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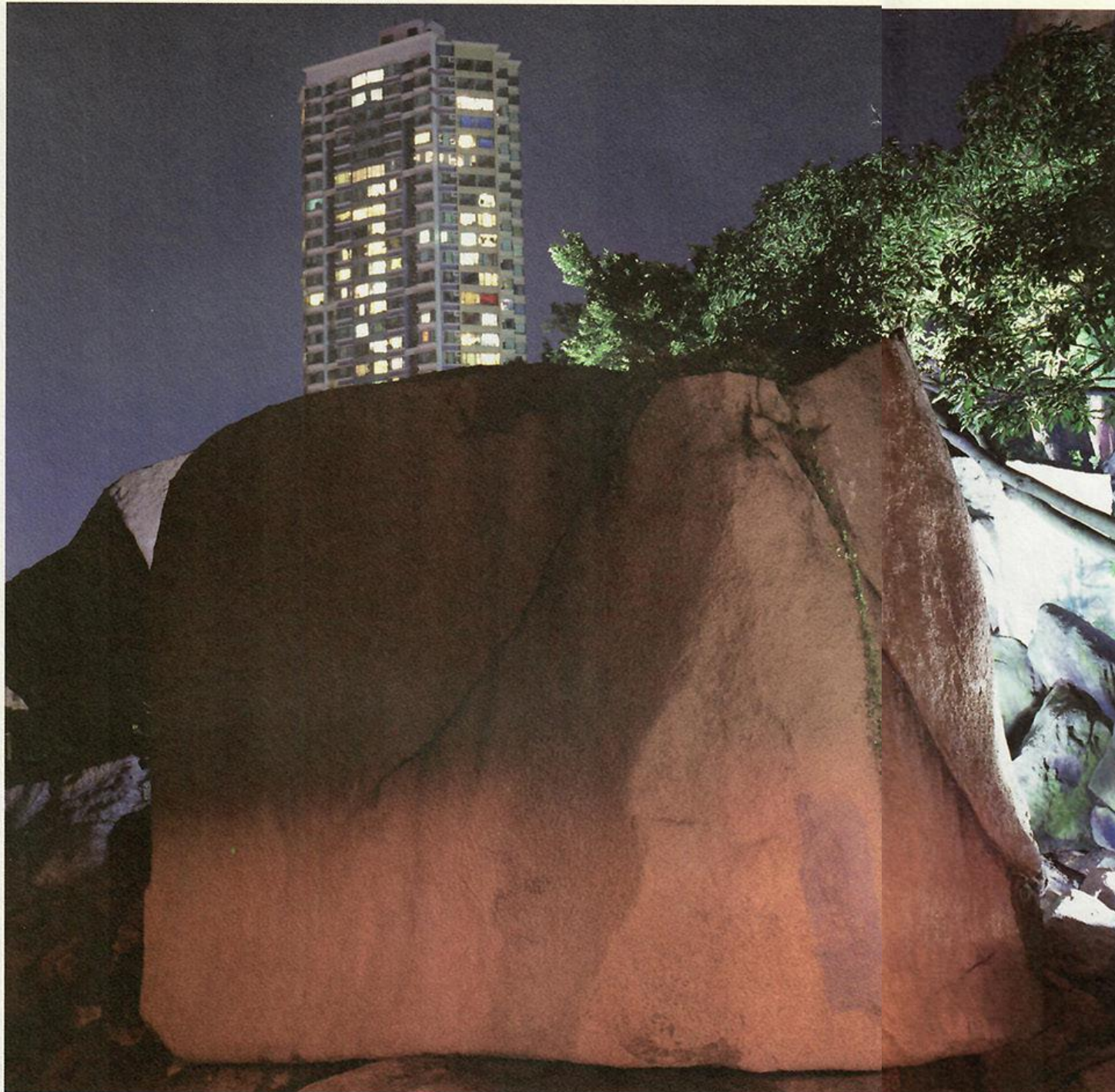
visual art news, exhibitions, feature, interviews, reviews

An Age Without the Hong Kong Museum of Art
沒有香港美術館的時代





Words by Angel Li / Translation by Dongli Liang / Images courtesy of the artist



The Irrational Night 4
2007-2008
Digital inkjet print
70 x 70 cm

Lai Lon Hin

A FUNDAMENTAL WAY TO SEE LIFE

Lai Lon Hin may not be a prolific artist-photographer – since he picked up photography when he was still studying at a local design institute in 2003, he has released only three series while the fourth one is scheduled for later this year. Lai, however, has been shooting constantly, except during the time when he was in Australia for a working holiday lasting almost six months, citing the reason that the natural landscape abroad was not as erratic as the one in Hong Kong.

Judging from many of the photographs he has released so far, we can easily come to the conclusion that the photographer is inclined to capturing the fleeting moments of life. For example, in his debut series titled *the excuses*, with the tagline “For the same reason, every time I found a different excuse to press the shutter”, we can see photos of a man napping in a public area and an orchid plant. Lai explains that he was out shooting without a specific plan or object, and it was a way for him to express his emotions. He admits that he is not the

type of photographer who embarks on a shooting project with clear goals. He simply sees where the wind blows and lets his instincts guide him, just capturing scenes which he considered “beautiful”. Most of the photos he took on a Polaroid camera can actually be deemed as snapshots, as the composition and light are far from contrived. Although they may look quite banal at first glance, they breathe the essence of everyday life – contrary to being a daily roller-coaster ride, it is not that eventful most of the time.

Experimenting with Techniques

Like many young artists, Lai has been experimenting with his work and his attempts to explore the different themes and spectrum of photography are palpable. For his second series, *The Irrational Night*, released in 2008, Lai speaks of it with vague memories, indicating that he manifested some iconic elements of Hong Kong. Back then, with a newly purchased big camera and a tripod, Lai began shooting at night and to his surprise, a long exposure would induce strange effects in the photos. At the same time, a paradoxical scenario of the city came to his attention – placed against the backdrop of an urbanised environment, artificial nature is lit up by the ubiquitous glaring city lights. By using a long exposure for such scenes, Lai showcased a different way to perceive Hong Kong and the series, devoid of the element of people in such a densely populated place, conveys a sense of eeriness.

One might assume that *The Irrational Night* series would be Lai’s protest against excessive urbanisation, and thus, the absurdity of our city. He is, in fact, neutral about the series, saying, “I did not intend to be critical about urbanisation in Hong Kong since it is not unique to our city.” He just presented what he saw, with special effects in photography.

The Irrational Night has garnered the most media attention for Lai. However, he states squarely that he prefers the black and white series *Me on the rooftop scenery* as it is not as straightforward as *The Irrational Night*, which apparently points to a certain aspect of a city. Viewers are likely to arrive at similar interpretations of *The Irrational Night*. On the contrary, the *Me on the rooftop scenery* series is more abstract, leaving more room for viewer imagination. What do they make of the photographs showing a toppled plant or clothes hanging on a wire at the corner of the rooftop? It is all up to them to decide.

What Lai wanted to capture on his camera was the action (if and when there was any) that took place on that seemingly quiet rooftop of his residential building. He went on to give some background information about the location – it is quite big, yet most activities, such as having a barbecue and playing badminton, are banned. With the prohibitions fully enforced, all residents can do is grow small plants and hang out their clothes for drying, while some elderly people jog there. Some of his pictures show that the rooftop is somewhat derelict – we can see a photograph of traces of water on the floor, next to a hanger. Just like *the excuses*, nothing is staged and traces of life are witnessed. This series is a stark contrast to the previous one, in which photography effects play a pivotal role. The black and white series is not too exciting, but it leaves viewers wondering.

Paradoxes of What He Sees

Lai is working on a new series which he hopes to release by the end of this year. He has even gone a step further and is shooting with a mobile phone, putting behind all photography techniques. It has been a profound change for him since he used to believe that photographers must shoot with a bulky camera. By ridding himself of the prejudice, he has been exploring the characteristics of the medium of phone photography. He is trying to examine what is real and what is fake since manifesting the pixels will blur the images and make them appear fake, even though the happening is real. Shooting with a mobile phone has rendered Lai a newfound freedom. He finds it more intimate than big cameras but less intimidating, as if he was invisible to other people. He explains that he feels a certain lightness when the technical aspects of photography become secondary and he can concentrate on the composition as well as the emotions of the scene.

Some people may think that what appears before the viewfinder is what matters most in photography while neglecting the fact that what goes on in the photographer’s mind when he or she clicks the shutter counts as much. It is evident from Lai’s photos that he is a silent observer of the ordinary life that flashes past him, and he is taking it slow and easy.

From the mobile phone series

