

Sunday Vibes

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FROZEN
in time

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Lorry Boy (archival pigment on cotton rag, 2017).



Cheong Yew, Khor Leong Wah (archival pigment on cotton rag, 2017). — Photos: Hari Ho



A world of their own

Photographer Hari Ho captures the faces of KL's Central Market during its last days as a wet market in 1985.

By **ROUWEN LIN**
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THERE is a boy in one of the portraits who remains a bit of a mystery to the photographer till this very day, more than three decades from when it was taken. It is the only picture hanging on the wall at the *Central Market* exhibition at Wel-Ling Gallery in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur that the photographer has unfinished business with.

The portrait shows the child sitting on a wooden barrel surrounded by gunny sacks, light streaming in from the skylight overhead and bathing everything it touched in light and shadow. This single moment of tranquility amid the hustle and bustle of the market was captured by Australian-based photographer Hari Ho just moments before the boy was called away to work. It was a fortuitous meeting between the boy and Ho, set against the backdrop of the impending closure of KL's Central Market in September 1985. They never met again.

"Among the people I did portraits of, this boy is the only one whose name I do not have. I asked around and was told he was a lolly chai in Cantonese — an assistant with a lorry team helping to load and unload supplies at the market. But even though I returned to the market every day after that, I didn't see him again," says Ho, 69, during a chat at the gallery.

He recalls that the boy had a "good face, very sweet yet strong", and that he just had to take that photograph when he saw him sit-

ting there that morning. "At that very moment, he looked like a little prince sitting on his throne. He was called away for work right after I photographed him. I still wonder what he looks like now and what has become of him, and I think, wouldn't it be nice to meet him again," he muses.

Lorry Boy is one of the 28 portrait shots featured in his solo show *Central Market* at the gallery. There is the eccentric man who struts around the market with military paraphernalia and toy guns hung around his belt; the pork seller couple who return to the market even on their days off in their Sunday best, seemingly unable to pry themselves away from familiar stomping ground; a guy referred to fondly by the market folk as "the man with one tooth and two wives"; and a man selling ginger, pumpkins, potatoes, and other root vegetables, who took it upon himself to feed all the stray cats in the market.

"He is a very kind man who is always dressed in a white shirt and white pants, nicely pressed and always spotless. When I was doing his portrait, he raised his hand, telling me later that when you meet a friend, you shake his hand or hug him. 'But for this portrait,' he said, 'I would like to greet the world.' I thought that was so beautiful," says Ho, who is currently based in Newcastle, Australia.

The Ipoh-born Ho studied in the US before working as an advertising copywriter and associate creative director at an advertising agency in KL and teaching at the

Universiti of Malaya. After founding and operating a design company in KL, Ho settled in Australia in the late 1980s, becoming head of production and design at a fine art publishing firm in Sydney.

As he recalls, this *Central Market* project was several months in the making, the initial weeks simply spent on visits to the market and getting to know the people there. In turn, they grew to be comfortable around Ho as he became a familiar presence.

"At first, I was there just to talk to people, the photography came later. But there was this sense of occasion hanging over everything because everyone knew the market was due to be demolished. In the last few days before its closure, I couldn't work fast enough because so many people wanted their photograph taken," he relates.

Ho was adamant that the photographs exude honesty and authenticity, two things he considers important in his portraiture work. The shots in *Central Market* have all the subjects looking straight at the camera and photographed in a frontal orientation.

"It was a plain and simple approach that I had. I wanted them to be relaxed and comfortable, doing what they usually do, then very calmly and slowly projecting that into the camera. What I wanted from them was what I call the neutral gaze, which I think shows better who the person really is, compared to a formal pose or an action shot. I really just wanted them to be themselves," he says.



Mah Kum Lin (archival pigment on cotton rag, 2017).

These portraits in *Central Market* have never been presented together before, so this is the first time they are exhibited as an entity. Ho left for Sydney shortly after he finished this project and it never really felt quite right for them to be shown.

"It is a body of work which I did and liked very much, so I have always wanted to show it. But being in Australia, the context was not quite right and I knew I would have to show it in Kuala Lumpur first. It is like having a tiny bit of sand in your shoe: you try and ignore it but it keeps reminding you it is there, you know?" he says.

Indeed, there is no time like the present, especially when it comes to looking back at the past, and Ho would like visitors to the exhibition to revel in the sense of history that this body of work captures in

its throwback to the wet market of the 1980s.

"It is like a documentation of that era, of how people were and how they lived, and in terms of its historical and social context, how they got their food. I like the fact that it also portrays the people who are part of an important institution in the city," says Ho.

Three decades on, the people in Ho's *Central Market* might have grown up, moved on, passed on. But in this show, their voice rings out as crystal clear today as it did yesterday.

Central Market is on at Wel-Ling Gallery, 8, Jalan Scott, Brickfields in KL till Sept 10. For more info, call 03-2260 1106 or visit welling-gallery.com. Opening hours 10am-6pm (Monday-Friday), 10am-5pm (Saturday). Closed on Sunday and public holidays.



Phoon Chien, Loke Woon (archival pigment on cotton rag, 2017).