

An Interview with John Clang

Category - interviews

by Sally Clarke – John Clang, born Ang Choon Leng, has from a young age carried an immense passion for photography. So much so that he enrolled in LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore at age 17; but after six months he decided to drop out as the curriculum was moving too slow for him and he opted to work for acclaimed artist Chua Soo Bin instead. Following Soo Bin for free, he learnt a great deal about the world of photography. Since that time, Clang has participated in exhibitions across the globe – ranging from China to the United States, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Italy, and France. In 2010 he was awarded the Singapore President’s Designer award, being the highest design award available in Singapore, and he is the first and only photographer to have received this honour. In February 2013, Asian Art Happenings (AAH) interviewed Clang at the National Museum of Singapore.



John Clang, Erasure (1), 2011

AAH:

A lot of your work comments on the conflict an individual experiences in today’s society. Would you say this is a topic that is extremely close to you personally or one you enjoy commenting on?

Clang:

Well a lot of time, how I actually create my images is I do a lot of strolls, I walk a lot and along my walks I never bring along any camera, I’m a strong believer that if I see something amazing in front of me, something that happens in front of me, I do not take a picture, what I want to do is observe, to hear, to sense and to be in the moment, because it’s embedded in my memory itself. Only then, when I create my art I can reflect those feelings. So it’s a strong policy that I do not carry any camera to take any pictures at all. As I want to reflect on the society things that are

happening in my images itself, it's just basically my intense observation. Because when I walk, I don't carry a phone as well so nobody can reach me. When I walk it's only me, my mind and what's in front of me. If you do that every day over the years you start to see things that people don't see. You start to observe certain kinds of memories, certain things that happen. And when I come back to Singapore – I do a lot of walks here as well – I walk different places here and there, and through that I can observe how society has changed. So some work has to build over time because things change over time, in a certain kind of society. Singapore is a very interesting place because, for example, both of you have been here for a year, a year and a half; you see the exciting part of Singapore – the current. For me, I have seen what it was for my parents, for me as a teenager. I can witness the changes and see it has the good things and the bad things. It has all the detailed nuances that I cannot comment on because I only present. I raise questions in my work, but I do not provide an answer, because I believe everyone has his or her own answer.

AAH:

So you leave it open to the viewer's interpretation?

Clang:

Correct, your interpretation comes from your own historic context, from your own family environment, and what you have gone through. A happy man looks at things happily and a sad man sadly.

AAH:

We noted that from the age of 15 you understood that you wished to be a photographer, were you always keen on creating pieces that portrayed a strong personal message, or did that develop over time?

Clang:

I came from a poor family and we could not afford a camera and things like that, so when I first convinced my mom to buy me a camera – a Russian camera called a Pratika, which was 120 dollars. I also had my Ang Pao. Over the years I saved my money and managed to get my camera. When I got my camera, I didn't join the camera society in the school as I found it was a very snobby club – it was only the rich kids with all the gear, and it was all about the gear. At that time it was all about salon photography and I found it tacky. So I had my camera. I had no sense of how to use the camera. When I shot my first roll it came out all black and there was nothing there. So I saw this and due to my ego I told my friends, because they saw it was all black, that it was intentional... I wanted to show how my mind is empty, etc. and I started believing my own interpretations. I realized that photography can be expressed in that way, it's the whole process of how I see things and you don't have to be picture perfect, so from then on I started to do things in that aspect, pictures could be overexposed, underexposed, blurred it didn't really matter. What mattered was what I was trying to achieve and then, of course, I tried to improve my craft, get the correct exposure etc. and from there I would try to experiment with new things. But how I realised that a photograph could be reinterpreted started from that blank image.

AAH:

So this you would say was your turning point, this is where you wanted to go forward?

Clang:

Yes this is where I wanted to go forward, and I wanted to be an artist. I was in the table tennis team and my school or my team were national champion for three years while I was there, and at the end of my secondary school I took my paddles, trophies and tossed everything down the rubbish shoot, so I could focus on one thing – photography. For a teenager that is a very big thing because it was about two loves you want and you have to focus on only one and that should be the way.

AAH:

I did note while you were talking us through the works in your exhibition that you said its all about the process, do you maintain a final image of what the piece should look like or does the image formulate as you create it?

Clang:

I have a strong pre-visualization of what my art should be like, and with that pre-visualization, I'll know if the thing is over crafted or if it evokes the same feeling. From then on, once I know what it's going to be, the whole process, the journey has to be more like a pilgrimage, or an odyssey. When I was a little kid I was fascinated by a few things, Christopher Columbus at one point fascinated me with the adventures he had, to the extent where my name was John Christopher Columbus Ang Choon Leng because I really admired him. So from beginning to end I want things to matter, matter in the sense of how solely I'm trying to grab the picture itself, even when I write with a pencil I must have a certain pencil, a Blackwing 602, just because it has a certain vintage quality to it, a timeline etc. In that sense I find the whole image that I already pre-visualized will have the accent that I'm going through.

AAH:

Are there any artistic processes that you are keen to try that you have not attempted yet with your photography?

Clang:

I'm trying to redefine the landscape, it's something that I have been thinking about. A lot of my work requires only three months to create but takes me three to five years to actually finish. My current focus is to redefine landscape itself. I was having a conversation that a landscape doesn't come from the physical form of architecture or of nature, but rather from the people who are actually there – people change the landscape, especially now when everyone travels. The landscape it's constantly being redefined and remodelled, so my new projects which will take me three to five years to complete. How I'm going to do it, I'm not sure, but I want to do it in such a way that its very detailed and difficult, I like the difficult path to keep me working on it and keep me trying it. Then if I fail, I fail big time and it's good. If I succeed then I create a new vision for people to see. I'm into presenting new vision rather than just a photograph. I'm ambitious to create my look. To redefine what's going on and have a place in the photography world; I'm not into images that are aesthetically beautiful.

AAH:

You did mention that you stick to the times with your choice in camera, but do you have a preference towards digital or traditional photography?

Clang:

As a preference I prefer traditional photography, just because I spent most of my time mastering it, now everyone seems to be using Digital and creating images extremely easily. In terms of my studies I prefer the old one, but in terms of what is in context, it has to be what is presented to me, so in the future basically I will work in film and take still images from there, because I'm also into film as well. I'll be trying to do an Art movie with my co-director Wai Thong, so that will be something that I will express. My movie will be more of a love story. I'm a sentimental guy; so all my things will be more into that sense.

AAH:

Going back to your inspiration where you said you go on walks, do you ever encounter creative blocks or points where you struggle to find inspiration?

Clang:

Yes I do, when I was a little kid I had a tick, I twitched and talked to my reflection, until my mom slapped me around thinking I was possessed. And I stopped doing that after a while, but that's where I started to have conversations with myself. What I mean by that is I have really in-depth conversations with myself. Whenever I come upon a creative block I tend focus on other activities, I play poker, I'll go out clubbing and see a different kind of life, it is important to fill oneself with an idea of things that are going on. If you go to art school and then afterwards you become an art student, and then start creating your work there, if you pull back it's actually an art career, you're trying to then speak to curators, trying to talk to everyone in art, pool references from different parts of work that you see in the art world, and you end up creating something that has already essentially been created. I don't believe in that, I believe if you want to do something you live a life only then when you see something you rest on. If not, you will just be mechanic artist producing art that you cannot understand unless you trained, you cannot understand if you are not trained, but you should feel something, the immediacy is important to me.

AAH:

Many young contemporary Singaporean artists such as Chen Ziwei and Ong Hui Har have a keen interest on the topic of identity; pieces such as Translation and exhibitions like Five Stars Arising particularly show this feeling. Do you think this is a focal point for young Singaporean artists?

Clang:

I think it is a part of what they are doing, because it's something that they can, as ten years ago if you tried to do something that was political, it wouldn't work out, now it can be done the climate allows this to be done, it encourages it to be done. So I think people are taking the opportunity to express themselves, and I don't think it's a big part of their work, I think it's a small part of their work that they are transitioning through, so you see this now but next year there will be something else. For myself I try not to focus on specific things like this just what is very near me.

AAH:

Just elaborating on the idea of Identity, do you think it's something that many young Singaporeans are coming to terms with at the moment, what would your comments be on that?

Clang:

When talking about young artists, they will have a load of complaints, but from an older artist like myself, we didn't have grants then, even my idol didn't have a grant, they did what they did and there was no hand holding, you had to be really on your own and do your stuff. I think there is a different score of thinking, we are spoon fed, in Singapore we have this tendency as it's a very comfortable society. But of course within those people there are those people who take this and use it to generate results faster. In the past we didn't have that and were pushed into the corner, and when you in the corner there is nowhere to go but up so we pushed for that.



John Clang, Being Together (Kan Family), 2010

This interview first appeared on www.asianarthappenings.com February 2013. It was conducted by Sally Clarke, who is currently a student of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme.

All images courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore and the artist.

Bringing Together: Family and Portraits with John Clang is held at the Exhibition Gallery 1 in the National Museum of Singapore, it will run from 23 January to 26 May 2013.