

CULTURAL INDEX

The arts at a glance

BY  
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On Oct 1, 1985, Hari Ho sneaked into Kuala Lumpur's Central Market — which had been a wet market — by prying open the planks boarding up the entrance. He took a picture which he named *the day after*. It is the only photo that does not have a human subject in the series being shown at Wei-Ling Gallery.

The 27 other black-and-white photographs in the series are named after the person(s) — inhabitants, vendors and shoppers — he had captured before the wet market closed on Sept 30, 1985.

"The photo was very enigmatic ... the market had been a really noisy and chaotic place, but [when I took] this shot, I remember it was totally silent," recounts Ho, an Ipoh-born photographer who is now based in Newcastle, Australia. There is a sense of loss in the abandoned void captured in the shot, and it echoes throughout the series.

In the final weeks leading up to the iconic market's closure, Ho visited daily before dawn. He enjoyed watching the market come to life and getting to know the tradesmen.

However, he kept the photographs under wraps. "I left for Australia quite soon after I had processed and printed the photos, so they had just been sitting in boxes. You know how when you have a little bit of sand in your shoe? That's the feeling. They have been sitting there in my shoe all these years, and I've always wanted to show them here," says the 69-year-old.

Ho's *Central Market* photo series is well-timed for the Merdeka Day celebrations. A walkthrough stirs up a bittersweet emotion interwoven with a dash of nationalism.

"You don't see this anymore," he says matter-of-factly. "That sense of community — you can't find it in the markets today. I visited Pasar Seni recently. I must say I felt a bit sad to see it now. You can't see the art deco windows from the inside ... they're sealed. And it is mostly selling trite and cheap souvenirs. It used to serve an integral function in the city, a place where you could buy anything and everything..."

To the viewer, each portrait may be just a face from a time gone by, carrying historical details of a Malaysia that is no longer in existence. Yet, Ho's attempt to elicit the subjects' identities through the lens is earnest and compelling, with the monochromatic tone evoking a timeless quality that distills it down to what really matters — the human connection.

"All these people have their unique stories, of course," Ho recounts as we walk past each frame. "Some had nicknames. Some were with their wives, some were second and third-generation vendors: Like this man and his son or the two who sold yogurt and cooking oil, a very strange



## COMING TO LIGHT

Beautiful captures frozen in time unveiled after 37 years in Hari Ho's black-and-white shots of Central Market

combination. This couple are pork sellers. These twins were from a fishmonger family, they were very cheeky. This [couple's photo] was taken on a Sunday — usually their son took care of the stall, but because the market was closing, they couldn't keep themselves away and came back in their holiday clothes. So you can see the batik shirt..."

A natural and unguarded openness comes through in each photo. At the same time, they are reminiscent of photos taken in studios in the old days. Ho agrees, "That's exactly right. There is a balance here ... they were in their natural environment, but as if with the closing of the market looming, they all felt a sense of occasion ... that the photograph was important. At the end, I didn't have to ask if I could take their portrait, they all came to me, wanting their photographs taken."

Their stories remain vivid and personal for the photographer. There was the 92-year-old auntie, who had shopped in the Central Market since she was a young girl, and Mah Kum Lin, the cake and coffee seller who had walked up and down the length of the market daily since she was 12. Lai Kok Chin, pictured at his large office desk, was known as the powerful "egg king." Another subject — powerful but disliked — was the chettiar (money lender), who posed with his umbrella on his arm.

Then there was Wong Chee Mun, an eccentric fellow who lived in the market and collected army memorabilia. "They

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said he was crazy, but he wasn't really. He was very hardworking," says Ho.

He remembers two persons, in particular. In the whole series, only one photo is named differently. *Lorry Boy* features a young boy sitting on a stack of boxes with a streak of sunlight illuminating a side of his face. "He was in the market for a short while ... I took his picture, then someone called him and he left. I couldn't find him again. The market people told me, 'Oh, he's lorry zhai (lorry boy). This is the one that intrigues me ... I would really like to know who he is,'" Ho explains.

The story of the other person is particularly poignant. "Wong Yen Hoon was a very kind man. He fed all the cats in the market. He was always in white, and the clothes were always pressed and spotless even though he sold dirty root vegetables like potatoes, ginger and pumpkin. When I was taking this shot, he suddenly raised his arm and I captured it. It was beautiful. After that, I asked him why he had done so and he said, 'For a portrait like this, I would like to greet the world.' Somehow he had a sense of it (this exhibition). Time is amazing, isn't it?"

Central Market will be shown until Sept 10 at Wei-Ling Gallery, 8 Jalan Scott, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. Opening hours are 10am to 6pm (Mon-Fri) and 10am to 5pm (Sat). For more details, call (03) 2260 1106.