

LIKE A VERY FINE SCORE

Sherman Ong | photographer

Like the actor trying to find the right tone for his part, Sherman Ong polishes his various projects to give them the perfect form revealing his artistic intent. Therefore, it is difficult to extrapolate and define an “Ong style” for his full body of work, as each corpus has its own inner force. It then becomes obvious that the Monsoon series or the series about people who have disappeared have not much in common apart from their aesthetics which is a justification in itself and makes for a powerful statement.

To reveal how fragile the human figure is in a public space, Sherman’s plunging gaze uncovers the layers of a city in its uttermost depths, taking the eye into a vertiginous vertical and abrupt fall from the roofs and the walls. In doing so, he stresses how little space the city leaves to humans. Similarly, in the balance of power between man and nature as expressed in his images from Rio, the vitality of the vegetation and the telluric forces of the earth will always beat the inventiveness and creativity of man in his endeavour to build the city.

Yet, in order to temper such a rather pessimistic view, he adds to his statement some unexpected and incongruous notes and association, bordering on absurdity. We are presented with an elephant proudly displaying its tusks in front of a trophy showing them hanging on the wall, while a majestic paper dragon is confronting, in a conscious face-off, a strange advertising poster, whereas a mason is building a pool in the greeneries for – it seems – sheep.

But the keen observer that Ong is also reveals the softness and subtlety of things: delicate motives, sparkling colours found either in the carpet or the curtain, while plastic flowers, a forgotten caddy or a car wreck seem to be the traces of some quixotic, vernacular land art.

In such spaces that he entitles ‘Landscapes’ and that are also slices of life, men and things find their own structure.

On the contrary, his Monsoon series shows each human being and each object surrounded with such a special atmosphere in which heat and humidity compete with one another in an ambiguous environment where sounds of water and life disappear. Vision is made blurry, imprecise, light is dim despite artificial lighting, and yet one can feel a joie de vivre, a brotherhood, like at the dawn of a renaissance. Each image is bathed with light and colours, lending the atmosphere with a quasi-cinematic feel.

Does he wish to bring back memories of fleeting moments and those that are particularly and deeply intimate? In composing his Hanoi Haiku series, Sherman produces short visual poems in a triptych format, where the subject is framed by its context or its references. There is a long-haired woman posing between disorder and decay, and family scenes counterposing the internal and the external domains without discarding traditional gestures and postures, while smoke slowly invades all the images, hinting with shattering simplicity at how transient and fragile life is.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Missing You series is a testimony of Sherman Ong’s ability to compose an image and develop a concept with the greatest discipline and audacity. The moving evocation of the absent figure by resorting to writings coming out of the past via some transparency is a confirmation of the difficult dialogue between presence and absence that these characters undergo.

This series has a lot in common with the corpus My Favourite Person, as the attempt to say who I am and who I’d like to be perfectly unfolds itself into four diptychs which, using masks, gestures and attitudes, speak in a simple and concise way of the dream of every child.

As an ultimate evidence of soft nostalgia, Sherman offers us images displaying great mastery. Here, the beauty of Cognac’s classical architecture is washed with the light of the setting sun, elegantly supine with the roundness of old wooden barrels and the golden brown hue of the spirits.

by **AGNÈS DE GOUVION SAINT-CYR**

Curator | Brassai Collection