



Clockwise from top,

So Hing Keung, two portraits from 'Southern China' series, C-type photographs, 1997

Michael Wolf, 'Two Women on Holiday, Fujian Province, 1999', Lamda print, 2003

So Hing Keung: 'Central, Hong Kong, 2002', and 'Central, Hong Kong, 1999', silver gelatin and sepia-toned photographs. All images courtesy of John Batten Gallery

COLLECTING CONTEMPORARY ASIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

By John Batten

Everyone likes a bargain and in the art world finding good art at a reasonable price can be daunting - however, when you really put yourself to the task, there is reasonably priced art available. Possibly not within the 'high art' area, but at the design and popular culture ends of the art spectrum there is art that, once collected, makes an impressive statement. Just think of toys, Chinese Cultural Revolution posters, film posters, decorative ceramics etc - the individual beauty of these objects is enhanced by being seen as a considered group: 'a collection'.

Collecting photography, I believe, is open to all - no matter your budget. Photography is also understandable to most people: we have all looked into a viewfinder, clicked the shutter and taken photographs. The technical vagaries of photography need not be a barrier to appreciating photography, but - like most pursuits - understanding what is 'good' and 'bad' takes time and requires the building of knowledge.

I believe it is essential for photography collectors to understand the history of photography - to appreciate

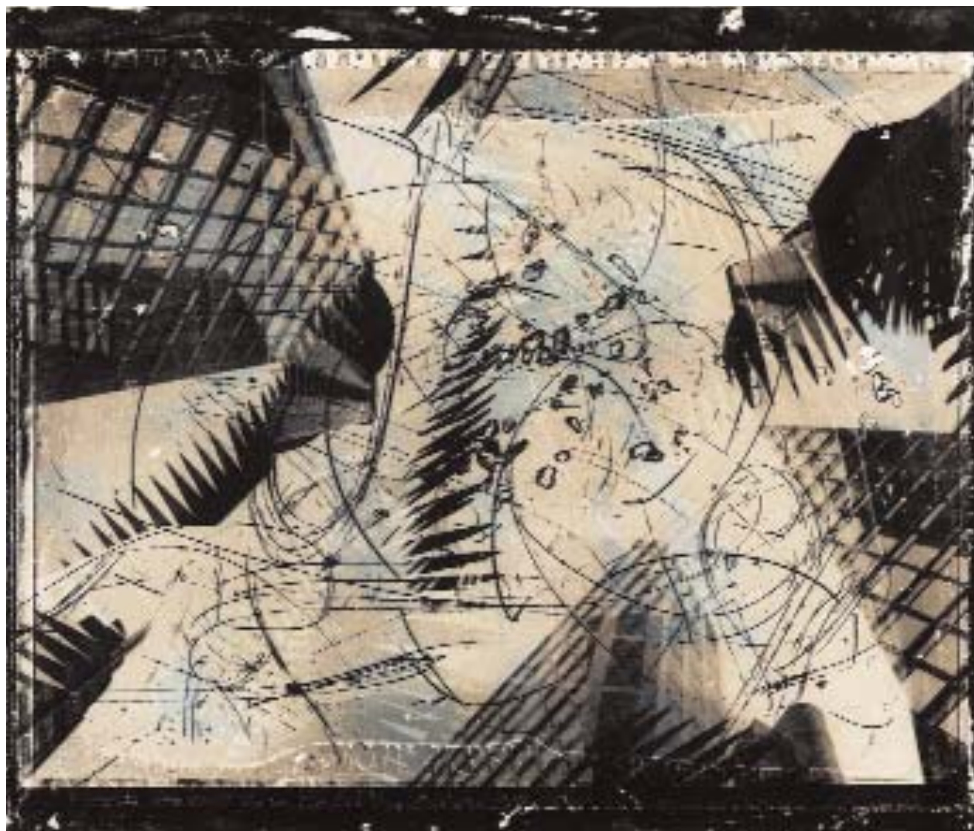
the episodes of technical advance that influenced the final image that the viewer sees and to gain a greater understanding of the intent of individual photographers: the documentation of Egypt done in the 1850s by Francis Frith; the locomotion experiments and formidable panorama photographs of Eadward Muybridge; the difficulties of photographers on-the-move (carting cumbersome glass plates, chemicals and portable darkrooms) such as John Thompson in China in the 1860s; the obsessive need to record a city undergoing massive changes such as the Parisian Eugene Atget undertook over a forty year period around the turn of the 20th century; the German August Sander's monumental series of portrait photographs; the photographing of



seemingly banal objects (advertising and road signage) done by Walker Evans in the USA; photography taken in extreme conditions, such as Frank Hurley's photographs of the Antarctic taken on Shackelton's ill-fated exploration of 1914-17; and, the advances in photojournalism that the work of Weegee achieved. If these names are meaningless to you; I can assure you that you have seen their photographs: each have produced indelible, iconic images that have shaped and visually articulated our view of the world. They are also amongst photography's pantheon of standard-bearers from which all photographers are judged.

A knowledge of the history of photography is essential to focus and articulate your likes and dislikes about particular individual photographers and their work - a knowledge of photographic history means you can judge how and why a particular photograph falls within the photographic canon. With knowledge and time, these judgements become second nature and your viewing becomes confident and the photographs you buy will reflect your knowledge.

I love browsing for old photographs in second-hand shops - lots of family and travel photographs; often simple snapshots, occasional old





Laurence Aberhart:
'Fortune Teller, Ruo do
Almirante Sergio,
Macau, 2000', Gelatin
silver, gold chloride and
selenium toned print.
Image courtesy of John
Batten Gallery

stereo-cards, film publicity shots - most are mundane and of no interest, but small (and cheap) great photographs can be found; there is no intrinsic value in these photographs: the photographers are usually all unknown amateurs or nameless studio photographers, but this does not detract from the fact that the actual photographs can often be excellent. An interesting collection can be built from this humble scavenging - indeed, in the USA there are collectors of 'found' photography and exhibitions have been held at leading public galleries based around unknown and amateur photographers.

But most photography collectors purchase their photographs from galleries or direct from photographers who are not represented by dealers. Hong Kong's leading photographer is probably So Hing Keung - his work deals with a variety of subjects, but all is pure documentary: he records a changing and psychologically taut Hong Kong with his Hong Kong series using a polaroid camera - each photograph is unique: embellished by distressing and scratching the negative and then putting a sepia tone through the final image. He has also photographed extensively in China and his Southern China series specifically documents over a ten-year period the Chiu Chow village of Chaoyang in Northern Guangdong.

A few months ago I visited Taipei and visited Taiwanese photographer Chen Sun-chu's latest exhibition at IT Park (a semi-commercial space run by a photographer that exhibits innovative art). I think his on-going portrait series and pre-occupation with his own family will become one of the great bodies of photographic work taken by any Asian

photographer. I also admire his work because it is not bound by constricting taboos and political correctness: his latest large-scale colour photographs are set in the physical confines of family burial plots.

There is a long history of Western photographers working in Asia, including over the last 50 years Henri Cartier-Bresson and Marc Riboud. Recently, Lois Connor's use of a large-format banquet camera on her yearly visits to China and Vietnam have produced a seminal collection of beautiful silver gelatin and platinum prints and these placed alongside her work in her native USA makes her one of the world's outstanding contemporary photographers.

Hong Kong-based Michael Wolf is a freelance photojournalist who has been working in China, predominantly for the German Stern magazine, over the last nine years and whose on-going explorations of Hong Kong have produced an important series of work: his Architecture of Density series depicts Hong Kong's large housing developments - these front-on photographs depict endless clinical grids of apartments as well as their inhabitants' attempt to personalise their outwardly anonymous homes. Together with his Backdoor series (see the forthcoming Thames and Hudson publication), Michael's Hong Kong work will be seen to be groundbreaking in future years.

New Zealand photographer Laurence Aberhart was invited to Macau in 2000 by the Macau Museum of Art to document a changing Macau and his later exhibition (and catalogue: Ghostwriting: Photographs of Macau by Laurence Aberhart) at the Museum displayed sixty of his 8 x 10 inch contact print photographs of Macau - reminiscent of the 19th century photograph albums that travellers visiting Hong Kong or Macau would purchase as a memento of their visit. Aberhart's photography

Hong Kong's
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**Chen Shun-chu:
Memories of the Wind,
C-type photograph.
Image courtesy of
Hanart TZ Gallery**



**Chen Shun-chu's
work is not
bound by
political
correctness**

is photography at its purest and in the mould of Eugene Atget or Walker Evans. He has since photographed in China and Japan (adding to his extensive work in Europe, New Zealand, Australia and USA).

Thai photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom is regularly seen at art biennials and is well known for his social realist imagery using 'the pink man' as the protagonist. The pink man - who in real life is a well-known Thai actor, dressed in a bright pink suit - is depicted serenely standing amongst scenes of chaos. Manit's manipulated images often make use of distressing photographs (usually press agency photographs) from recent Thai history - one of his most notorious photographs depicts the pink man standing as accuser (of the then military government) amongst on-lookers staring at the bodies of dead students strung on trees adjacent to the Royal Palace in Bangkok in the student riots of 1973.

Seen alongside such powerful political social commentary as Manit Sriwanichpoom, contemporary Chinese photography seems almost trite. However, it is Chinese photography that will most be seen in the world's public museums - curators are pre-occupied with China and governments are keen to promote trade by encouraging cultural and art exchanges; so, money is available for Chinese art exhibitions; whereas the Philippines and Indonesia - who it could be argued have equally if not more talented artists - are much less seen.

A phenomena that is almost solely seen in China is that artists work with a wide range of media e.g. painters will also make videos, take photographs, do performance pieces and installations - thus, a 'Chinese Photography Exhibition' may well comprise photography done by artists who merely use photography as an extension to their wider artistic practice. These artists have become masters of digital manipulation, cutting and collaging -

the power of Photoshop has taken the place of stringent measuring of light, subject composition and meticulous darkroom techniques. The presented photograph (usually a digitally printed image) will often be of material that will shock the viewer. These generally glossy gratuitous images will be presented with little or no social or political context or comment - in keeping with the Chinese State's intolerance of overt criticism.

China does, of course, have some excellent photographers and these serious photographers should form the backbone of a Chinese photography collection. Luo Yongjin's austere black and white photographs of industrial buildings and abandoned domestic apartment buildings is reminiscent of the famous German husband/wife photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher.

Liu Zheng's documentary photography is excellent and his historical tableaux - such as his Peking Opera Series is some of the best narrative type photography done in China at the moment. I love panorama photographs: Zhuang Hui's recent panorama photographs of workers and work units fits into China's long history of such photography and is itself important work.

One photographer whose digital photographs are impressive is Weng Fen: his Wall Straddle series is enigmatic and begs so many questions for the viewer. He has used the same idea - originally young schoolgirls but since expanded to include families and the elderly - of someone staring into a distant series of skyscrapers or, recently, to a seascape horizon line.

Collecting contemporary Asian photography just requires knowledge and a practised eye - good luck.

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