

# SUGGESTIVE REALMS AND THE ICONOCLAST

– picturing Sherman Ong

“Freedom of thought alert to mystery  
us always possible if not actually  
present, whatever the nature of the  
possible; atrocious or attractive, mean  
or marvellous. It has power to evoke  
mystery with effective force.”

Rene Magritte, 1898 – 1967

The photographic work of Sherman Ong has been likened to that of a filmmaker. The textures and narrative his imageries evoke appear to convey the largely cinematic. His images are serial in nature, yet do not appear to have rolled off a chain of captive shots. They bear the traces of having reflected on the pace of human life and the human imprint upon its surroundings.

Magritte was a painter associated with the Surrealist movement. He dabbled in photography sometime in the late 20s, within an esteemed community of artists involved in the medium, such as Andre Kertesz, May Ray, Brassai and Berenice Abbott. His photography has been regarded as casual snapshots, mainly of family and friends, documenting their “private lives”<sup>1</sup>. We are told that despite this apparently informal approach, Magritte actually orchestrated the postures and figures in his photography, creating “controlled compositions that often reflect the imagery in his paintings.”<sup>2</sup>

The relationship of motion picture production to still photography is a somewhat ambivalent one. To some extent, using the example of Magritte, one can extrapolate the idea that all photographs, even in a realist and documentary fashion, bear traces of unexpected loss and unpredictable dimensions. If they attempt to mirror life, as in the case of a motion picture rendering, we are led to believe time passes in a linear fashion, with a sleight of hand unfurling successive images before our eyes and minds, conveying a narrative that has been stitched together using the logic of visual coherence and a semblance of pictorial gestures in a pictorial syntax.

Sherman Ong’s most critically evaluated work could well be his Monsoon series: a visionary collective of images that in sum actually represent traces rather than primary components of understandable or appreciable imagery. The monsoon itself represents the seasonal movement of life and nature; its somewhat tenuous and unpredictable force lending credence to a fable-like sensibility that builds from the impending or potential loss in its wake. In some ways, the act of documenting the monsoon and its corresponding imageries, reflect the ‘alertness’ to mystery, as Magritte infers. The significance of the monsoon series and the elemental approach with which the works were ultimately produced, propose that photography is not simply its documentary effort, but a means of divining flashes of the invisible, spaces between consecutive, articulated experiences rendered in spite of the logic of the camera.

The cinematic quality emerges as a tumultuous gesture, compelling our senses to yield to time, unable to only scrutinise one image at a time, instead availing an immense horizon of shadows and light, solid forms and the richly ambiguous, movement and stillness. “The photographs were very good, and the lighting and scenery first rate ...it was relieved by a fascinating series of Chinks and negro train attendants, also beautifully photographed and lighted, each looking like a whole detective story in himself....it was really beautifully done; and it held the audience as a picture book holds a child. The cameramen and the producers had put their hearts and souls into their jobs. But the interest was entirely pictorial and utterly undramatic.”<sup>3</sup> Shaw’s detailed description of a Hollywood production is here distilled to calibrate the power of narrative without its attendant, beautifully shot imageries – Sherman’s Monsoon series is exactly that, a visual panoply that invokes fragile beauty without the beautiful, the prettified, the sensible or the recognisable.

In some respects, he proceeds to challenge this motivation and manifestation with his Missing You series of photographs. Here, once again he directs his characters upon a stage of their choosing, themselves alone, electing to portray in one single, critical gesture, an absolute moment that articulates the memory of a person/thing most meaningful to them. This absolute moment is certainly embodied in a gesture that has no equal; is not repeatable nor would it be evidently and common sensibly understood, by the logic of its own occurrence. Each memory occupies a time and space that is infinitely removed from the currency of experience. The proceeding enactment and its capture by Sherman elicit not only an almost awkward testimonial, subtly reinforced in its strangeness by the fact that each actor adopts the stance with guilelessness and without self consciousness. In this, the pictorial sensibility once again, is one that demonstrates a somewhat impossible caricature: the alertness to the mystery that is loss; something (time or relationship with a person) or someone (the actual person) having left the domain of our immediate experience, passing on to a plane of fragments, immiscible memories, thoughts, moments, ideas, feelings, emotions.

Similarly, My Favourite Person establishes yet another intriguing series of images, intimating a tableau vivant unlike the Missing You, somewhat more still and enacted, using self crafted paper masks and props. This album of images possesses something less contrived, since they are of children, whose sensibilities and memories are most often, singular in their prospective dimensions literally and figuratively. The children evoke the characterisation of their chosen favourite person with great immediacy; a pet would be on all fours, a parent would adopt a posture of authority, one that applies to all adults and not specifically to the parent portrayed. In this respect, these images respect the convention of typology, imbuing the series with a richer layer of photographic imaging beyond our construed imagination and knowledge or wisdom. We are not looking at these children to actually see who their favourite person is, but their ability to summarise and convey in a succinct manner, an observation of humanity that is persistently timeless and memorial.

If there is a way to consider why Sherman’s photography parlays a visual vocabulary so unique and unconventional, then a comparison to motion picture making and filmmaking is warranted, needful, kind.

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1. Brooks Johnson (ed), ‘Rene Magritte’, Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on their art, Aperture Foundation Inc 2004, p118  
2. ibid  
3. Bernard F. Dukore (ed), letter to Cecil Lewis, 5 June 1937/CL 4, Bernard Shaw on Cinema, Southern Illinois University Press 1997, p 126-7

The work of serial images tend to suggest the realm of possibilities; perhaps implicating the obsessive tendencies of picture making and picture taking through the lens of compulsion. Iconic and historic players such as Brassai, Roman Vishniac, Eugene Atget and August Sander<sup>4</sup> are a handful of notables who are known today for compendiums of their imageries of diverse subject matter. For Sherman, this has manifested in his various collections of environments, in Spaces and Spurious Landscapes.

The works of Spaces and Spurious Landscapes are exactly that: mostly vacant, curious and ultimately sublime. They represent an ecology equally of the momentous as well as the unsuspecting and inconsequential. Sherman assembles a cast of individuals and environments abjuring any logic of posturing or purposefulness. People appear as both in motion and yet at pause; a requiem of inertia before the daily activity and the familiar environment in which they stand. The potency of Sherman’s images reside in a stark reality of factum(action/deed) and punctum(point/plot). Again, we return to the parallel in film as narrative in motion picture making: the stories Sherman tells become synonymous with both the elemental visuals in his photographs and the ‘incidents’ that appear to suggest themselves in our reading of the image.

These uncanny portrayals sometimes capture a slice of mountain, a wash of sky, a wisp of cloud, a spruce of flora and shrubbery, an assortment of people from all walks of life, tourists, armed militia, regular citizens enjoying the outdoors, players in a festival, visitors to an attraction and foreigners in a geographical locale obviously alien to the place of their origin. In some of the spurious landscapes, there is wildlife: a scattering of goats, the odd dog and even deliberately placed figures whose identities remain covert and irrelevant. Pictured in succession with other frames, Sherman melds the inanimate with the vital: parts of what look like abandoned architecture; planks and materials that lament the loss of utilitarian evidence; untrimmed foliages, a cascade of telephone and electrical lines, street sides, parked cars and even open windows, parts of a vehicle and doorways. Individually perhaps they coax the viewer into a reverie of perplexity and doubt. But as a sequence, they propose a widening, operatic scale of visual sensations – almost immaterial and somnambulant, as though one were to have had a dream, then walked out into the sky, only to fall into a rich and conspicuous palette of unmediated realities, of the postmodern in media res as it were.

These compositions do not come about from a spontaneous lock of the gaze in time: any photographer’s vision is the result of having seen the auspices of life under the many guises of fleeting change and the dynamism of the universe in flux. Sherman’s images hold parts of this chaos in check, giving us opportunities to reflect on the realms of suggestiveness. In one particular image of a familiar scene in Singapore, he stands in a position that takes in an aerial perspective of a landscape before him, corralling several key buildings of the arts district into a strange symmetry of architectural hybrids. The result is a flattened plane of peaks and apexes, descending in horizontal wings that touch a concentric cast of inhabited structures, resting on the backdrop of still more architectural buoys, pinned against the sky. Anyone familiar with this scene or even those who do not know of this space, are surely convinced they have strolled accidentally into the backstage of some film set, where all the extra parts have come to reside.

The purity of Sherman’s imagery cannot be overstated, it comes across unedited and even if somewhat composed from some direction, still encapsulate a matrix of human meaning that cannot be found except in the syntax of these images. In yet another stylistic endeavour, Sherman creates a similar wellspring of the intuitive and the intentional. The Hanoi Haiku series provides us with a range of images that exist logically or illogically only as triptychs; repeated only in the Fukuoka Haiku as well as the latest series of imageries produced as part of his Icon de Martell Cordon Bleu award.

The format is simple enough: the juxtaposition of three seemingly random images that if evaluated elementally, would likely have no intrinsic relationship with one another. Superficially, some (within each triptych) may bear likeness in either framing or composition, or even colouring. Fundamentally however, the basis of this ‘haiku’ of imagery relates almost certainly to the austerity of the Japanese verse it borrows its genre name from. Here are the 17 syllables of time and space, rendered without punctuation. Grammatically, they might be defined as a series of nouns and adjectives without articles. Their sensibility lies in our reflection, not our scrutiny; in our contemplation rather than our participation. They are documents of an ‘other’ life, an ‘other’ space. We see the things and the people within them, but do not recognise them for what they are, only as grammatology, to borrow another term. It is the proposal and study of how images are transcribed as images, a structural definition, in evaluating not simply the image, but how the photographer’s knowledge of the world around him (and the images from that world or aspects of it) is reflected in the composite derived. If we accept this proposition, then our takeaway of Sherman’s images becomes infinitely of more profound possibilities, from simply looking, to being given the context in which reflection is compelled to take place, and over a period of time, not only at that moment of both capture or appreciation.

The photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard once said, “I believe that we must be true to our medium. That we must know where we have been and where we are going in order to make something original out of our art... in this exhibition I deal... with the ‘surreal’, which I feel is the especial province of photography.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems an overstatement to regard the quality of Sherman Ong’s work as having surrealist overtones or even surrealist undertones. However, it is reasonable to suggest that his vision is one of the iconoclast who has insidiously questioned the established conventions of what it means to make a photograph, and what it means to take a photograph. Meatyard, like Magritte, obviously subscribed to the belief that life, normal and unremarkable as it seems, embody if not the secretion, then at least the allusion to an undiscovered element, both factum and punctum. The spaces between fact, fiction and the dramatisation of those experiences, are thus the spaces out of which Sherman makes his photographs. He has done well to literally pull at the weave of life, unravelling both the yarns and fables that reside in the average human history, producing pictures that breach time and space as fragments literally drifting in the universe of our existence. They are not so much irrelevant as they remain free spirited and sometimes unreadable. They are, to graft a position writer Vicki Goldberg adopted in regard to another photographer’s work, about “compositions (that are) pulled taut by a sense of unexpectedly active space, which seems to be as alive and demanding as the figures and objects within it.”<sup>6</sup>

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4. Brassai (born Gyula Halasz) was renowned even in his time for his vivid documents of the alternative metropolis that was Paris; his career spawned visionary tomes of street and night life, today recognized as dark, vivid and almost consuming tapestries of simultaneously real and folk-like humanity. Eugene Atget was known for his photorealism and considered himself a documenter of the streets and civil environment of an evolving, modernized Paris. Roman Vishniac trained as a medical doctor, but spent 6 years traversing 5000 miles around Europe to document the plight of the Jews during the Second World War. German born August Sander spent his life with his famous idea: Look, Observe and Think – his portraits of different social classes as well as almost dramatized paradigms of the human race, today offer a richly layered almost insidious encyclopedia of perception and insight that has travelled and endured through time.

5. Brooks Johnson (ed), ‘Ralph Eugene Meatyard’, Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on their art, Aperture Foundation Inc 2004, p208

6. Vicki Goldberg, ‘Josef Koudelka’, Light Matters, writings on photography, Aperture 2010, p106

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