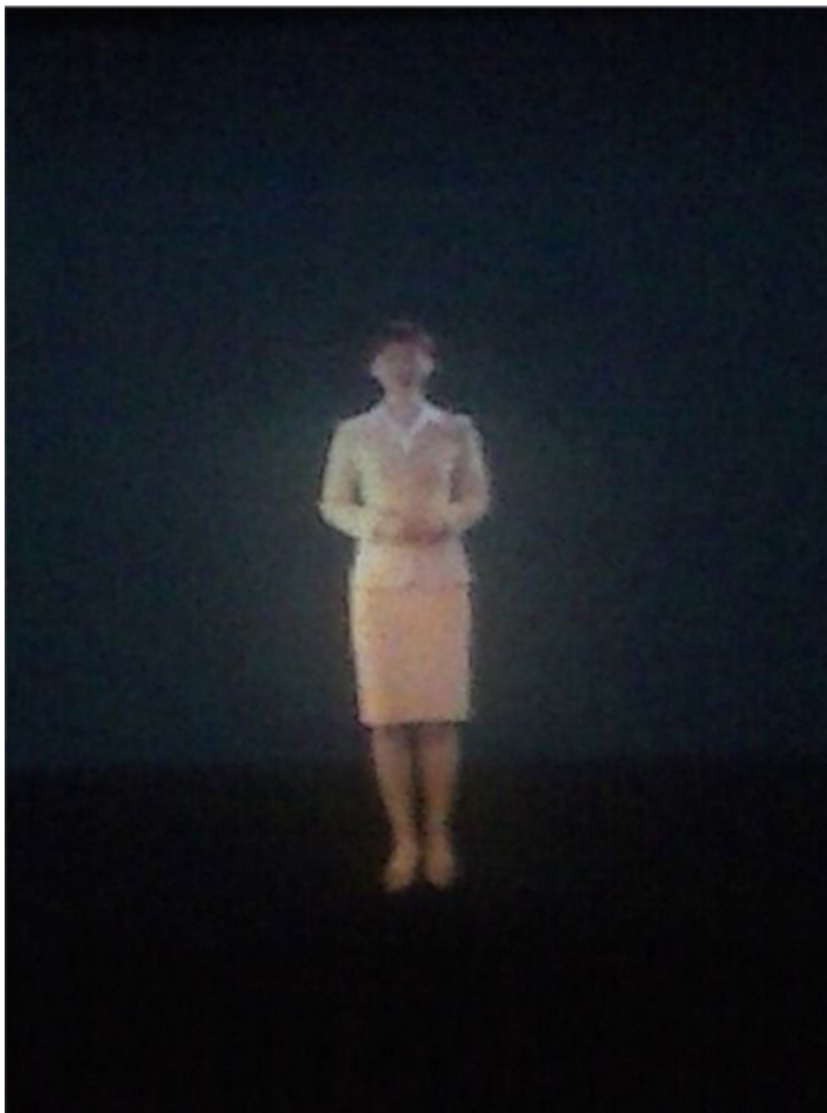


LAI LON HIN. LOOKING IS DETACHMENT

by Sheung Yiu



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'Lean Against the Wall'

'The first 10,000 photographs are your worst.' If that is true, Lai Lon Hin (賴朗熹) is in his prime. In his 20s, when he was shooting his first series of work 'excuses', he was going through a bitter period of his life. He put all his mind on photography, taking snapshots with his vintage polaroid camera. When he woke up from his 'stream of unconsciousness', he had already taken tens of thousands of polaroids. Now he had had his work exhibited in several big exhibitions and snapping for his most recent series 'Lean Against The Wall', a more matured and self-conscious sequel of 'excuses', using nothing but a low tech camera phone. I am lucky enough to be invited to his studio and talked to him about his journey and his work.

Growing up, have you ever imagined being a photographic artist?

LAI LON HIN (LLH): I have never thought of it, but I like drawing since I was young.

What is your first camera? What is your first memory with photography?

LLH: A first generation Nikon FM. It was a gift to my tutor. My first memory is just shooting landscapes and sunsets, slowly it becomes my habit and I take my camera everyday with me.

When did you start to see photography as an art form/ a way of expression?

LLH: Frankly, I have never thought of photography as an art form, but I had spent most of my 20s obsessively shooting. Between 2005 and 2006, I did nothing except photography. I did not meet a friend, watch a movie nor read a

book, I put every spendable money and time on photography. At that time when I was photographing 'Excuses', I would not look at the road when I ran out of film, fearing that I could not capture it when I saw it.



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'Excuses'

How did you start your career and went on to become one of the most shown artist in exhibition in Hong Kong?

LLH: I started photographing after I graduated. I broke my FM at the time. I needed a new one but not the same one, so I bought a '630' polaroid camera for 40 dollars at a Salvation Army second hand store at Chai Wan. That camera was the simplest camera ever, there is not control except adjusting exposure. I spend thousands on polaroid film, in fact I spent almost every cent I earned on photography. I did not have any other form of entertainment.

I had been photographing 'excuses' for about 2 years. I spent all my time photographing and nobody had seen my work. I was lost. Coincidentally, I often met Ducky Tse (謝至德), a renowned documentary photographer in Hong Kong whose work I adore, on the street. I invited him to a short meeting to show him my work.

He has a workshop called 'The Photocrafters' with Ng Sai Kit, Siman Wan, Ellis Yip, Dustin Shum and some younger photographers such as South Ho and myself who joined later. He introduced me to artist-run gallery Hulahoop. I had some of my first exhibitions there.

I lost my polaroid right about I am ending my first project, naturally I started another series 'The Irrational Night' exploring night scenes of fragmental greenscapes in the city. The project was exhibited in Blindspot Gallery.

Please introduce the project you are working on now.

LLH: 'Lean Against the Wall' is a project that I started in 2013 till now and exhibited in Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong and Palais de Tokyo in Paris. It is a series of extremely low-res flat looking photos that lack the sense of dimensions.

With the pervallence of digital photography in this decades, some are going back to large format analog photography, claiming that analog provides the time needed to develop good work compared to the almost instant and effortless snaps of smartphones. What is your take on that?

LLH: It all depends on your perspective. Photography has become 'too popular'. As digital camera become more accessible, people turned back to big format analog camera. But it is futile to use format as the measure of effort, ultimately it is how you organize your thought using photography as a medium. There is no direct relationship between this and your camera.



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'Lean Against the Wall'

Why do you choose to shoot this series in a camera equipped low-tech cell phone?

LLH: I started this series for a while now and I uploaded them all on Facebook. At the beginning, I was about to go to Australia and I got my mobile phone. There is just no reason to not take photos, even if you are not a photographer, one will get used to snapping pictures with it. It is not something that special.

I did have doubts about the legitimacy of these phone snaps as my personal work earlier in my career, legitimacy in a sense of whether I conceive them as my art. I have moved passed that. Taken with camera or not, it is still

snapshots. I find the distinction unnecessary, but many obviously has that distinction. Organization and selection are important. The act of taking picture is actually a form of selection and subsequently a reorganization. It is about what you find appropriate and what not.

This project is still ongoing, but I did not consciously choose to continue, it is just too random and easy to shoot this way.



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'Lean Against the Wall'

'Lean Against The Wall', to me, is almost like a more matured and avant grade sequel of your first photo series 'excuses'.

LLH: Yes, but I had dissimilar emotions when I was photography. For my first series of work, it is more personal, now I want to examine the social environment. The half year I lived in Australia, I lived in a farm, I did not go to a lot of places and I could not access the Internet. If I had to send a text message, I would need to go to a big tree for 15 minutes, trying to get a signal. I would receive people's reply one day later. After that, I look at Hong Kong differently.

I have exhibited my latest series 'Lean Against the Wall' at Palais de Tokyo last decemeber. At the time, I chose to present my work in a Facebook layout, I show them along with some personal things and news during The Umbrella Movement I shared on Facebook. I was going to exhibit the same work this year at K11 (an 'art mall' in Hong Kong funded my property developer)during Art Basel Hong Kong. I have a twenty-minute video footage of my Facebook post and snapshots, which about one-third of the video is related to the movement. I guess the property developer does not want to have anything to

do with it, so My work is pulled off. I believe it is crucial to intentionally decide what to express at a specific period of time.

How is your research process?

LLH: I continue to produced numerous work between the two photo series. I am not a photographer who had a detailed plan before shooting. I need to photograph nonstop. Between every exhibited series, I take thousands of photographs, much more than what I shown in galleries to reach a point where I want to dig deeper into a more specific motif. I did not think too much at that time, but now I am getting a pattern.

I have never received any education in fine art photography nor contemporary art, I spent a lot of time to develop my approach and understand my pattern when I am working on a project. I know when I can create something create and at what moment I should end a project.



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'Me on the rooftop scenery'

Inspirations. Who and What?

LLH: I liked documentary photographers when I was younger, such as James Nachtwey and Steve McCurry. Araki is my ultimate favourite. I love his photo book about his wife 'Yoko'.

How does Hong Kong inspire you artistically? Living in a city with such dense visual elements, does it influence your aesthetic and artistic thinking?

LLH: Definitely, because that is what you see. It is also about how you see though. Michael Wolf photographed a lot about Hong Kong. He sees the city from a foreign perspective and sees it more clearly than anyone. He took what Hong Kongers took for granted and photographed elements that we did not pay attention to. I think photographers need to stand back to get the whole picture. Looking is detachment. Looking is comparison and looking is the essence of photography. How you look is important; through what method do you see and how you understand it are important.

Hiroshi Sugimoto do not live in Japan but his concepts are from Japan, the same is to Lee Kit (a Hong Kong contemporary artist). By distancing yourself from your city, you get a better picture and understanding of your origin.



© Lai Lon Hin, from the series 'The Irrational Night'

Favourite exhibition(s)?

LLH: For photo exhibition, Sugimoto's latest exhibition in Taipei is a good one. Sugimoto has a very unique idea about time in his photographic work. Personally, I do not like his presentation method because it is too clean for me. There is hardly any photographers of his generation that can ever deconstruct a concept as deep and thorough as he did. He uses still image to illustrate to concept of time, for example his photographs of blank screens in 'Theatres'.

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