

Leo K. K. Wong — From Representational to Abstract Art

American modern photography reformist, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), pioneered straight photography in the 1920s. He was devoted to establishing photography as an independent art form like painting and sculpture. Although a master pictorialist, he placed great emphasis on the expression of photographic techniques. With simple and straightforward works fully demonstrating the special attributes of photography, he elevated pictorialism to a fresh new level. Likewise, the seasoned photographer of Hong Kong, Leo K. K. Wong, injected a breath of fresh air into the local pictorial photography scene. Wong pursued typical pictorial aesthetics in his early years but later became deeply influenced by the spirit of Chinese calligraphy and painting. This resulted in an evolution from the representational to the abstract as he began studying the intrinsic qualities of photography. He was the first to show a new way to further explore Hong Kong pictorial photography that has gradually evolved into a new standard.

In 1966, Wong studied photography under master photographer S. F. Dan (1906-1987) where he came to understand the importance of composition and innovative ideas. He was greatly inspired by Tchan Fou-li's artistic view on juxtaposing documentary and pictorial elements. In the early years, Wong insisted upon presenting social life subjects within pictorial compositions. Works from that period depict the bustling Wong Tai Sin market in *Market Place* (Fig. 1), workers posting bills on street walls in *Postering* (Fig. 2), the life of Lau Fau Shan fishermen in *Burden of Life* (Fig. 3) and the Tai Po street scene in *Monkey Show* (Fig. 4). All these photos successfully record glimpses of life in Hong Kong from the 1960s and 1970s. Although Wong often gives up signature landmarks for more elegant compositions, these monochrome works are precious images that bear witness to the social changes and remain outstanding examples of pictorial photographs of the time. In 1975, Wong won the gold award (human emotions) at the Mental Health Week exhibition with *Tearful* (Fig. 5) of 1969. This photo captures the grievance of his little daughter replete with teardrops and pursed lips. The innocent facial expression and inner feelings of the child are vividly portrayed.

Black-and-white photography is discerning about light and shadow, and tonal gradation, whereas colour photography demands colour contrast and matching. It is not easy for photographers to satisfy both sets of requirements. Wong is nevertheless capable of creating black-and-white photos with moving tones and rich details, as well as brilliant colour works. *Brightness Ahead* (Fig. 6) and *Early Spring* (Fig. 7) taken in China exemplify the masterly effect wrought by harmonious colours. *Autumn Fantasy* (Fig. 8) in 1983 is his first work achieved by means of multiple exposures. The same objects were captured with different focal lengths; the light, colour and objects blend perfectly as one. It creates an overall illusive effect of fleeting light. Lauded by economist and photographer Steven N.S. Cheung (1935-) as "an outstanding impressionist work", this photo transcends the prevailing stereotype of salon photography execution.

In the mid 1980s, Wong felt he could make no further breakthroughs in photography although he won many awards in international salons. It was then that he turned his attention to studying and collecting Chinese calligraphy and painting. For ten years, he was immensely nourished by these classic art forms and established a unique value of aesthetics that lent great support to his future artistic output. As he says, Chinese calligraphy and painting possess great freehand abstract beauty, as seen in the highly

cursive script of the Tang dynasty and Zen paintings of the Southern Song dynasty. He hopes to pursue through photography the artistic level of “unlikeness is true likeness” found in Chinese paintings. Wong is also influenced by the painting theory and the style of contemporary Chinese painter Zhu Qizhan (1892-1996). Zhu liked to explore subjects in nature and was very successful in adopting the colour scheme and brushing techniques of the impressionist school. His works exhibit clever use of light and colour. They are always bright and vivid yet never vulgar. The brushwork is overwhelming and forceful, while the stress of expression is on individuality, strength and conciseness. Zhu always encouraged Wong to maintain his personal style characterized by visual tension and minimalist composition.

Unlike painting, photography is based on real objects. This somewhat restricts imagination and creativity. As Wong pursues a creative process and artistic level of “portraying mountains in likeness and unlikeness”, he must first come to a subjective interpretation of concrete objects from which he can abstractly express his personal impression. To Wong, mountains are merely lines, crisscrossing paths are colour blocks and trees are dots. When shooting a photograph, he elevates himself to a state where he is unaware of both the artist himself and the outside world.

In the late 1990s, Wong infused his photography with a strong passion for nature. Using different photographic techniques, he hoped to eternalise the momentary beauty of nature and express his emotions with vistas of various seasons and times of day. His finds depicting hazy beauty a viable mode of expression to take the work from representational to abstract art and that multiple exposure is the best technique for this purpose. It is quite common for pictorial photographers to do multiple exposures yet Wong is bold enough to do so up to 9 times in one photo. Such skill is truly incredible. Multiple exposures create overlapping images creating the illusion that objects are full of movement. Viewers can sense the energy of life in a serene and natural scene. In addition, Wong also loves to create hazy and illusive conceptions with reflex lens. His favourite 250mm reflex lenses have very short depths of field. When light falls on objects outside the depth of field, small light rings are formed. *Dreaming of Spring* (Fig. 9) is one such example. The flowering peaches in the background are diffused into a series of hazy red halos, whereas the blossoms in the foreground are vague and sometimes half concealed. Looking at this multiple exposure work, one feels as if one is in Wu Ling Yuan.

Wong believes that photographers must appreciate painting, calligraphy and music to sharpen their aesthetic perception. His Lotus series contains blooming summer lotus blossoms as well as withered winter ones. Whatever form the blossoms may take, they always express his personal response to beauty. Multiple exposures lead to a series of optical effects in the lotus pond. Delicate nuances of light and colour, coupled with harmonious and coordinated tonal gradation, piece together a unique artistic conception. Wong successfully expresses the beauty of nature’s light, colours, lines and form with photographic qualities. In *Jötunheim* (Fig. 10), light and shadow transform the snow on tree branches into abstract lines. The picture is like a powerful Tang cursive script calligraphy, or a surging symphony. In recent years, Wong has been fond of photographing flowering plum and cotton trees. These subjects are captured with long focal length lenses so that scenic details are enlarged and trivial elements omitted. *Resonance of Plum Blossum* (Fig. 11) and *Nimue* (Fig. 12) are fine examples in which simple and clean compositions are off set by dazzling and mystical light and arrangements of colour. Flowers captured with the telephoto lens are like adorning red ink strokes in Chinese ink paintings, while twisted branches resemble the

unrestrained effect of ink splashing. These photographic works are bursting with the abstract tone of modern Chinese ink painting.

Wong conducts dialogues with landscapes through his photography. He experiences the ever-changing life force of nature. His works echo the messages conveyed by Japanese landscape photographer Shinzo Maeda (1922-1998) whose poetic natural landscapes deeply touch the hearts of viewers. While the works of both photographers bear witness to the harmonious encounter between the self and the natural environment, Wong's photos particularly resonate with a rich charm found in Chinese paintings. His landscape photographs are simplistically composed while interpreting abstract beauty with photographic qualities. He has opened up a creative path full of individualistic style.

In the publication, *Camera Lucida • Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) proposed that a photograph is generally made up of studium and punctum. The former is the "application to a thing" and is comprised of basic elements that reveal the motives for shooting the photo. The latter is a "sting, peck, cut" which includes the finer details that can inspire emotion or interest. Barthes thought that to appreciate a good photograph properly, it is best to raise your head, close your eyes, and let the punctum rise to emotional consciousness. When appreciating Wong's works, what is the punctum for you? Is it his daughter's teardrops? Or a withered lotus in the pond? The same photo may have a different punctum for different people. Let us close our eyes now and feel Wong's works with our heart. Let the images speak directly to us.

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Plates

Fig. 1

Market place

Leo K.K. Wong

1966

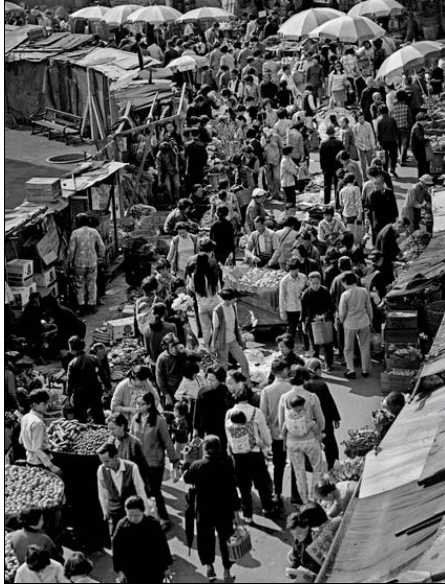


Fig. 2

Postering

Leo K.K. Wong

1967



Fig. 3
Burden of life
Leo K.K. Wong
1971



Fig. 4
Monkey show
Leo K.K. Wong
1972



Fig. 5
Tearful
Leo K.K. Wong
1969



Fig. 6
Brightness ahead
Leo K.K. Wong
1979

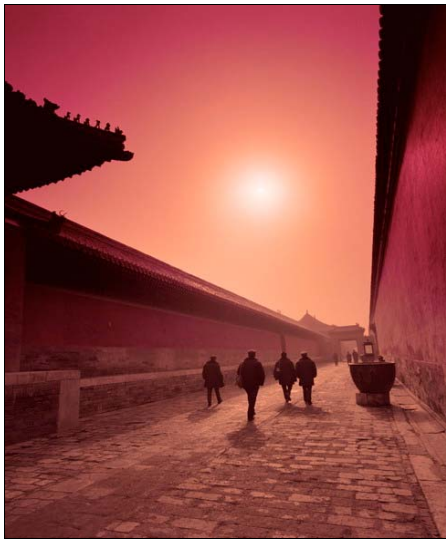


Fig. 7
Early spring
Leo K.K. Wong
1980

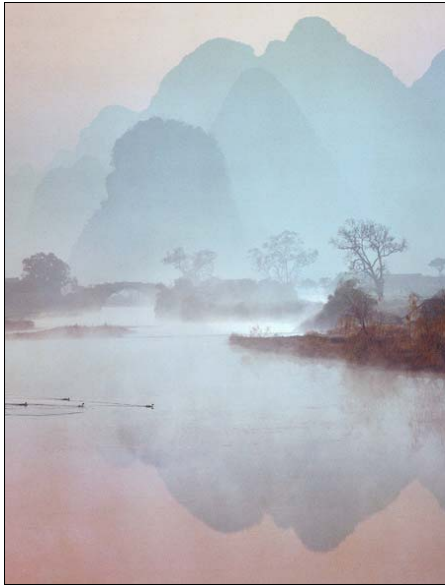


Fig. 8
Autumn fantasy
Leo K.K. Wong
1983



Fig. 9
Dreaming of spring
Leo K.K. Wong
1999



Fig. 10
Jötunheim
Leo K.K. Wong
2004

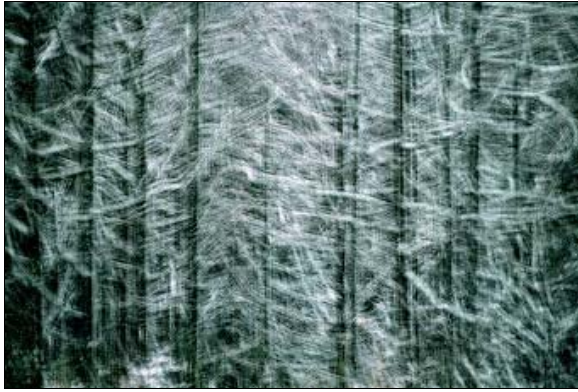


Fig. 11
Resonance (Plum Blossom)
Leo K.K. Wong
2006



Fig. 12
Nimue
Leo K.K. Wong
2007

