (see *Kwong Hing Tai Firecracker Manufacturing Company, Macau, 17 June 1997*) and he immediately recognised that this small colonial outpost contained all the elements that form the basis for his photographs. Aberhart uses a 8x10 inch view camera and his exposure times - depending on the available light - can be quite long; consequently, his work generally covers still objects: the detailed documentation of historic buildings and church interiors; monuments and memorials; and an impressive collection of landscape panoramas. There are, however, some strong themes running through all of his work and each can be seen in his Macau photographs:

- The documentation of subjects that are post-colonial; particularly objects that combine aspects of the original culture with those of the newer settler culture (see *Interior, The Chapel of St. Joseph Seminary, Macau*).
- Irony and 'black' humour (see *S. Mazzarello School, Macau*).
- A commitment to photograph objects under environmental or economic threat (see *Old Chiang Mansions, Macau*).

- To uniquely photograph objects that have become visual clichés (see *Last light View of China and Macau from Taipa*).
- A conscious effort to continue and contribute to 19th and early 20th century photographic traditions by photographing similar subject matter as his historical predecessors - following the work of, for example, the French photographer Eugene Atget and the American Walker Evans (see *Old House of Tang Shaoyi, Macau*).

There is a strong link between the 1981/2 New Zealand photographs and these recent Macau & China photographs. Aberhart prints his own photographs and he is a meticulous and exemplary printer. Back in New Zealand, where these photographs were printed, Aberhart decided to use photographic paper and processes that he has not used since his earlier 1981/82 photographs. For the first time in over 15 years, Aberhart procured supplies of contact print paper, gold chloride and selenium (both used as toners). The contact paper has a wider tonal range than normal photographic paper and the gold chloride and selenium toners combine to alternatively 'warm' and 'cool' an image - by under and over toning and manipulation an image moves through stages of what Aberhart refers to as "critical forms". He eventually decides what is 'perfect' when an image is transformed enough in the darkroom and he decides that this is the photograph that you will see. The irony (because he is ostensibly using equipment and printing techniques that date from the 19th century) is that the outcome - the photograph you do see - is of a quality far superior to any modern 35mm camera and the latest digital printing processes. All his photographs have superb resolution and a beautiful, almost otherworld, aura about them.

There are some additional elements to be seen in these Macau photographs:

- The 1981/82 photographs were a set of particularly powerful photographs if all seen together. Likewise, the 62 individual Macau images seen in *Ghostwriting* are an unusually extensive survey of contemporary Macau and are a powerful statement supporting Macau's architectural heritage. It could be argued that such a dedicated overview of Macau has not been tackled since 19th century photographers produced souvenir albums catering to visiting tourists.
- Aberhart's skyscapes, using a strong yellow photographic filter, are often dramatic. Macau's autumn haze, on the other hand, has rendered a subdued neutrality to the sky.
- The ghost-like smudgings of people wafting through many of the Macau photographs contrasts with New Zealand's relative emptiness and Aberhart's usual photographs devoid of any human presence.

Aberhart and his wife, Greta, stayed in Macau for one month during November and December 2000 and, except for a short trip to Toi Shan in China, woke early every day and spent the day walking and looking all around Macau. Some Macau photographs were never taken however, because of refusals to allow any photography. Aberhart does not "dwell on the misses", but irrational refusals to photograph were accepted with the retort: "Spain all over again!" (3). Much more unsettling was what was to become an oblique rallying cry for him. The Director of the Macau Art Museum, Ung Vai Meng, introduced some locations to Aberhart

but on visiting a potential site to photograph would exclaim: "Oh no, it's gone!" And this exclamation was heard on many occasions when Ung realised that a building that had stood solid only a few months earlier was now gone: often simply a victim of Macau's humidity and rain and a compliant landowner waiting for time and weather to make the property unsafe.

Macau's old historical buildings and districts are unique in Southern China. The best art often hits a nerve: much of Macau's Chinese cultural heritage is disappearing and Aberhart has consciously photographed temples, old tea-shops, medical and dental clinics and fortune-tellers. Much Portuguese/Macanese architecture was restored and preserved just prior to Macau's Handover to China in 1999, but Chinese architecture has seemingly not received the same attention. Aberhart has had a long-standing interest in 'things Chinese' in New Zealand (see his 1983 *Hop Yick Cheong* shop), and it was a natural starting point for him to vigorously pursue Macau's Chinese heritage that many consider to be threatened by development and modernity. *Ghostwriting* will take on even greater significance if it catalyses action to retain Macau's fast disappearing old buildings.

A side trip to the city of Toi Shan, about five hours by bus from Macau in China's Guangdong Province, saw Aberhart traipsing around a small, frenetic rural city and its surrounding unspoiled country villages. These photographs of China now link Aberhart with his 19th century Scottish predecessor, John Thompson, and the contemporary American photographer of Indo-China, Lois Connor, whose photographs using a large format banquet camera offer justified comparisons.

Photographers have stories about their photographs and the first photograph that Aberhart took in Toi Shan's surrounding villages was *Watchtower, near Toi Shan, 27 November 2000*, but behind the fence unseen in this photograph and in front of the watchtower was an enclosed sanctuary, a clean leaf-ridden pool that had a small pavilion situated at one end reached by a narrow bridge - inside the pavilion was a remarkable small ceramic photograph of a beautiful young woman, deceased; a classic Aberhart photograph if it was taken. It wasn't. For those who saw the composition, it remains indelible. The old man, keeper of this family shrine, refused the pavilion and its poignant contents a photograph - we all understood; yes, it was, possibly, just too beautiful to capture.

Aberhart has a quiet understanding and appreciation of different cultures and it says everything about his character that he has been allowed entry to such a wide range of buildings, churches, temples and businesses in all parts of the world. Aberhart himself is not (as some people may imagine from seeing his photographs) a dour and bleak loner. He has a studious interest in everything, country sense of time, dry sense of humour, and an understated meticulousness. He just "does what he does" with a commitment to simply show "a beautiful photograph".(4) His photographs of Southern China are an important and beautiful record of an area undergoing massive and irreversible physical, economic and political change.

NOTES:

1. Aberhart, however, has long been recognised by arts funding bodies and received generous support from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council in 1981, 1982, 1984 and 1988 and had a retrospective exhibition, *Nature Morte*, at the National Art Gallery (predecessor of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand) in Wellington in 1990.

2. *Marae*: The first settlers of New Zealand, the Maori, have their traditional land and community centred around *marae*; comprising of a meeting house, kitchen and housing. Many of Aberhart's 1981/2 photographs were taken on *marae* throughout New Zealand's North Island. See for example: Roger Neith, *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1993, pp 121-131.

3. Aberhart had many refusals while visiting Spain in 1994 and a similar Iberian attitude in Macau denied the Clube de Macau and the Filipino Tabaqueria being photographed.

4. Many of the ideas outlined in this essay were formed after informal conversations with Laurence Aberhart between 1997 to 2001 in Hong Kong, New Zealand, Macau and Toi Shan. This essay is adapted from the author's essay in the Macau Art Museum's catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Ghostwriting: Photographs of Macau by Laurence Aberhart*.

***Ghostwriting: Photographs of Macau by Laurence Aberhart*, Macau Art Museum, 1 August 2001 - 6 January 2002. *Laurence Aberhart: Macau & China*, John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong, 5 - 27 August 2001.**

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