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GIVE US YOUR BEST SHOT

An exhibition showcasing pre-digital cameras and photography encourages visitors to get the shutter bug, writes David Evans

ALEX MAK HON-CHEE is intently studying a Rolleiflex Old Standard camera, circa 1932. The battered German-made camera has seen better days and is a stark contrast to the shiny, new phone camera the teenager is using to record his visit to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum's recently opened Cameras Inside-Out exhibition.

The Rolleiflex is one of more than 130 owned by collector David Chan. It's part of a display that includes a series of historical and contemporary photos.

Like most of those who grew up in the digital age, Mak can't understand why anyone would want to use film and then wait 24 hours to view the results. For him, and the thousands of Hong Kong's snappy photographers of his generation, the instant shots on his tiny mobile phone or digital camera screen are much better.

Cameras Inside-Out is a prelude to the museum's Hong Kong Photography Series, for which it wants everyday people to contribute to help create a pictorial log of life in today's Hong Kong. The two-part exhibition details 100 years of camera development, from early photographic plate-type cameras, to conventional film and modern digital cameras – all courtesy of Chan's extensive collection. Complementing these is a collection of shots from the 1950s onwards by local photographers including Kan Iing-fook, Chan Fou-li, Leo K.K. Wong and Ngan Chun-tung.

The second part of the exhibition examines photography as a contemporary art form, and features about 30 works by Almond Chu Tak-wah, So Hing-keung, Bobby Sham Ka-ho, Lam Wai-kit and Chow Chun-fai.

Acting chief curator of the Heritage Museum Judy Chan Lee Suk-ye says she hopes the exhibition will not only help educate the city's army of amateur photog-

raphers, but also encourage them to hit the streets and record contemporary Hong Kong life for posterity. In doing so, she says, they'll gain a better understanding of the medium as art rather than the fast-food photography it has become because of digital technology.

The series concentrates on local photographers and their achievements and the fact that they've won many awards," says Chan. "It's not just about cameras. I hope the pictures will illustrate the many different styles and techniques used to create a photograph and how the camera has been a tool in improving that technique."

"Back in the 1950s and 60s, photography was an expensive hobby. Today, cameras are manufactured in such large quantities that anyone can pick one up. We want to highlight the old techniques. We also want to encourage people to pick up a camera and send us their pictures."

Among the old-school photographers is Lam Wai-kit, a graduate in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and winner of many local awards, including a distinction from the Philippe Charriol Foundation Modern Arts Competition in 1992. Her current project, Divided Minds, is on show at the exhibition.

In it, Lam superimposes various images of herself onto other photos, creating what seem to be reflections of herself in windows and glass. In her artist statement, she says that "the representations can be figurative or abstract; the internal spirit and the external aspect may not be the same. So, what is genuine or what is false? It is impossible to tell from the aspect of a single photograph."

Lam, who lectures at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, says she's in no hurry to trade in her film camera for a digital one. "For me, the camera isn't very impor-

tant. It's a tool. For me, the idea and concept is more important. I quite often have my camera with me, and [a digital] would be quite heavy in my bag. The camera I have now is light. I've got a Leica. It's the cheapest Leica there is, compared to other cameras, but I love it."

"I started to use it in 2000 and the colours are excellent – especially the reds and blues. That's why there's a lot of red and blue in my pictures."

David Chan has also steered clear of digital phone cameras. His collection was built up over many years as a keen photographer and dealer in photo equipment. He says the first camera he ever bought was a Yashica in 1965 and he still uses it. "Everyone – especially young people – is using digital cameras, and they don't know what a joy it is to use film," says the 63-year-old. "They don't know about shutter speed or aperture. They don't think, 'They just go click, click, click.'"

Lam says the secret to producing good shots is to experiment. She hopes the exhibition will help educate amateur photographers, and prompt people to submit work for the museum's collection.

"If you have good equipment it can help," she says. "But you must get the knowledge to explore the tool and develop a technique. I lecture students in photography, and many like to discuss different techniques. I tell them photography isn't difficult. Just press the button."

Cameras Inside-Out, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, HK\$10 (free on Wednesdays). Inquiries: 2180 8188. Ends Jul 30

**"Everyone – especially young people – is using digital cameras. They don't think. They just go click, click, click!"**

David Chan Collector



A visitor looks at one of the old photos at the Cameras Inside-Out exhibition (top); collector David Chan (left) with a Japanese wooden studio camera (circa 1880-1900); the exhibition includes historical photos such as this late 19th-century antique lantern slide (right). PHOTOS: DAVID WONG



A great leap forward ... with funky gibbons and strange squirrels

A pioneer of Singapore's modern art, Chen Wen Hsi also transformed Chinese ink painting, writes Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop

Like the Europeans who embraced chinoiserie styles in the 19th century and the Beautiful Indies in the 20th century, Chinese artists absorbed and adapted foreign ideas and influences. Chen Wen Hsi is a case in point.

A pioneer of Singapore's modern art, Chen played an important role in the foundation of the Nanyang style, which fused eastern philosophy and subjects with western aesthetic style and composition.

He also transformed Chinese ink painting, says Anita Chung, associate curator of Chinese Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. "His modernity of style, as reflected in his daring use of form, surface, colour and brushwork to give an overall

abstract composition, was novel," she writes in an essay accompanying a major retrospective of the artist's work at the Singapore Art Museum.

Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition features 123 pieces, many displayed in public for the first time.

Born in Guangdong in 1906, Chen enrolled in the Shanghai College of Art in the late 1920s and subsequently the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts, where he trained in Chinese and western techniques, before going on to teach.

In 1949, he moved to Singapore, where his interest in and knowledge of international art styles and concepts took a major leap forward. He started exploring Fauvism, cubism and abstract,

moving between styles, techniques and media. In *Malayan Scenery*, dating from the 1950s, Chen makes full use of the dramatic power of the Chinese brush to depict a local setting. Although he adopts a western, fixed-point perspective in this work, the more traditional, vertical format gives full play to the fishing nets hung out to dry, says the show's curator, Low Sze Wee.

In *Rocky Hill*, dating from the 1970s, the artist combines the monumental landscapes found in Chinese paintings with the fractured planes of cubism, the brushwork of the *xieyi* tradition as well as the colour fields of abstract expressionism. "Chen's art is reflective of the meeting of different aesthetic traditions in the 20th century," says Low. "Although he embraced many different western art forms and concepts throughout his life, Chinese painting always remained at the core of his practice." A keen observer of nature and

a strong believer in life-drawing studies, Chen was impressed by a 13th-century painting by Muxi that led to a life-long fascination for gibbons. But his depictions of the creatures changed over time. In his early period, his gibbons' faces were rounded and they adopted passive poses. But as Chen developed his craft, his gibbons became more playful and active: their legs and arms becoming elongated.

His portrayals of squirrels, another favourite subject, also show a clear evolution, being painted in all their furry detail in the earlier work before he moved towards a more abbreviated style in later years, with much drier, shorter brushwork.

"Chen's focus moved away from the squirrel and the details towards the overall composition of the painting," says Low. "He was trying to express his subjective self through the composition rather than depicting the objective world."



Gibbons Fetching the Moon from the Water by Chen Wen Hsi

In the last decade of his life, Chen concentrated almost exclusively on Chinese ink as a medium, seeking different and original ways to incorporate his understanding of western modern art. He also put his creative soul into expression rather than representation. Although his paintings were still based on reality, he freely distorted, reconfigured and transformed the subjects, creating powerful abstract compositions.

He also used the vibrant and bold colours more often found in western paintings than in Chinese inks. "He was always interested in colour relationship," says Low. "He felt that the colour palette for Chinese traditional painting was too limited and he felt that the west had much more to offer in terms of a wider range of colours to work on."

In *Heron*, completed shortly before he died in 1991, the artist again breaks from tradition by creating an almost-abstract work,

resulting in a flat patterning of the painting surface. This is achieved by incorporating cubist elements to produce interlocking planes, suggesting a dense flock of birds. In addition, the voids left by the white, unpainted paper create a dynamic tension – in places, depicting the water surface, and in others, cunningly delineating the form of herons in the negative.

"Chen's contribution towards the modernisation and development of Chinese ink painting was most apparent in his later period, where he used cubist and semi-abstract renditions of flower and bird themes in ink," says museum director Kwok Kian Chow. "In a sense, Chen came full circle with these works. Although initially inspired by western principles such as cubism and abstraction, he also reached deep into his own cultural heritage."

Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum. Ends Apr 8