



I think I'm not just being nostalgic. I don't go and shoot in every old building



Painting with light Wong and her famed piece, *Man Descending From Spiral Staircase*, HKU Hostel (1990)

Staircases and corridors

Unlike the folks in Marienbad, Wong Wo-bik was most definitely in Lai Yuen before it became a distant memory. The photographer talks to **Edmund Lee** about her decades of documenting old buildings

The landscape photography of Wong Wo-bik is bound to induce a cogent sense of nostalgia, which is a sentiment she doesn't really share. "Not at all," says the veteran photographer briskly when asked if her signature photos of old buildings – many of which have since been demolished – represent some kind of a historical mission. "Sorry about that," she reacts, unprompted, to her own deadpan answer, before adding: "When I took the photos, I just felt that I should preserve them [on film]. They're really beautiful."

It would be an understatement to say that Wong, one of Hong Kong's most recognised photographers, has been under-exhibited; it is partly a consequence of her long-time position working as an arts administrator in the government and partly – you get the impression – that she's simply in no rush to show them to the world. In fact, when we meet for this interview on a weekday afternoon, Wong does casually

speak of the 'tens of thousands' of photos that she has taken over the years, but never had a chance to take a look at.

For those who want a glimpse of history (in every sense of the word), a tip of this iceberg is being showcased at Wong's current exhibition, titled *Memory and Fiction*, which includes several of her unpublished works dating back to the 1980s.

Would you consider your work a form of nostalgia?

No. I think I'm not just being nostalgic. I don't go and shoot in every old building. Take the Central Market as an example – I've been inside for some projects I was working on, but I had no interest at all to shoot there. The only reason I was carrying a camera there was for documentation purposes. That building is so ugly! On the other hand, I did actively go and visit abandoned buildings that my students told me about, such as Eu

Tong-sen's old mansions, which I did extra researches on. I really like to research about the old buildings. A few friends from abroad recently remarked on how lucky I was to be able to capture these buildings before they were torn down.

As an artist, how do you fit into the context of architecture photography?

You know, the proper architectural photographers will always set their cameras straight, which is something I never did. I didn't set out to [deviate from the norm], but I do feel that I've been capturing the best angles. I also like to include flaws in my works. You can easily notice that I only set up two lights [for some of my shoots]. These flaws have become a special element of my work.

Why do you prefer doing landscape to portrait photography?

I've also done some portraits; it

depends on the occasions. My portraits are more of the alternative type, though. For example, a friend of mine once asked me to shoot a set of wedding photos for her and I replied that I wouldn't do any proper portraits. I asked her: 'can your husband throw you up into the air?' [Laughs] I would do that type of photo, but she's too heavy for that.

Have you ever exhibited your portraits?

No, never. [Pauses] Ah, maybe one.

Do you remember the earliest photos you ever took?

It was in my undergraduate years at [the] Columbus [College of Art and Design,] Ohio. I took a photography course, equipped with only a Minolta standard-lens camera. I had to imitate wide angle, telephoto and other stuff with it. The most memorable part was the criticism session of the course. I was criticised like mad after taking some photos of the water tanks on the rooftops – I mean, I found them really cute as I've never seen them in Hong Kong – and my classmates kept on interrogating me about the meanings of those photos! I've forgotten how I fought back but luckily I didn't cry on the spot. [Laughs]



Images from the past Corridor, Eucliff Mansion, Repulse Bay, Hong Kong (top, 1984-1985); Ice Skating, Lai Yuen Amusement Park, Hong Kong (bottom, 1997)

I've read somewhere that you were greatly influenced by film. Can you elaborate on that?

I was [a member of] the Phoenix Cineclub [in the 1970s]. For some reason, I also bought a Canon Super 8 camera back then – it's now preserved in the [Hong Kong] Arts Centre as an antique. I watched a lot of foreign films then, like those by Antonioni, including *Blow Up*. When I subsequently went to study in the US, I chose photography as my subject.

So how did your film viewing experience relate to your career in photography?

The films were very important.

There's this film, called *Last Year at Marienbad*. It's such a great movie! Have you seen it?

I have, and it looks very much like what you've been doing.

Definitely. Actually I didn't realise the connection at first. When I watched it, [the film festival] didn't manage to find the English-subtitled print. Though I could get a refund, I went in to see the film anyway. I felt like I could speak French!

Memory and Fiction is at Blindspot Gallery until **Feb 4**.

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