



Intimate Glimpses

On the eve of a solo exhibition and the launch of his latest book, photographer FAN HO reminisces with LEANNE MIRANDILLA about a seven-decade career as well as his favourite time and place in history—1960s Hong Kong

LITTLE DID 14-YEAR-OLD Fan Ho know, as he set out in 1945 to explore the streets of his new hometown with a Rolleiflex camera his father had given him, that he was laying the foundations of a body of work that would forever live in the hearts of Hongkongers. Within a year, the self-taught amateur, who developed his photographs in the bathtub at home, had won his first prize. The Shanghai-born lad continued snapping away and honing his skills, maturing into the photographer who shot the iconic photos of 1950s and '60s Hong Kong for which he is best known and which earned him the moniker “the great master.” Looking back today, at the age of 83, Ho proudly surveys a career that has secured him more than 280 awards and has seen

him named no less than eight times by the Photographic Society of America as one of the world's top 10 photographers.

For Hongkongers, Ho's shots evoke an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. The streets and buildings featured in his photos have irrevocably changed, and the activities captured in those streets are rarely witnessed today. In moody black-and-white photographs, men pull rickshaws across streets devoid of traffic against backdrops of hand-painted wooden signs, with nary a neon light in sight; construction workers in straw hats nimbly negotiate bamboo scaffolding without safety equipment; groups of elderly women gossip in Central Market, a wet market long gone from a building that today awaits regeneration; a labourer teeters precariously down cobbled Pottinger Street with a heavy cargo; a girl does her homework on top



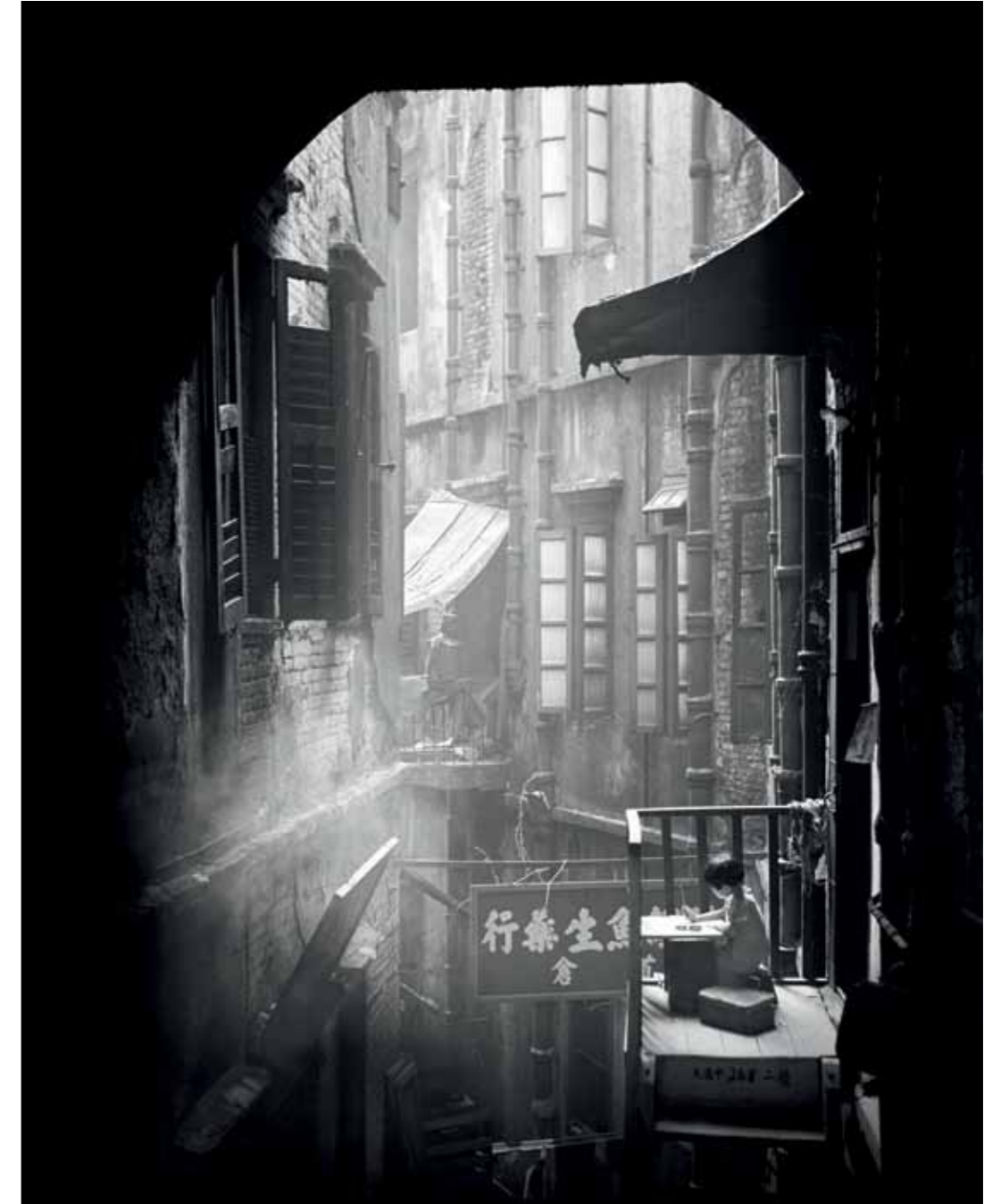
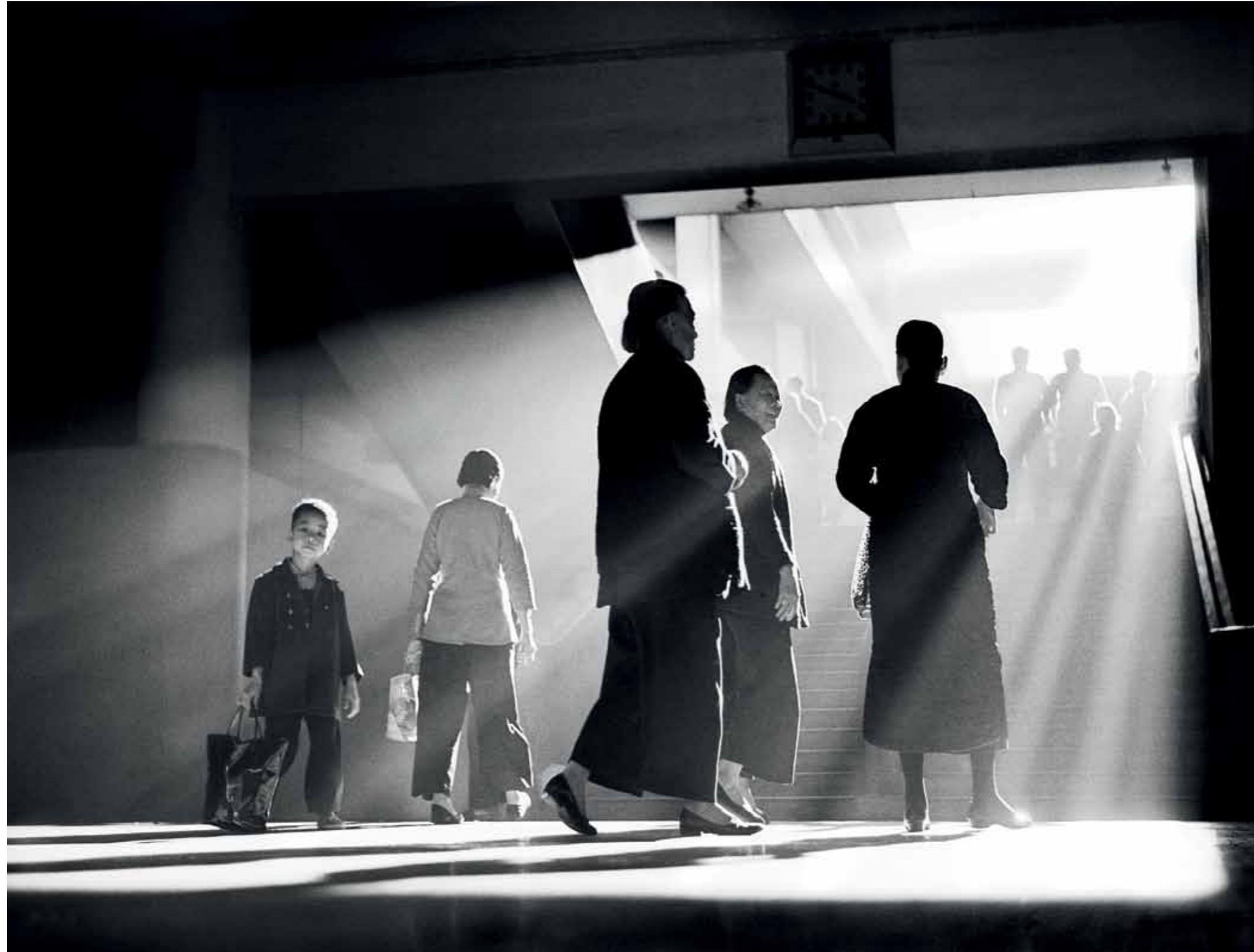
LOOKING FORWARD

From left: Fan Ho with a number of his works; *Approaching Shadow* (1954)

SLICE OF LIFE

From left: *Afternoon Chat* (1959); *Her Study* (1963)

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of a flight of stairs overlooking a shadowy alley. Ho captured the daily lives of ordinary Hongkongers with a distinctive combination of technical ability and sensitivity.

“I sympathised with people and their fighting spirit—the Hong Kong spirit,” says Ho over the phone from his home for the past decade in San Jose, California. “Always struggling and fighting, even in difficult situations.” In making his photographs, however, Ho did not focus on the suffering of the working class, but on capturing glimpses of the ordinary moments and joys of life, both at work and play.

While his photos look spontaneous, they’re actually the product of careful planning and countless hours spent revisiting locations to get the perfect shot. For example, Ho first noticed the alleyway in *Her Study* (the above shot of a young girl doing her homework) because he realised the arch would frame a subject nicely, but he

couldn’t find a compelling subject—not until he visited the alleyway one day and saw the girl setting up a stack of boxes to make a desk.

“I don’t have such great ideas,” Ho says humbly. “I just use my instincts. I don’t click my shutter until I feel something that touches my heart.” His style recalls that of one of his role models, the French photographer credited as the father of photojournalism, Henri Cartier-Bresson. The most important element for Cartier-Bresson was finding the “decisive moment”—that instant when the photographer’s recognition of the significance of his subject coincides with the moment that form, composition, lighting and circumstance all come together in creating the perfect shot.

While many of Ho’s famous photographs were the result of such decisive moments, others were the result of time spent in the darkroom. *Approaching Shadow*, for which Ho

DOCUMENTING HISTORY

Clockwise from left: *Impression of Old Hong Kong* (2011); *Different Directions* (1958); *Working Skywards* (1961); *East Meets West* (1963)



IMAGES: SINO HERITAGE/THE POTTINGER HONG KONG (FAN HO PORTRAIT); FAN HO/COURTESY OF AO VERTICAL ART SPACE (FAN HO PHOTOGRAPHY)

asked a cousin clad in a qipao to pose against a wall, is one such example. The stark, black shadow symbolising the encroachment of old age wasn't present when Ho captured the image; he introduced it during the developing and printing process.

As skilled as he was at photography, Ho feared it would not be able to provide him with a living wage, so he decided to join the Hong Kong film industry, getting his start in 1961 as an actor at Shaw Brothers before striking out independently as a director. But while Ho enjoyed a successful, decades-long career, photography remained his greatest love. He found the commercial nature of the film industry frustrating and restrictive. When his early experimental films (notably 1970's *Mi*) failed to find financial success, Ho turned to directing erotic films, which brought positive reviews from around the world—and healthy receipts. “But I didn't like it,” recalls Ho, who directed more than 20 erotic films. “I didn't feel artistically satisfied. They were well received at some famous film festivals, but in Hong Kong, if you talk about erotic films, people don't think it's good art.”

Indeed, many of Ho's films have been shown at international festivals, including Cannes, Berlin and San Francisco, and he has won numerous awards for them. His work has also found a permanent home at the national film archives of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Ho is officially retired from

directing, but studios continue to seek him out for new films.

Since moving from Hong Kong to the US with his wife and children, Ho has been experimenting in a new medium—digital editing. “Never, never dump your old negatives,” he says, advice he has been pressing on younger photographers for some time. “Why? Because when you get old, you may see the world from a different perspective, and if you revisit your old work, you might find some treasure there.” Ho takes his old photos and makes digital collages with them, or introduces effects with programs such as Photoshop that make his realistic photos look abstract or surreal.



AO Vertical Art Space in Chai Wan, which represents Ho in Hong Kong, is exhibiting a range of these new, digitally manipulated works in a one-man show, *A Hong Kong Memoir*, that opened at the end of October and runs until January 31. Ho's US representative, Modernbook Gallery in San Francisco, is also holding the exhibition over the same period. The two shows serve as the launching pad for a book of Ho's latest works, also titled *A Hong Kong Memoir*. It's expected to be a hit with fans, as Ho's previously published books and many of his photos are out of print.

The book will also be on sale from the end of November at The Pottinger Hong Kong, a boutique hotel in Central adjacent to its namesake street, which features in one of Ho's famous photographs. The hotel opened in June and has Ho's work permanently on display in its rooms. Ho rarely takes part in commercial projects, but he accepted the offer to work with The Pottinger after months of calls and correspondence. The hotel has also produced a documentary about Ho that can be watched in its rooms.

Some might expect the octogenarian to take a break after the launch of a new book and two exhibitions, but Ho doesn't rest on his laurels. “I want to do experimental photography, just like I did experimental film,” he says. “I want to try and do something new. My belief in art is that you should never stop trying and never stop experimenting. You may not gain fame and fortune from experimental art, but you'll have an artistic satisfaction that no money can buy.”

Ho's exhibition A Hong Kong Memoir shows at AO Vertical Art Space in Chai Wan until January 31. aovertical.com

