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## Outside the frame

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# OUTSIDE THE FRAME



*Almond Chu and Tse Ming Chong have pushed the boundaries of photography to create memorable images with the power of fine art. Despite having widely different views regarding the way photographers change our perceptions of reality, both agree that their medium has enormous potential for future innovation. SUMMER CAO reports.*



OPPOSITE TSE MING CHONG (LEFT) AND ALMOND CHU (RIGHT) LEFT FROM FLOWER SERIES BY ALMOND CHU

Covering in limbo at its inception in the early 19th century, photography began life as the black sheep of the art family and a fickle companion of journalism. Yet it is such a powerful medium of expression that it has survived distrust and occasional abuse, continuing to thrive and evolve into the era's most pervasive medium of expression via Smart Phones, selfies and social media platforms.

Like many inventions bestowed upon creative minds by the development of technology, photography required a significant period of time to establish itself as a distinctive discipline. This warranted some genuine artistic vision and the courage to embrace the unfamiliar, hone it into a conveyance for self-expression and found the grounding principles of a new practice.

Crucial to photography's cultivation has been a collection of visionaries who hold clashing views about the medium's identity. The "father of art photography", Oscar Gustave Rejlander collaborated with painter photographers such as Henry Peach Robinson and Julia Margaret Cameron, who all chose to instill photography with the aesthetics of painting. Their photography was manipulated with a delicate touch of hand and evoked Renaissance master paintings.

Yet the defining characteristics of photography as a medium have long inspired talents in various disciplines

to revolt against the dreamy Victorian aesthetic, and establish photography as an art form of its own. These pioneers cherished photography's integrity and refused to subject photographic images to painterly affectations.

At the forefront of this school of thought was Alfred Stieglitz, founder of the Photo-Secession Movement. Stieglitz was devoted to separating photography from painting. Others with the same intention include towering figures of photography such as Edward Steichen, who took the first series of modern fashion photographs; as well as Alvin Langdon Coburn, who led the vanguard of abstract photography.

Contention between the two schools' of thoughts (manipulated vs. unadorned) has not depleted, but taken together they have formed a medium laden with vibrant innovations, experimentations and creativity. To fully grasp the merits

ALL IMAGES BY ALMOND CHU



of photography as an inventive method of expression and communication, it's necessary to understand how it empowers and inspires the practitioners of these two disparate creative processes.

Renowned Hong Kong photographer Almond Chu is among contemporary masters of the medium, and he takes a clear stance. Chu believes that his creative process resembles that of painting. "I take photographs the way I paint," Chu says. "I start from a clean slate, and add in elements – certain settings or people – that I want to include in my frame. When I hold a camera, my thoughts are the most focused and intense."

Photographer and photography scholar Tse Ming Chong believes that Chu's portfolio demonstrates how a talented photographer can paint the world with light. In his opinion, a photographer's background and interest critically affect the creative process as well as which of the two schools of practice the photographer prefers.

It was not surprising therefore to find that Chu was a painter before studying photography at Tokyo College of Photography at the age of 20. Best known for his portrait photographs, Chu has received multiple international awards. His work has been collected by prominent museums including Hong Kong Museum of Art and Hong Kong Heritage Museum as well as leading business enterprises.

"After seeing my photographs," Chu reveals, "a lot of people wonder whether I was a painter before. Something has exposed me, but I can't tell what it is."

A glimpse of Chu's work suffices to demonstrate his fine art approach. Tse commented that this approach requires a pair of well-trained eyes that would normally

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IF COMPUTERS  
COULD FACILITATE  
MY CREATIVE  
PROCESS. »



ABOVE FROM HORSE  
2008 SERIES  
LEFT FROM NUDE SERIES  
OPPOSITE FROM  
PARADE SERIES



take years of training and practice.

"It is usually hard for artists to form an opinion of the world in an early stage of their lives, let alone to express it in a powerful way," says Tse. "As time flies and life's experience accumulates, they would be able to have a clearer idea of what they want to express, as well as develop means and skills in terms of how to express them."

Having devoted himself to photography for 30 years and possessing an artistic inclination since childhood, Chu is confident in showing aspects of the world that have registered in his mind, and is assertive in his way of transforming them into photographs.

In the collection *Horse 2008*, Chu depicts the animal in medallion style portraits, and presents muscular curves and skin texture in detailed close-up photographs. Showing the horse's beauty in this fashion triggers imaginings of its agile body moving across a wild space. One of the portraits now greets guests at the presidential suite of the Mandarin Oriental Taipei.

The collection *Nude* features human forms that radiate the raw charm of ancient Greek sculptures of gods and goddesses; *Fabricated Mortals 2007* is a series of erotic fantasies of a woman's body, hazy yet vividly salacious; *The Bride With White Hairs 2007* is populated with a veil of mystery that evokes Cosplay portraits.

Chu has made "art for art's sake" into his creed, with

freedom of expression the most sacred altar. Tse observed that Chu's portraits, be their subject a human being or a horse, invariably have sculpture-like textures and put heavy emphasis on athletic yet graceful body forms.

"I take photographs of horses in the same way that I photograph humans," Chu says. "I think the necks of horses of Spanish origin are very beautiful. They move elegantly when they eat and when they run. When I was working on the *Nude* series, I was also enchanted by graceful body movements, but this time of an avant-garde stage performer in Japan."

Besides seeing with a painter's eye, Chu reveals that when making portraiture, the genre that he is best known for, he keeps a certain impression of the subject in his mind, and carefully considers what he wants to present to viewers, although "the process is more complicated than





taking photos of animals because tactical communication has to be involved”.

“The chemistry between photographer and subject is very subtle,” Tse adds. “Sometimes, the entire shoot depends upon this intangible yet critical element.”

Besides nurturing predilections to bring out his subjective opinions in photographs, Chu is ready to embrace anything in his toolbox as long as it proves helpful in bringing his creative concepts to fruition.

In the collection *Lifestill 1995-1999* and exhibition “Future and the Past”, for which Chu created *Self-portrait 2012* that features portraits of himself in the future and the past, he demonstrates skills of art installation, sculpture and prosthetic makeup in addition to photography.

In *Fa Fa 2007*, Chu juxtaposes two series of photographs – one of real flowers and the other of old-fashioned TVs only displaying blurry static. In contrasting beautiful flowers (“Fa” in Cantonese) with noisy and messy snow screens that are crammed with colours (also “Fa” in Cantonese), the collection explores Chu’s exasperation at the poor quality of everyday TV programming.

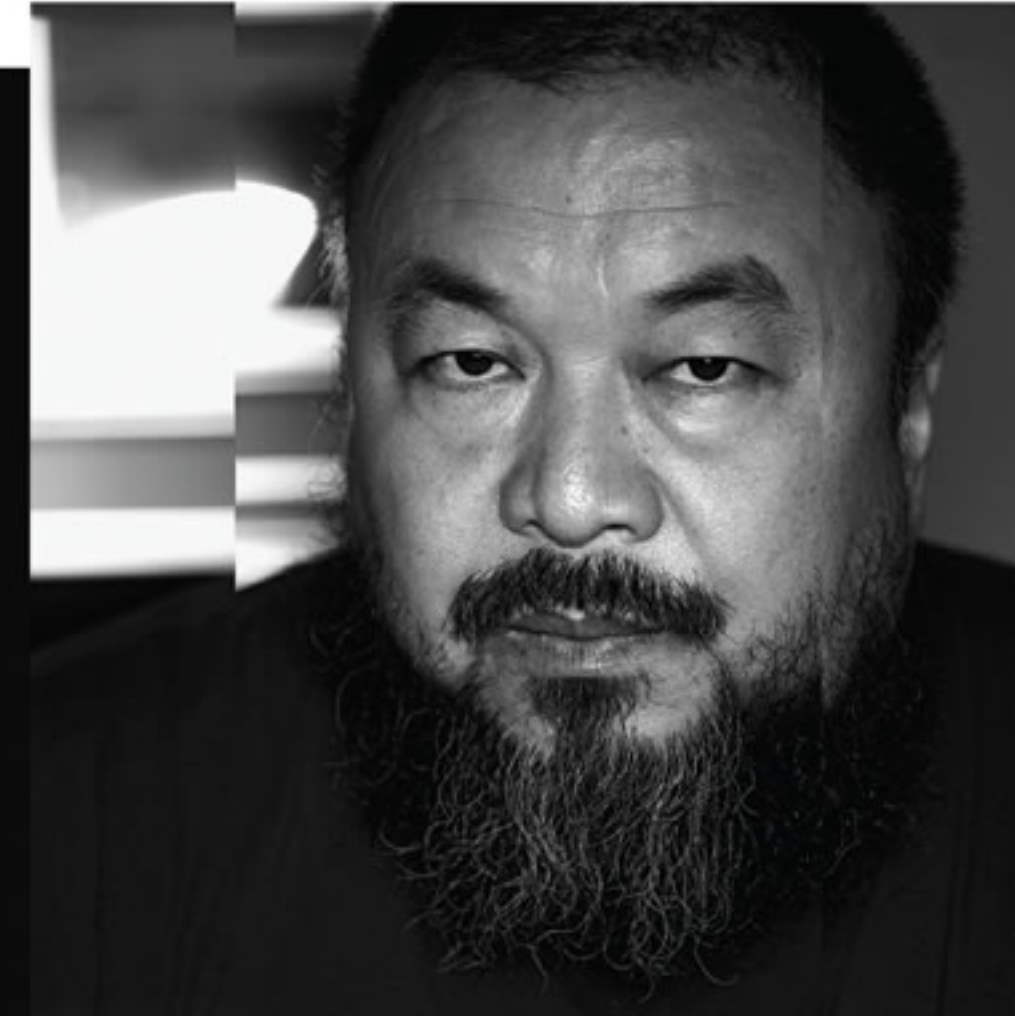
Besides relying on a range of artistic techniques in creating his photographic work, Chu does not flinch from utilising

computer technologies, an area that still extracts a snigger or look of contempt from purists of the industry.

“Why not,” he says, “if computers can facilitate my creative process.” Evoking the work of Chinese contemporary artist Yue Minjun, Chu’s *Parade* series consist of computer-edited photographs featuring parades, each of which is made up by miniatures of the same person taken from different angles.

The two schools of photography, at first glance, have conjured two opposing poles in the spectrum of photographic practice. On the one hand, photography is employed as a tool for calculated artistic expression. On the other, it is a record, able to capture a spontaneous reaction that a photographer has in response to the environment.

However, Tse believes that in reality



LEFT AI WEIWEI  
OPPOSITE FROM SELF-PORTRAIT  
2012 SERIES

« I USE A CAMERA TO CREATE, SO I AM A PHOTOGRAPHER. BUT THE WAY I CREATE, THAT'S WHAT MAKES ME AN ARTIST. »

the two practices are more like yin and yang rather than two ends of a spectrum – a photographer must deploy both for visual success.

“There is no clear line between the two,” says Tse. “Some photographers respond to the environment and record what they see. But in the end, they have to decide what they will convey by selecting photos to be shown to viewers.”

In his artistic process, Tse strikes a balance between the two, the weight of each depending on his state of mind. He begins with sketching, researching and collecting resources before allowing space to take his photographs instinctively.

Chu agrees with Tse’s opinion to a certain extent despite his inclination to see the photo as a canvas and arrange elements in front

of his camera. However, photography by its very nature is temporal and Chu also has to react instinctively.

When he took the famous portrait of Ai Weiwei, he didn’t have the luxury to do a short interview beforehand, which is his norm when taking somebody’s portraits.

“Ai wasn’t in a good mood,” Chu recalls. “I wasn’t able to connect to him. He didn’t want to do what I asked of him and there wasn’t enough time. So I changed strategy – to record how he was at that exact moment. I only took seven to eight shots, then he walked away.”

When asked to consider his art, Chu says, “The way one creates and employs media defines what you are. I use a camera to create, so I am a photographer. But the way I create, that’s what makes me an artist.”

In the past 200 years, photography has evolved into a platform that allows people to employ different techniques and creative processes and philosophies. Photography allows practitioners to converse in the same language yet to experiment and create as individuals. Photography has weathered the storm of criticism and doubt; its somewhat confused identity has been turned to its advantage and allows true expression. ☺

ALL IMAGES BY RAYMOND CHU