

Catching the Photographer's Eye

By Dr Clinton Chan



“To a photographer, the world consists of an infinite number of vantage points – places to stand – of which very few are altogether satisfactory. The photographer's goal is simple in principle and seemingly modest in ambition: it is to find the place and moment from which some interesting aspect of the world can be converted into a photograph that will be both clear and lively. **”**

- John Szarkowski: Atget (2000)

BEGINNINGS

Perhaps the earliest memory of my attempt to make a visual record of my experiences was when I was about ten. It was my first tour of the Malay Peninsula with my family and I was full of anticipatory excitement. I had with me a simple point-and-shoot camera with which I snapped at whatever I thought was new, exciting and remotely relevant to this documentary project – rubber estates, hills, highways, glimpses of kampongs, street life, monuments and suchlike, mostly from the bus, since that was where I spent most of the journey. I must have shot some ten rolls of film! But to my great disappointment, almost all were blanks. Disillusioned, I rarely took up a camera again.

My interest in photo-documentary was rekindled when I was preparing for my postgraduate studies in Stanford University. With the encouragement of my close friend Jon Ng, who works in the photojournalistic industry (now with

BBC), I bought myself a Nikon SLR, an F80, with a standard zoom. This was idiot-proof enough and still allowed me some manual override functions should I ever feel brave. With some initial tips on basics, I started snapping away again, experimenting with techniques found in most introductory guidebooks. That was when I came across 'large-format' photography, which is done with sheet film of 4" by 5" in size or larger, rendering ridiculously high definition negatives, using century-old technology. Fascinating as it was, I had no access to this type of camera then, but it stuck in my mind.

By the time I had completed my first quarter at Stanford, I had some 40 rolls of documentary pictures. Strangely, my attraction towards the mundane had not changed despite the many years since my initial foray into photography, and I found myself with endless doorknobs, doors, buildings, trees... but at least this time, I had something to show. When the time

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**About the author/
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Dr Clinton Chan, MBBS (Singapore), MBA (Stanford), is an avid photographer. An exhibition of his colour photographs can be viewed at the SGH 'Art Expressions' wall at Block 3, Level 1, until May 2005, and is organised by Carelink. In 2004, he received an Emerging Artist Grant from the National Arts Council for his work: "Pulau Ubin – A Portfolio of 18 Landscape Photographs", which was exhibited at the Blue Lotus Fine Art Gallery. Selected pieces are in the collection of the Thomas Welton Art Gallery, Stanford University. In 2003, he photographed the work of the United Students for Veterans' Health (USVH) at the US Veterans Hospitals in the Bay Area of California. The photographs were published by the USVH in the documentary book: *Living Memories*, which is available online at www1.va.gov/volunteer/docs/Living_memories.pdf. Dr Tan was also recently awarded the USVH Award for his contribution. Outstanding Leadership.



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came for me to select an elective as part of my studies, I was thrilled to discover Stanford offered a course in 'large-format' photography. It was meant only for advanced photography seniors, but I went to see the guy offering the course anyway, bringing along a stack of what I thought were decent photos. I was greeted by a friendly-looking man with short curly hair, who introduced himself as Joel Leivick. Initially reluctant, he eventually relented and allowed me to sit in, and if any spare large formats were available, I could use one.

The introductory course was anything but – I had never stepped into a darkroom before, and there I was expected to be able to print to the likes of Ansel Adams in a few weeks, not to mention take high quality photos, using manual labour all the way! Challenging is an understatement. Joel also taught us to 'see' with examples from very noted photographers, such as Atget, Eggleston and Robert Adams, names foreign and unfamiliar to me then. I later learnt Joel himself is a noted photographer, with photos in the collections of famous museums and galleries all over the world. After the initial crash-course in manual photography, I slowly began to more fully appreciate the 'art of photography' as a medium and means of expression, under the tutelage of Joel over the next two years.



TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY

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Straight photography has in essence this simple message: to point out some interesting aspect of the world as it catches the photographer's eye. There are perhaps as many opinions on what is a good photograph as there are photos. Perhaps it is because it seems so easy: anyone can take a photograph, as opposed to painting or similar art forms, where a large degree of skill, time and effort have to be put in to cultivate raw talent to produce a painting worthy of being labelled 'art'. Perhaps it is the 'degradation' of being a tool of the masses

that make many regard photography as non-art. But to argue thus and emphasise the snob appeal of the painter's unique talent and skill is to ignore the fact that photography, in spite of its simplicity in principle and seemingly modest ambition, is one of the most difficult of arts.

Unlike a painter who can decide what to put into his painting, a photographer is faced with capturing reality as is. There is little or no manipulation of the elements of his composition, an infinite number of possibilities as to which direction to point his lens at, and at the same time, communicate and express himself with that photo. Paradoxically, it is the limitation of the photographic medium – that is, its direct and simple record of the subject in hand, that more often than not produces a result that is profoundly fresher than any attempt at visual novelty. That there are only a handful of photographers (out of the thousands who are at some point or other photographers) who have attained this 'goal', attests to the level of difficulty in this art form. They have truly understood the most fundamental philosophy of photography that has been taken for granted, largely disregarded and little remarked upon – 'quiet' photography, or the art that hides itself.

In 'quiet' photography, the photographer's artistic persona is modest and self-effacing. He focuses on modest rather than grand subjects, shuns quirky tricks of technique or vision, and most importantly, presents the work in a modest way. 'Quiet' should not be confused with 'straight' photography, the notion that an un-manipulated print should be made from an un-tampered negative by any significant degree. A 'quiet' photo is always a 'straight' photo, but not the reverse. What the 'quiet' photographer aims for is that delicate balance between subject and object, the external world and the photographic author, such that he dissolves himself into the formal structure of the image, which also means, precisely, that he makes himself present in it. The voice of the 'quiet' photographer remains always modest, because his reference is not the 'art scene', but the world. If photography deals directly and honestly with life, then it has every chance to be fresh and 'new', for the life that it records is infinitely variable, always renewing.

One of the key qualities in photography is 'thereness', which is the primary goal of the 'quiet' photographer. It is a sense of the subject's reality; a heightened sense of its physicality in the image; that we are looking at the world directly, without mediation; of being a part of the photograph such that we can

hear the gurgling of the stream or feel the wind rustling the leaves. Photographs that conjure the compelling desire to touch the subject, to walk into the picture, to know the photographed person, display 'thereness'. The 'quiet' photograph is a combination of document, aesthetic object and fictional tale. Its finer pleasures are perhaps not obviously enjoyed or immediately apparent, yet might be appreciated by anyone who has attempted the seemingly simple, but endlessly slippery task of freezing reality with grace, economy and authenticity.

To understand the ideology and philosophy of the 'quiet' photographer is to come close to a full understanding of photography's singular qualities. He recognises that a simple, straightforward act of recording is anything but – however, he will not draw attention to this process. The goal is an elusive one: the illusion of transparency, but not a dumb or mute transparency. 'Quiet' photographs do not lack a voice, but that voice is always calm, measured, appropriate and reasonable. For many of us who have at one time or another embarked on the perilous quest to attain the 'goal', the question that burns is: how does one take good photos? There are as many rules of composition as there are ways of breaking

them. I recommend 'Dan Stella's Tenfold Path of Good Photography' on www.dantestella.com as a good start. ■

A Note on Equipment

My personal favourite camera is the Rolleiflex Twin Lens Reflex, a square medium format camera made in the 1960s. Another medium format I frequently use is the Fuji GA645i rangefinder, with a superb 60mm EBC lens. I also have a large-format Wista metal field camera, with a Schneider-Kreuznach Apo-Symmar-S 150mm f5.6 and a Rodenstock Grandagon 90mm f6.8. I have long since yielded to the digital revolution and happily snap away with a Nikon D70. I was recently given 2 Leica 'Barnack' cameras with the 5cm f2 Summitar Collapsible lens from the 1950s, which have been restored and are in excellent working condition. In the darkroom, I use an Omega 4" by 5" enlarger, with the Zone IV cold light head with the Chromega V variable contrast tungsten head as back up and print on Oriental Multicontrast Matt Double-Weight Fibre paper through the Schneider-Kreuznach Componon-S series of enlarger lenses. For colour, I use the Epson 2100 Ultrachrome Inkjet printer on the Epson Archival Matt paper.

Note:

The photo of Dr Chan on page 19 was taken by Joel Leivick.