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# Stanley Wong

BY ANDRE CHAN



Stanley Wong in his Hong Kong studio. Behind him are two photographs from his "Lanwei" series (2006–). Photo by Ann Woo for ArtAsiaPacific.

## InnoCentre in Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong, is a recent government initiative that aims to provide low-cost spaces for creative types, fostering design and innovation.

Yet I arrange to meet up with graphic-designer-cum-artist Stanley Wong—better known as another mountain man—at the café downstairs, as the air conditioning in his studio is provided for a limited time each day, and not in the early mornings. This sort of problem is a common characteristic of the publicly funded and managed creative spaces scattered around Hong Kong: uniformity, frugality and ease of management always tend to come first.

We chat about the artist district of Fo Tan, a suburb in Hong Kong's New Territories, and then about how younger artists are starting to get their own spaces these days. Many artists of Wong's generation—he is now 52—have a second job to support themselves and few have a separate space for pursuing their art. He describes himself as a graphic designer who happens to do noncommissioned photography and installation works. He also believes that an artist is someone who is immersed in art and art alone, and that maintaining a space just for his extracurricular activities would be a luxury.

In due time we move up to his studio inside the building, passing through long, nondescript hallways reminiscent of so many commercial buildings around the city. The first item that meets the eye when we arrive is the large-format 8-by-10 camera, with its huge T-stand, that points out of his window toward the surrounding low-rises, which are an uncommon sight in Hong Kong's densely packed cityscape. Leaning against the

opposite wall, taking up its full height, are two framed photographs from his ongoing series "Lanwei" (2006–), in which he dots unfinished buildings with fashion models dressed in vintage costumes, embellishing the mundane surroundings. These photos were taken for his show at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery.

*Lanwei*, or "broken tail," is a term used to describe building projects that never got finished and which stand in various states of incompleteness in the middle of cities throughout China. Many of them have stayed that way for years, even decades, relics of the building craze that followed the Chinese economic reforms of the 1980s. Their empty concrete shells act as vast sets for Wong to stage his often humorous photographic scenes against the backdrop of the booming cities. The contrast between the coldness and starkness of their bare concrete structures and the sensuous human figures dressed in the style of a bygone era is enhanced by the generous size of the prints. Large-format photography shows the details of the scenes well, while the analog nature of the process keeps Wong in tune with the craft aspects of making art. After all, it's a long and meticulous process to take a proper picture with this equipment. He even mentions that he'd like to carry his 8-by-10 out every day as part of a training regimen, and, despite the advances of the digital age, he's keen to keep shooting with it until no more film is available.

Wong then shows me the photos he shot the previous week for his new show. These were taken at an unfinished fairground in the outskirts of Beijing—the site was intended to become a copycat Disneyland, complete with the obligatory castle. It is early autumn, and the bleakness of the northern Chinese landscape is already showing through in the pictures. Adorned with actors and actresses dressed in midcentury Chinese uniforms, these scenes become a new form of propaganda imagery, with an eerie capitalist twist.

To Wong, the ultimate testament to the *lanwei* spirit is the enormous Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang, North Korea. It was left unfinished in 1992 after the downfall of the Soviet Union, which had provided most of the expertise required for the building's construction. He jokes that no one in their right mind would point a large camera toward this hotel, or place models in front of it. Nor would anyone have guessed that an Egyptian company would agree to resume the project 16 years after it was abandoned. There still remains an unfinished, "broken tail" to this project, a testament to the incompleteness of the world.

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