

From revolutions to real-life saints

The photo exhibition “Figures of Speech”, at the Shanghai Center of Photography takes an intimate look at portrait photography. The photographers include Fan Ho, Meng Minsheng, Stanley Lau, Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong. Shanghai Daily reporter Liu Xiaolin talked with some of the photographers.

Stanley Fung

In photography, minister finds earthly divinity

In a way, Stanley Fung says, photography is a religious act. Capturing a certain moment and recording it is “an act to fight against the flow of time,” Fung said. “It’s an art of timeliness ... All the moments I’ve filmed are those most meaningful in my chaotic life. The pursuit of eternity is similar to religion,” he told Shanghai Daily.

Having worked as a minister for more than a decade, Fung linked his ministry and his photography skills with his faith, which lead to a collection of portrait photos featuring Biblical characters. The series currently on show at the Shanghai Center of Photography (SCoP) is named “Dust Icons,” and showcases figures such as King David and Samuel the Prophet as well as the Virgin Mary.

Fung said the idea of “dust” comes from the beginning of the Old Testament that describes how God created human beings from dust. “Human beings are no different from dust — the most low-born thing one can think of — in terms of fundamental materiality,” Fung said. “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.”

All characters are embodied by his parishioners, because he is “too shy to take photos of strangers,” the photographer said. He believes that those biblical figures are just like all ordinary ones

“We all are struggling with everyday life and various choices. It’s just they somehow felt connected with God and responded to his summons despite their struggles,” Fung added, “just like my parishioners and I did.”

Liu Heung Shing, the Pulitzer-winning photographer and founder of the SCoP, said he was impressed by the relationship of the photographer and the models. “It is exceptional. You can tell the complete trust toward the photographer through the look in their eyes, their facial expressions and body language,” he said. “This is why I often say the images go beyond the words.”

Among the photos exhibited is a portrait of a deceased Taiwan native gospel singer named Xiao Wen. She was diagnosed with rectal cancer when she was pregnant. The doctor advised her to stop pregnancy and receive surgery. She refused and insisted to give birth to the child.



“The Waiting Virgin,” 2008

“She told the doctor that she could not think of any reason why a mother would sacrifice her child to save her own life,” Fung recalled.

Xiao Wen suffered through great pain during the pregnancy. After the baby was born, her condition deteriorated. She received repeated surgeries, had her stomach, liver and more organs removed. Eight days before she died, her husband asked Fung to portrait her for her husband and child.

“I was very nervous that day. When I went over to her to pull back her hair, she held onto my hand and said to me: ‘Minister, I only have one chance. Please do not stop until you have the perfect photo’,” Fung recalled. “She died at 33, the exact age Jesus died on the cross.”

“As a woman, she married the man she loves. As a mother, she gave her child all she had. She said she has no regrets,” he continued.

He named Xiao Wen’s portrait “The Lord’s Handmaiden.”

The setting for the photos is his office in his Taipei church. Most of the costumes are made with second-hand clothes the church collected. The props are handmade. The light always comes in from the left because there’s only one window in his office. All the photos are black and white. “Black-and-white photos are more abstract and lend some historical color,” he said.

“The Bible is not an invention of some religious talent, but a compiled collection of stories over the ages. I want to pass down the historical meaning.”

Juan I-Jong, a Taiwan photographer, said Fung’s works had “the most depth” he had ever seen in Chinese photography. “Through all these faces, Fung tries to show the naiveness of the newborn, the purity of souls, the shackles of destiny, the maze of exploration, the crave for being saved, the understanding after repentance and the constant faith,” he once wrote.

However, Fung never considered himself as an artist. To him, photography is just another way to preach.

“Almost all the forms of art are originated in religious beliefs, to serve the religion. They sure are ways to embellish life, but art itself is gradually idolized,” Fung said. “For example, Cai Yuanpei (a well-known Chinese educator) once said that religion should be replaced with aesthetics. The divinity has been lost, and what I am doing is to try to find it again.”



“The Lord’s Handmaiden,” 2012



“Son of Gospel,” 2011

“Figure of Speech”

Date: Through February 29
Venue: Shanghai Center of Photography
Address: 2555-1 Longteng Ave

Leung Chi Wo & Sara Wong

Highlighting history's accidental photo extras

Hong Kong photographers Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong's "Lost" series started with the picture of a Tokyo train station taken in 1955. The picture taken in Ota ward was rediscovered in a photo album five years ago when they were working for a public art festival in Tokyo. A woman in one of the pictures drew their attention.

"Even though I had no idea why I cared so much, I wanted to find out her identity immediately," Wong recalled. "I started to imagine who she was... 'She must be 80 now; Does she still live in the ward?' I thought to myself."

The duo then redid the photo and stuck it on the window of the Yaguchi-no-Watashi Station, where the original picture was taken.

"It is a kind of connection between us and the woman. We want to find her, but also know that it's likely impossible. This is what we feel is interesting," Wong said.

Since then, they started to collect all kinds of printed matter, such as calendars, old newspaper and magazines, and records, to preserve those artifacts that carry "lost identities" — people who have become part of a photograph by accident.

In 2013, Leung and Wong established the Museum of the Lost in Hong Kong to preserve this collection of images. Each image is paired with a note that offers their own interpretation of the character.

Currently at SCoP, they give those anonymous figures center stage. "He was lost yesterday and we found him" features Leung and Wong dressed up and posing exactly like the people in the older photos.

"We have magnified the photos in hopes of the viewers can walk up and have a close look at the details," Leung said. Wong added they tried to recreate the characters by paying attention to even the smallest detail. "Most people never care about these things," Leung said, mocking herself. "Maybe it is

because we are so boring in real life."

"It was like reading books by Haruki Murakami. I am really obsessed with his detailed descriptions, without much adjectives, sometimes monotonous, even," Wong said.

Q: Why are you so obsessed with finding "lost" characters?

Wong: Every day we see a lot of pictures. But there are always some very special figures in some of the pictures, people who appeared there for unknown reasons. They are not who the photographers were focusing on. They just happened to be there at that time.

What we understand about photography is you click and then this critical moment is saved as an image which later becomes history. In this series, we are more interested in discovering some forgotten figures. Those figures are not entirely indifferent. At least those pictures are proofing their existence. It's just that we don't know who they are.

Q: Why do you choose these characters? What makes them so special?

Leung: The criteria of choosing is a bit subjective. We've seen a lot of materials, only a few were kept. Sometimes we also wonder why they are so appealing to us.

Wong: We actually don't know why we care so much about them at first... But later we do find some common things in these characters. First of all, they are all unidentified. There was once a person we were so interested in that we did a massive amount of research. Yet we suddenly lost our interest when we managed to figure out who the person is.

Leung: It was as if you run into a stranger on street and getting to learn more about him or her.

Wong: Yes. When you come between known and unknown, when you are



"Photojournalist With Two Cameras"



"Japanese Housewife Scratching Her Back"

trying to figure out the person through all the traces, there's a lot of room for imagination.

Another thing is when we make them the main characters and omit all the backgrounds, they each become an independent figure against single-color background. The focus is then all on their body, which is a bit awkward but interesting.

Q: Why did you decide to play these characters yourself?

Wong: When we did the research, we gradually felt strongly connected with them, which was a lot of fun. In a couple of cases, we did find the position where the photographers took the pictures, so we can entirely see the image. It is impressive to relive the process. Naturally, we want to present these characters who are rarely seen in these pictures. The series can be called self-portraits, because these characters are actually all us. But we don't just imitate them. We write for each of them, create pseudo stories. It is how we understand them, part of which may be their true story, or not.

Q: Do you try to restore every detail of these characters?

Wong: Most of them, yes. But some of the pictures are of low resolution, so there isn't a lot of information. But we try to figure out by following many traces. If we know the picture is taken in the 1940s, we will then look at other pictures from that period of time, and presume what the character should be like. Or watch videos to understand why the characters pose the way they do. Sometimes I would imagine what the character was doing before and after the moment he or she was photographed.

I always think the critical moment that one clicks the shutter is quite poetic. In one-thousandth of a second, you let in the light. But when we shot this series, we extend that moment. There's a huge contrast.



"Beauty"



"The Awakening African People"

Meng Minsheng

Meng Minsheng's romantic portraits

Most of the some 100,000 camera films photographer Meng Minsheng has taken record Hong Kong's society and all its walks of life from the 1950s to the 1980s. He focused his lens on ordinary Hong Kong people such as fishermen, dockers, factory workers, private workshops and tram-cars, and documented the life and social transition of the port city during that period of time.

Yet when senior Meng passed away in 2007 and his son, Meng Jialin, went through his stuff, he was surprised to find a dozen photographic works featuring the revolutionary images.

"He never showed anyone these photos nor have these works been published. It took six people more than half a month to sort out the films," Meng Jialin told Shanghai Daily.

Born in Shanghai, Meng Minsheng went to work in Hong Kong in the 1950s. He worked in the filming studio of Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd, and other

companies and food stores, and became obsessed with photography.

From 1964 to 1969, he shot a series of posing photos that show the revolution from his perspective. With the help of a close scenic artist, he set up a scene in Hong Kong's Sun Beam Theatre and asked actors to deduce the revolutionary images.

"The photos are very post-modern, which can be labeled today as conceptual photography," said Meng Jialin, who is also a photographer and photo editor. "Yet a few decades ago, my father has already found the approach to express his nostalgia, deep patriotism and personal commitment to the revolutionary spirit."

The photo "Storm in Mountain Village" was inspired by a Cantonese drama that depicts how the Communist partisan soldiers fought their south China. To create a photo of "awakening Africans" fighting for independence, the photographer found a couple of Hong Kong

sailors who had once been to the Africa and dressed them up as Africans.

Meng Minsheng was awarded the golden award on Lianzhou Foto Festival in 2006 for his "Imitated Revolution" series. In the same year, he suffered a severe stroke and passed away six months later.

"It is visual imagination of a Hong Kong photographer toward revolution... Maybe some of the viewers will find those images a bit amusing, but it was a series thing for the photographer at that time," Yang Xiaoyan, an official with the photo festival said of Meng's photos.

"He set up the photos with devoutness. There's nothing ironic, because he truly was trying to showcase the revolution."

Meng Minsheng was generally regarded as being at the helm of conceptual photography in China.

Along with his revolution series, the SCoP is also showcasing his portrait photos of women in Hong Kong. The portrait collection is more humane and soft, showing romance and elegance.