



Around the streets of Hong Kong, Manila and Bangkok with Rick Martin, meeting many of the props in his photographs and a dry humoured rapport with the landscape – it is territory that he must have also tramped in Adelaide, but the seediness could never have been as abundant and the faded-glory interiors would have long ago been tidied and rented out at an annual return [guaranteed!] of not less than 8%.

Adelaide, I suppose, grew tiresome. Possibly Australia, too. All places become parochial, but your hometown – well, the best vitriol is always reserved for hometowns after the leaving. Rick Martin the Adelaide photographer, has now earned his stripes as 'Rick Martin, international artist' after residencies in France, Ireland, the USA and [currently] Thailand. His work crosses continents and comprises Europe, North America and Asia. Like the best generalisations these boxes omit that 'Europe' is Dublin and Belfast; and 'Asia' is Hong Kong and Bangkok, but, hey [to any cynics], Martin joins only a small handful of artists that have gone and done something in these diverse locations.

Rick Martin has completed four recent series of work in Asia since his first visit to Hong Kong in 1999. In Hong Kong itself: *Beautiful City*, *Helpers* and *Cha Chan Teng*, and in Bangkok, *Golden Palace*.

# RICK MARTIN: ASIAN EPIPHANY

JOHN BATTEN



Completed while a studio resident at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in the USA, his exhibition *Irwin Hotel*, seen at CACSA in 1999, is a precursor to Martin's current work. *Irwin Hotel* was a series of images of hotel rooms, barren snow-swept night 'scapes, ubiquitous perspective-dying highways, and cars – juxtaposed with the scratched, scarred torso-surface of the SR71, an aeroplane that carried sophisticated photographic equipment to spy on Cold War Russia. The incongruity of these disparate photographs created a questioning narrative about personal fears, hotel room anonymity, cultural direction and our place in the world of bigger forces.

*Beautiful City* is a newcomer's glimpse into a recently arrived city; featuring autobiographical interests and two iconic/illustrative Hong Kong places – the Mido Cafe and Neptune 2 Bar & Disco in Wan Chai. The Mido is a quiet oasis in a noisy area of Yau Ma Tei on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong and of classic cha chan teng design. Cha chan teng is the Chinese name for a Western-style coffee shop; examples can be found throughout Hong Kong and serve [Western] tea, coffee, soft drinks, and Western-style versions of Chinese food and Chinese-style versions of Western food. Martin photographed panoramic views of the Mido's large upstairs room of tables and chairs, condiment containers, menus and smaller format photographs of the tiled wall decoration. In his *Beautiful City* exhibition these images were counter-pointed by large photographs of people dancing in the strobe-shocked light of Neptune 2 Disco. The juxtaposition of imagery becomes meaningful when it is understood that the Mido is frequented by predominantly Chinese customers in an area known for prostitution, pimping and drugs while Neptune is a hangout for Westerners and [at the time of photographing] Filipina domestic helpers<sup>1</sup> having a good time. Seemingly, the Mido looks safe and comfortable while the frenetic Neptune indicates danger and risk – in fact, the reverse is true. Martin captures a version of Hong Kong's 'true spirit' by combining both documentary and a narrative style of presentation in these two *Beautiful City* locations.

Two obvious follow-up subjects emanated from *Beautiful City: Helpers* – a documentary and pseudo-narrative series of photographs of Filipina domestic helpers' bedroom interiors. And, inspired by the architecture and sub-cultures that frequented the Mido Cafe, came the pure documentary photographs of many of Hong Kong's other historic cha chan teng.

Martin himself explains in the exhibition catalogue his initial motivation for undertaking the *Helpers* series of photographs when he visited a friend for the first time:

*I walked down the narrow corridor under the remains of a plywood Doric column which had been cut away to allow for a doorway which lead to her room. Outside her friends were cooking a meal on a portable gas stove. Fluoro tubes buzzed light. This invitation to dinner was my first introduction to the many levels of living circumstances in Hong Kong and the extraordinary disparity of conditions and income... But it was the first time I saw the rooms in Pak Sha Road... I wanted to photograph these compact, densely filled environments. All the elements of sacrifice, the temporary paraphernalia and individual personality seemed distilled in each of those rooms.<sup>2</sup>*



And the rooms' contents Martin depicts are touching: family photographs – children, absent husbands, crucifixes, tacky posters, toiletries and cosmetics, cuddly [often plastic-protected] toys, neatly made-up single beds, depictions of first communions and weddings, signage: 'NOTHING GONNA CHANGE MY LOVE FOR YOU', always a stereo, TV or guitar in a corner... and the most extraordinary Martin photograph depicting the unlikely combination of a row of hanging Teletubbies alongside a formidably forgiving Christ. In our Western secular world of forgotten idolatry the Philippine vision is Brueghel-like, chaotic, strangely comforting. Quaint.

Martin's essay anticipates the sting however. Martin also depicts in his socio-political photo-essay alternate living conditions. One image: an almost slum-like Hong Kong rooftop of twisted wires and television aerials. Another: the foyer of one of Hong Kong's better class apartment blocks – faux-period furniture and a fantastic Hong Kong Harbour view and enough room to house fifty boarding-house rooms. And a roadway bounded by Hong Kong's mightily crowded skyline with the word 'SPACE' hanging as an almost-challenge.

*Helpers* is a poignant memorial to the Philippine diaspora – a worldwide community of overseas workers that bankrolls a country and fills planeloads in the days before the start of Holy Week [no, not Christmas; Easter!]. Martin's photographs will be exhibited later this year in Manila.

Martin and I visited Ngau Tau Kok, Central, Sheung Shui, Yau Ma Tei, To Kwa Wan, Tuen Mun and Sheung Wan – widespread Hong Kong locations that have evolved into the *Cha Chan Teng* exhibition: a series of over fifty photographs that depict Hong Kong's equivalent of the traditional Australian pub or British 'greasy spoon' cafes – places to sit, read the paper, relax, have coffee and a quick meal.

*Cha Chan Teng* is an important series of photographs as the depicted interiors are overtly Chinese with many unchanged from the time of the 1949 Communist takeover on the Mainland when a profusion of these cafes sprouted as places to privately eat, drink and entertain outside the extremely crowded flats where people lived. They are the type of place where waiters will nudge each other to be the unfortunate to take an order from the [presumably non-Cantonese speaking] gweilo customers.<sup>3</sup> Martin, the outsider, has been able to

capture these cha chan teng precisely because he is a gweilo. Local Hong Kong photographers have probably dismissed undertaking similar subject matter because their presence would raise too many questions: 'who are you?'; 'why are you photographing us?' etc. Hong Kong's cha chan teng are often the sort of places where men typically depicted in some of Hong Kong's colourful and violent triad movies hang out.<sup>4</sup>

*Golden Palace* is probably the most ambitious project to date as Martin's photographs deal with issues that are potentially unsettling. The actual Golden Palace Hotel located near the good-time-bar area of Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road is the setting for the majority of Martin's black and white photographs. Such hotels are prevalent throughout Southeast Asia: Chinese owned and managed, large and faded, built in the boom years of the Vietnam War, a wooden inlaid pearl-shell grandfather clock in Reception repetitively ticking its timeless chant.

Martin and his girlfriend, Kim Kee, appear in many of these photographs – voyeuristic glimpses of a breast, penis, back, face; a watery sexuality: submerged in the bath or bathed in sweat in bed. The *Irwin Hotel* style anonymity – overtly sexual this time – depicted. The hotel's rooms are non-descript, jumble wired, mirrored for angled viewing pleasure, the signaged towels seemingly theft proof but proof that this place is really here. Martin's images then jump to abstracted impressions of a clichéd Thailand beauty: depictions of upside down water-mirrored temples in Sukhothai – the ancient capital north of Bangkok – and near Kim Kee's home-town of Buri Ram in Thailand's northeast.

Back at the Golden Palace Hotel, guests [surprisingly, many married couples] are older than middle-aged and have maturity's liberty: they leave conformity and coyness to the young; taking up the beachbum/sex-monger's retort: "Enjoy the Life!".

#### Notes

1 Filipinas: women from the Philippines

2 See Rick Martin, *Helpers* catalogue, 2002: 1–2

3 Gweilo literally means 'ghost man', now a common Cantonese term for foreign person, specifically a man. Traditionally abusive, its use is so common that most people would sensibly consider that it has lost its abusive base

4 See for example Fruit Chan's movie *Little Cheung* [Cantonese: *Cheung Sai-lo*]

Clockwise from top right: Rick Martin, *Cha Chan Teng* series – *Cat Street*, Sheung Wan, 2002; *Helpers* series – *Helper's Room*, Sheung Wan, 2002; *Cha Chan Teng* series – *Sheung Wan*, 2002; *Beautiful City* series – *Neptune 2 Disco*, 2000. Photos courtesy the artist and John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong

