

Leong Ka Tai's Portraits of the City

by John Batten

Hong Kong's heroes are of the obvious kind: dubious businessmen and publicity-hyped movie, TV and singing stars. Sporting heroes, skilled artisans, social activists, artists, scientists and those that excel in any 'non-mainstream' field are rarely honoured. However, Hong Kong's flirtation with its own glittery image – a 1990s phenomena - is possibly waning as a post-colonial reality sets in, thus Leong Ka Tai's recent project in photographing the unseen heroes of this city is both timely and an example of the re-judgement of Hong Kong's character (especially by daily newspapers) currently prevalent – this is an attempt to get at a more real or 'under-belly' characterisation of Hong Kong.

Leong Ka Tai's previous photographic projects have included photographing various aspects of China and Macau and this series of portraits was motivated by the knowledge that Hong Kong's real heroes are not obvious, are generally unknown, and certainly ignored by the taste-makers of this town. A Hong Kong magazine typically only features the young, the fit, the healthy, the sexy and, of course, the rich. The rest of the world is possibly no different, but compared to Hong Kong there seem to be further checks and balances in other places and a greater range of channels for acknowledging success in its varied forms.

Leong's Hong Kong heroes are people that are not prominent, not celebrities and not well known. Leong set out to photograph people who fell into three categories – those that: 1/ overcame some type of adversity; 2/ demonstrated a special achievement or 3/ helped others. Leong canvassed opinions from a wide range of people for suggestions of who might be heroes...choices were made and Leong photographed.

The Spirit of the City is both an exhibition that will travel around Hong Kong and a (small print run) book. In the exhibition Leong will show a series of 12x18 inch black and white photographs to be accompanied by a short explanatory text for each portrait. The text is succinct and precise and compliments the photography. For each of the forty exhibited portraits the subject is named and their education level declared – this is a conscious label to emphasise that education is not a necessity to attain achievement.

The diminutive Tong King Sum chisels, scrapes and polishes huge wooden blocks of wood to create smooth sinuous abstract (with a hint of the figurative) wooden sculptures. Large-scale sculpture requires the sculptor to move and manipulate his material – this is a basic for any sculptor. In Leong's photograph we are presented with a semi side-profile of Tong, the cast light creating an almost-angelic face of a grey haired man with an off-focus image of one of his wooden sculptures in the background. On closer inspection (but not before) the photograph reveals a set of plastic tubes leading from Tong's nostrils and faintly seen is the top of Tong's crutches. Tong is a remarkable sculptor and a remarkable man for as a child he suffered bone tuberculosis and his vertebrae was damaged; hunch-backed and now requiring support from a mobile oxygen-machine Tong does work that even the able-bodied would shun.

Leong presents such a hero with their disability acknowledged but not highlighted. "I wanted to present people with dignity." And as proof of this Tong

himself reminded the photographer that his disability does not actually interfere with his work as an artist: "I would still be an artist whether I was disabled or not....".

Portraiture is a prominent genre in the history of photography and almost anyone possessing a camera does it of their family or friends: holiday snapshots, birthday and other celebrations, a passport photograph, a wedding, the newspaper mug-shot/portrait to accompany an article. Portraiture is both universal and mirrors aspects of our society. Leong's photographs are relaxed images – like many of his generation he read 'Life' magazine and later became familiar with the work of photojournalists and especially W. Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand: all possessing a relaxed natural approach to photography.

Leong's portraits depict an angle to the character of his subject; a mood and feeling is depicted; a psychological moment is presented, but the physical setting is usually kept within the familiar environment of the subject's work or home. A narrative is constructed – but it is a story understandable to all. Leong portraits continue an exemplary photographic tradition that begins with the remarkable 19th century French photographer Félix Nadar; moving to the more familiar modernist photographs of the social realist Dorothea Lange and 'environmental portraits' of Arnold Newman.

Leong is aware that much contemporary photography is confrontational and sensational – a viewer's attention is grabbed by the amount of shock that can be pulled from the moment. Leong has intentionally kept *The Spirit of the City* a positive exploration and there is no overt tugging of the heartstrings, induced sympathy and guilty sadness imposed on the viewer. Leong has successfully achieved his aim to "remind us of what we have all known all along: we too can be heroes, all of us".

Fruit Chan's portrait is one of the strongest depicted in the exhibition. He is seen in an eerie narrow tiled passageway, brightly fluorescent lit, a hospital-clinical-atmosphere, at the rear of the passage is a hazy half-profiled figure. Chan is holding his hand across his mouth, faced angled, close-up. I have seen Chan's movies and this particular setting is not the Chan - film director - I am familiar with, but this portrait of Chan is so accurate, so mysteriously accurate....this passageway is actually the entrance to one of Hong Kong's only underground toilets – sadly, recently renovated – and Leong has captured Chan in a light moment when his subject had just stated "...public toilet – must smell!" grasping his nose. The shutter clicked and the moment captured. An iconic photograph worthy of this fine film director.

Leong acknowledges that his heroes are only representative of the many that are in Hong Kong. Chui Fu Lung represents the old, slowly fading Hong Kong. A master engraver who is one of the last of his kind in Hong Kong – his skills used in engraving the plates for the printing of banknotes where the slight three-dimensional texture of the engraving after the printing process is complete adds a security feature to stop counterfeiting. Leong's photograph of Chui is a fine subjective interpretation of the craftsman at work.

Each of Leong's portraits is accompanied by a quotation from each subject. Yu Chui Yee is a fencing gold-medal winner and her words take on an almost moral maxim: "I am not afraid to fail. It is far more important to discover the cause of one's defeat and then to overcome it." This embodies many of the sentiments in this exhibition – Yu lost one of her feet to cancer and although only 17 years old has the determination and maturity of a much older person. Leong's portrait is a complex series of layers – a wheelchair, a pointed sword, a determined subject and in the background, training-room flotsam. It is the sort of photograph with its captioned sentiment that should be a guilty reminder to many of Hong Kong's decision-makers. I wonder will they see this exhibition?

If they knew Zunzi appears as a hero then maybe they won't.....

Leong placed Zunzi in the middle of a busy pedestrian crossing on Queen's Road Central. Zunzi the cartoonist, the social activist, the *bête-noir* of politicians and Chief Executives is seen where he works; no, not the table where his daily cartoons are drawn – but outside, amongst people; a variety of characters and opinions: it is the only place for a cartoonist to draw ideas and inspiration. How else can you reflect the concerns of society, mirror and embellish opinions, introduce irony and humour; and subtly challenge? Leong, in his choice of Zunzi, is promoting a hero that you and I know is a hero; but is of a type that will never receive Official Recognition and never be nominated for the Grand Bauhinia Medal!

The Zunzi portrait? A facemask drawn by Zunzi covers Zunzi's face: a perfectly appropriate portrait.

The set-piece photograph of Law Kar sitting, surrounded by film reels and cans is staged by the photographer. Law Kar, the indomitable film buff, critic and now archivist has a photogenic face – a raw soft intellectual face. Leong's portrait captures the spirit of the sitter – there is not much to say; the photograph says it all. Likewise with Fung Hing Hei, another staged photograph....

Fung sits at a toy piano replete with candles – a seemingly comical setting. Leong hovers his camera above the pianist – the angle of the shot, the seriousness of the sitter, the dour concert dress suit and the simple tiled floor make the photograph a serious portrait. Leong successfully recreates the simple flat in which Fung lives in New York, adds musical props to create what appears to be a wide-angled lens effect and presents a man beginning his career in the hard-knocks world of being a concert pianist.

Leong's photographs are not hero worship. His heroes are presented without the usual hype, gossip and innuendo. They are heroes for what they do and what they will do in the future. Surely, this is the only judge of a person's worth?

Leong Ka Tai: *The Spirit of the City*

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