

Figures of Speech

Shanghai Center of Photography, Shanghai, China

11 January – 29 February, 2016

The Shanghai Center of Photography (SCôP) launched in May 2015 amidst a boom of new art institutions in Shanghai. Its programme stood out by featuring a broad range of photographic genres: documentary, journalistic, artistic and historical. Founded and directed by Hong Kong-born, Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Liu Heung Shing, the SCôP drew on his deep knowledge of photography in its first two shows, which were broad, historical exhibitions of Chinese photography from the 20th century to the present. Following on from these two survey exhibitions, 'Figures of Speech' focuses specifically on the photographic history of Hong Kong, through the works of six photographers and artists whose work is associated with the region and has rarely been seen in mainland China. As its title suggests, this compact show features solely portraits, albeit of figures from varied fields and across different decades. Curated by Karen Smith, Liu's long-time partner and a veteran curator of Chinese art, the show assembles remarkable works by former film director and actor Fan Ho; cinema photographer Yau Leung; leftist photographer Meng Minsheng; pastor Stanley Fung; and the duo of conceptual artist Leung Chi Wo and his wife, artist and landscape designer Sara Wong.

About this review

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By Carol Yinghua Lu



Meng Misheng, *Beauty*, 1960s, 110 × 110 cm, archival inkjet print

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Fan Ho, *S.F. Dan - Master Photographer*, 1952, 44 × 35 cm, Gelatin silver print

Each participant is represented by a succinct selection of works, which are as revelatory about their unique perspectives as they are about the distinctive social and cultural character of this former British colony. Shanghai-born Fan Ho moved to Hong Kong in 1949, where he photographed the streets of his newly adopted home while wandered the city to relieve his untreatable headaches. In the 1960s, he became a celebrated actor and later a film director, but he never stopped taking pictures. Instead of presenting Fan's better-known modernist photographs of Hong Kong's cityscape, the show opened with three of his early black and white photographs of actors and friends, taken between 1952 to 1956: a mask held in the hand of a stage actor; smoke rising in front of the face of Robert Ray; and photographer S. F. Dan leaning against his camera, lost in thought. These three intimate portraits suggest Ho's mastery of composition and his ability to capture the personalities of his subjects.



Stanley Fung, *Tiny Dust, Illuminated*, 2010, 100 × 68 cm, archival inkjet print

Having grown up in Hong Kong and never lived through the revolution on the Mainland, Meng Minsheng was sympathetic with Mao's proletarian revolution, which drove him to create a series of surreal photographs in which he staged imaginary scenarios from the revolution in the confines of his studio. Featuring hired actors posed in highly symbolic sets, his photographs are subtler than the socialist realist propaganda posters and imagery of the time. Despite his patriotism and genuine passion for China's socialist ideology, his 'Imitated Revolution' (1960–69) appears a romanticized, naïve and fantastical parody of the violent and destructive revolution taking place across the border. The show also presents a few portraits of women from Meng's 'Beauty' series, giving clues to his day job as a photographer in a local film studio.



Yau Leung, *Actresses of Shaw Brothers*, 1970s, 180 × 142 cm, archival inkjet print

Yau Leung also emerged from Hong Kong's thriving film and entertainment industry, becoming a highly celebrated photographer for fashion and photography publications in the 1950s and '60s. His portraits in this show, all taken in the 1970s after he left the film industry to work for print media, capture women not as subjects of admiration, but as lively figures full of their own subjectivity. In contrast, the subjects in Taiwan-based Stanley Fung's photographs of friends and followers of the Christian church he leads ('Dust Icon', 2010–ongoing), appear frozen in time. Fung shoots each subject in a rented studio above his church, dressed in simple garments befitting a Biblical figure. Role-playing is also central to Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong's series 'He was lost yesterday and we found him today' (2010–14), for which the duo carried out in-depth research into the identity of an anonymous or overlooked figure in a documentary or news photograph, and then personified that subject in their portraits.



Leung Chi Wo & Sarah Wong, *Photojournalist With Two Cameras*, 2010, 150 × 110 cm, archival inkjet print

Given the escalating political tension between Mainland China and Hong Kong, and considering a general lack of knowledge about the rich cultural fabric of the area, this exhibition, small in scale as it is, provides a glimpse into Hong Kong's unique history and culture. The territory's politically undermined position today puts enormous pressure on its cultural and artistic scene, which faces the constant threats of diminished space and freedoms. In the face of these challenges, 'Figures of Speech' gives some insight into this socially diverse society.

Carol Yinghua Lu

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270