



A Hong Kong memoir



Photographer and film-maker **Fan Ho** looks back at the work that has made his name and discusses his new book *Hong Kong Memoir*. He talks to **Mat Gallagher**

Though many associate 20th century street photography with the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, over in the East, a young photographer called Fan Ho was also breaking new ground. Born in Shanghai, China, the man who became known as The Great Master moved to Hong Kong with his family in the late 1940s and, armed with his new Rolleiflex Tessar f/3.5 TLR, started to document the city in his own inimitable way.

'At that time, in 1948 and 1949, Hong Kong wasn't as prosperous as it is now, it was just a city,' says Fan Ho, talking from his home in California, USA. Self-deprecating about his understanding and command of English, Ho speaks slowly and clearly.

His love of photography started

when he was a young boy in Shanghai, where he took his first pictures with an old Kodak Brownie. Once in Hong Kong, with a fairly serious camera now at his disposal and a whole new city to explore, he began a career that has lasted well over half a decade. During this time, he has worked as a photographer, film-maker, director and has written several books. His career in photography has seen him win more than 280 awards, and his work has been included in hundreds of exhibitions across the world, but his move to film later in life was never seen as a natural progression.

'I don't think photography is inferior to film. They are like sisters, both using the image to express the author's feelings and ideas,' he says. 'They use a similar expressive

Above: 'Sun Rays', 1959

Above right: 'Approaching Shadow', 1954

Right: 'Pattern', 1956



medium, but they are different in my point of view. Still photography is about a decisive moment and to pick that moment is a photographer's job.'

Seeing in black & white

Ho's still images are the work of a street photographer who observed and captured everyday life as he saw it – the people, places and events. 'People have told me that they love the graphic design of my photos, but it's instinct,' he says. 'I see the graphic elements and it tempts me to press my shutter.'

Ho has never been afraid to experiment with his images, mixing styles and techniques over the years, but he predominantly works in black & white, sticking to Kodak Tri-X and Plus-X.

'Black & white, for me, is a better medium for expressing my view of the world,' he says. 'I don't know whether I'm right or wrong, but I believe colour is best left to the painters – they can do it better. For me, photography is like black & white and film-making is like colour. Film-making involves lots of things and lots of people – it's too complicated. Colour is more complicated, and since

Right: 'Dreamscape', 1962

Centre right: 'Old Street Kaleidoscope', 1955

Bottom right: 'Afternoon Chat', 1959



▶ I'm a simple-minded man, I prefer black & white.'

Despite Ho's comparisons, he sees potential in all creative outlets and takes inspiration from a range of artists, from the composer Debussy to the author Hemingway, and cites Chinese poetry as a major influence.

'I think there are other elements that give me more than what photography can give me – the nourishment and inspiration,' he adds. 'Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* gave me lots of inspiration, for example.'

A good photo, Ho claims, comes not from the idea, but from a feeling or a passion, and it's the ability to convey this that great photographers possess, and that viewers respond to.

New work

Ho's new book, *A Hong Kong Memoir*, forms the final part of a trilogy, and an exhibition of images from it is being held simultaneously in Hong Kong and in San Francisco in the USA. The works are new creations – unprinted negatives of Hong Kong from Ho's collection, brought to life through digitally superimposing slides and re-editing them to create insightful and often amusing pieces. 'Hong Kong is the place I love,' he says. 'Even though I was born in Shanghai, I studied, worked and grew up in Hong Kong, which is why the city is my home.'

Ho is no longer able to head out with his camera, as back pain has left him unable to carry the weight of his camera and lens, or to walk far unaided, so the digital darkroom has become his creative outlet. Although he admits to not being the most tech-savvy of photographers, with more than 50 years' experience in the darkroom and the help of some assistants, he is breathing new life into his old images.

'In America I don't have a darkroom, and my health doesn't allow me to work in a darkroom any more, so I just use Photoshop to

help me,' he says. 'I'm not an expert in modern technology, but I have good friends to help me. Just like in film-making, I am the director, and I have a very good assistant. I tell him what I want to express like a film-maker, then he uses his technique to fulfil my dreams.'

The layering of two images can create conflict or comparison between the pictures, and although some of Ho's new creations are serious in tone, others seem designed to simply make the viewer smile. 'I don't want the audience to say, "All this is too serious and too heavy." Sometimes you can give them some fun. That's why some of these images are funny.'

But even at this stage in his career, with an iconic portfolio behind him, Ho still wants to create something new, and is determined not to repeat himself. 'I'm still finding new ways of seeing – a new kind of experimentation,' he says. 'I believe an artist should go with something new all the time, not just go over old stuff and repeat himself. This is my third book and I don't want people to say it's all the same.'

Parting words

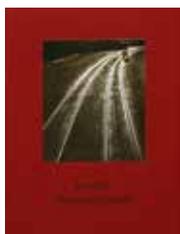
Ho offers some parting advice to aspiring photographers: don't throw away your old negatives. 'When you are young you take photographs, and at that time you may think they're no good and just put them aside,' he says. 'But as you get old and have lots of experience in life, you'll know more about the world than when you were young, so your judgement changes. Your standards change, too. And then you may find some treasures in your old collection, some diamonds, because it's a different time, a different environment. I have searched my old negatives recently and found something valuable, because time changes, and man changes – you and me and the whole world. Everything changes.'



FURTHER READING

The Living Theatre

modernbook.com/store, 2008, \$75



The Living Theatre represents the beginning of Fan Ho's look at the people, streets and architecture that make up Hong Kong. This volume focuses on life in the 1950s and '60s.

Hong Kong Yesterday

modernbook.com/store, 2012, \$75



Hong Kong Yesterday continues Fan Ho's poetic take at life in Hong Kong. This time we get a closer look at his beloved city.

A Hong Kong Memoir

Modernbook Editions, 2014, £65 (www.meteor.com.hk)



This lavish new book from Fan Ho brings to a close the trilogy that began with his books *The Living Theatre* and *Hong Kong Yesterday*.

Top: 'Working Class', 1966

Above: 'Different Directions', 1966