



Lorry Boy

TODAY CENTRAL MARKET is synonymous with being a hub of tourist activities, filled with souvenirs and memorabilia that only appeal to those on vacation here. While the tourist attraction is known to all, few are aware of its history, despite the fact that its legacy is imprinted in its name. It was once a traditional wet market that “traded up” in 1985, when the market finally closed. The result was that traders were relocated to other markets in the outer suburbs of the city.

Moved by this transition, photographer Hari Ho embarked on an exploratory process, capturing the market in its final days. What emerged were portraits of traders and others who worked in the market, some of whom had been there for generations.

Through these photographs, Ho depicted a sense of individuality, revealing the depth of a group of people in repose and capturing an honesty that was expressed entirely through a gaze of neutrality. Now for the first time in 32 years, Ho has allowed us to experience a meaningful part of history that we wouldn't be able to otherwise.

You wanted to portray the humanity of each subject but also to capture the identity of Central Market as well. In a lot of ways, it feels like it has its own character. Was it your intention right from the beginning or was it something that became apparent as you went on?

No, it was quite exploratory. At first I wanted to document the market itself, and the people were just part of it. As I was doing it, the people became more interesting to me. There's something about working-class people, where there's no bulls**t, where there's an honesty amongst them. I was attracted to that, so my focus changed to doing portraits immediately.

But still, you can't help but include the market as part of the environment. You can see a little bit of the market in the photographs. They all formed to make a picture of Central Market. For this exhibition, I chose to exhibit just the portraits except for one photograph, which showcased the market after the interior was demolished.

You mentioned that you wanted to capture the “neutral gaze” of the people, why is that?

I take portraiture very seriously because I'm very interested in people. The base of it is the question of “who are we”. I'm interested in who I am, who we are as a human race, as well as our identity in the universe. Individuals have different expressions of who they are, and underneath it all, they are actually the same. When people are excited, angry or depressed, the energy they exude, if I may put it that way, seems to be entirely focused “out there”.

NEUTRAL GAZE

Capturing a sense of individuality from a moment in time

WORDS BY ALEX LOW PHOTOS BY HARI HO



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Whereas when a person is in a neutral state, it is as if they've entered a private space where only they can go. We all have that, we all have that space within ourselves, when we are neither excited nor depressed, when we are in a contemplative or even meditative mood, when we go into a very personal space inside, and that's what I really wanted to see, when they are truly being themselves. The "neutral gaze" is when the person is in his own space, when they project themselves onto the camera.

So you mentioned that you went to the market daily in its final weeks and much of what you did was to get to know more about the people there. How important was it for you to forge a connection with the people?

First of all, the market is a very busy working place. When you go there, you are in their space of business. One has to be very considerate and cautious as they're doing business. The first few days were just walking around and saying hello. After a while, they became familiar with me. And shortly

afterwards, I began to photograph them.

There is one photo that caught my eye, particularly the story behind it, it was the picture of an old couple that had been around Central Market since the beginning.

Could you tell me more about them?

They told me that they were selling in the market for a long, long time. They met in the market. This portrait was taken on the very last day. The calendar in the background is important. It was taken on 30 September 1985. In fact, this was the last picture I took of the portraits. There was a very strong sense of silence amongst those two. They must've been in their 80s and I remember them being very affected by it. You can see in their faces, all the memories of the entire market going by. It was very poignant.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in Central Market, you became familiar with not just the place but more importantly the people as well. When the building was closed, what was your feeling then?

To be honest, this was just a project for me.

I felt something, but it's not anything close to what any of these people felt. But it was still sad to see it go because it was not only their livelihood, it was their lives. That man, the one that saluted me, that was his home, he slept there. I actually have a photograph of him sleeping there. He had his own little cubby-hole amongst the stalls that he set up permanently. He had a big Malaysian flag at the back, as well as a collection of toy soldiers and horses. He just liked collecting military stuff.

These photographs were taken a little over 30 years ago. In your opinion, do you think that people have changed?

I can't answer that. People change over a longer period of time. The changes in the last 50 years have been tremendous because of technology, as well as changes in values, morality, but at the same time, not much as well. People are still fighting to make a living. Quite a lot of people are still selfish, greedy and self-centred. But there are more and more people who have more light in them. And I think that is important. By light, I mean people who have more love in them, more of a sense of consideration for others, and more of a sense of a common humanity, that's what I would like to see in the future.

How has the experience impacted your life?

I believe everything has a small, incremental effect on one's life. You see someone on the street, the person smiles at you, it has a positive effect on you. It adds to your sense of being at the time. This project has affected me because it gave me a sense of connection to the people, people who had been working for all their lives. I'm very grateful for that. **AM**