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Mythic moments

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MYTHIC MOMENTS

An exhibition at HKDI this autumn aimed to introduce the power of photography through a series of family portraits that combined simplicity and emotional depth. *SUMMER CAO reports.*

Sontag's standards of what defines a good photograph reveal the expectations of a deeply critical eye, yet the *300 Families* exhibition held at HKDI from September 28th to November 3rd seems to have met them all. The show was organised by Hong Kong International Photo Festival in partnership with HKDI and showcased images of 300 Hong Kong families shot by 14 professional local photographers, revealing the fundamental units that are the foundation blocks of this diversified modern city. The portraits are highly individual and yet have a universal voice, addressing issues faced by many with a mythic intensity that is one of photography's unique qualities.

The family has long been an important subject matter for artists, from the early murals and sculptures

We want photography to be unmythic, full of concrete information. We are more comfortable with photographs that are ironic, unidealising... We expect the photographer to be bold, even insolent. We hope that subjects will be candid, or naively revealing," the late literary icon Susan Sontag wrote in *A Photograph Is Not an Opinion. Or is it?*, an essay written in 1999, two decades after the publication of her widely acclaimed book *On Photography*.



ABOVE FATHER AND SON: CHUI LING CHI AND HIS FATHER BY TSE MING CHONG
LEFT AU'S FAMILY IN THEIR FARMLAND AT MASHI PO HONG KONG BY TSE CHITAK

depicting Christ's family and the Tree of Jesse listing his ancestors, to the family portraits commissioned by royal and eminent families. Here in the East, mountains and rivers were the staple subject matter for artists during the imperial era, but more recently many modern artists have explored the meaning of family, such as Zhang Xiaogang whose works set records at auctions.

However, few art forms inspired by the idea of family are more readily appreciated than ordinary family pictures that are always revealing or "unmythic" and "full of concrete information", to use Sontag's specifications. Each of

EVENT

BELOW TOP A HOMELESS MAN CALLED KI WITH HIS DRAWINGS OF HIS FAVORITE PLACES TO SLEEP BY CHAN HAU CHUN
 BOTTOM A TAI SING PAP KAR MOON KUNG FU MASTER AND HIS DISCIPLES BY VINCENT YU

the images in *300 Families* is uncomplicated but full of impact.

The number and variety of photographs in the exhibition create an experience that is seasoned by a wide range of feelings. *300 Families*' diversity proves that photography excels at exploring the subject of family, whose meaning is both universal and infinitely variable.

"We started to focus on curating photos of underprivileged families," says Siu Heng, Executive

Director of the Hong Kong International Photo Festival. "But as the project went on, we decided to push the boundaries of what 'family' means, and attribute an artistic and intellectual dimension to what could have been a mere community project."

The result of the endeavour is an



« WE DECIDED TO ATTRIBUTE AN ARTISTIC AND INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION TO WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A MERE COMMUNITY PROJECT. »



exploration of the concept of family in 12 directions, falling into three general categories based on the lifestyle of those being photographed – Andante/Adagio, Staccato/Allegro and Forte/Fortissimo, creatively using musical tempo as metaphor.

Andante and Adagio generally have smooth flowing notes, like listening to a story told with calm precision. Photographs in this category feature families who live in a restricted and fixed space and have to deal with a range of private challenges, including people living alone, the homeless, families with members released from prison or with terminal illness.

Each piece in this category serves as an emotional timebomb, able to create a sudden and profound response and the images narrate their stories andante, without fluctuation or over-emphasis. They range from treasured relics of elderly home-alones, to the doodles of the homeless that explain how they ended up living

on the street, to the family support of the terminally ill or a released wrong-doer, to the banality of life and estranged relationships among family members. The images are not easily forgotten – and this might be the highest accolade for any work of photography. The Staccato and Allegro category has jumpy notes that tend to be more lively and light-hearted, allowing visitors to explore the lives of families with interesting and alternative lifestyles, such as designer, IT, musician or green-living families and families that choose to live at some distance from the city's bustle on the beautifully vibrant Lamma Island.

ABOVE JOY IN STRINGS FAMILY BY RAMBO LAI AND LORRAINE CULTRISH



《 WE HOPE THE AUDIENCE WOULD START TO QUESTION THE MEANING OF FAMILY IN OUR SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT. 》

RIGHT ARTIST TO WUN AND HIS FAMILY BY ROY LEE
BELOW TOP FAMILY-RUN RESTAURANT YIU SHING KEE BY BOBBY SHAM
BOTTOM YIU SHING KEE'S OWNER AND HER TWO SONS SHORTLY BEFORE CLOSURE OF THEIR RESTAURANT BY ALMER AU



The Forte and Fortissimo category grabs attention and radiates energy with strong notes. Photographs in this category feature families and lifestyles that are unique or special to Hong Kong, infused with historical roots, local heritage and ethnic culture, the photos feature the family-like relationships in the traditional Kung Fu schools, family-run businesses and traditional Chinese extended families.

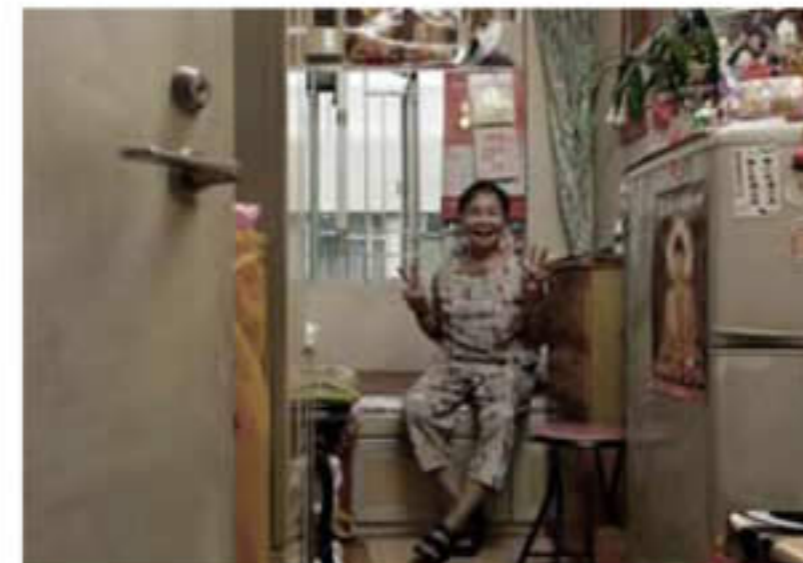
"While the community service element is still there, we have enriched the project with some new and thought-provoking aspects," says Siu. "We hope to promote photography as a powerful artistic expression to explore, if not to the extent of intervening in, our society. In this case, we hope the audience would start to reflect upon their own relationships with family, and to question the meaning of family in our socio-cultural context."

The *300 Families* exhibition was part of the bigger Hong Kong International Photo Festival Flare, which took place this year at the HKDI. It featured workshops, seminars, portfolio review sessions, photography book recommendations and two experimental exhibitions, one welcoming all to show their own works and the other showcasing young artists' works with audience participation.

Siu hopes that through the photo festival, and especially through the high quality exhibitions such



LEFT FROM TOP TO BOTTOM COSPLAY FAMILY: SING WAN, CHERRY AND ZOE BY VINCENT MAK; MR. AND MRS. YU BY THOMAS LIN; CATHLEEN AND RAPHAEL BY WEI LENG TAY; 78-YEAR-OLD CHAN SIUYIN BY ANOTHER MOUNTAIN MAN
BELOW FOUR GENERATIONS BY LEONG KATAI



as *300 Families*, HKDI students and the community at large can experience the power of photography.

"We believe students will benefit from the exposure to creative photography works, especially those who are interested in using photography in their design."

For those who were unable to attend the *300 Families* exhibition or who wish to revisit the images the Hong Kong International Photo Festival Flare website (www.hkipf.org.hk) is currently carrying some of the works from the exhibition. The site offers the chance to review images in detail and to rediscover the venerable truth that a picture is worth a thousand words, especially when the image has the universal emotional power of a family portrait. 

