

John Clang

The Singaporean of His Time

By Dustin Holohan

"I do not take a picture, what I want to do is to observe, to hear, to sense and to be in the moment." This quote from contemporary photographer John Clang aptly encapsulates his approach to his work. Picking up a camera for the first time when he was 15, Clang has never looked back; from this early age he has been captured by the world of photography, aiming to make his mark in contemporary photography. Widely recognised, in 2010 he was awarded the President's Designer Award, the highest design award available in Singapore. He is the first and only

photographer to have received the honour.

Clang is currently exhibiting his works at the National Museum of Singapore. The exhibition, titled *Being Together: Family and Portraits*, presents a selection of works from five of his artwork series, namely *Being Together*, *Fear of Losing the Existence*, *Erasure*, *The Moment* and *Guilt*. There is a strong play on the emotions when you wander through the exhibition as the powerful search for family togetherness resonates from the artworks on display.

Clang, who recently arrived back in his home country from New York, discloses that family is something he holds very close and once you come to terms with the emotions this exhibition evokes, you can really appreciate the mastery at work in Clang's images.

"The reason why I decided to show family is because it's something that is very near us all, but the message behind it has a certain kind of marking of time of what a common man like me is thinking. I much prefer my photographs to have a certain kind of layering and concept, a concept that comes not from a



Being Together (Ang Family), 2010

theme, but the way a man feels."

Listening to Clang it is clear that this is an individual who operates on a deeper level of thinking than most. He tells us that he enjoys walking around town, be it in New York or in his home town of Singapore, and that while on these strolls he refuses to take his camera along and never carries a mobile phone. It's through this that he claims he has a keener observation of his surroundings.

He states, "I don't believe in creating images just to record them, I'm not a documentary photographer. But I do believe a photograph can consist of a black painting, like any contemporary art where there are a lot of underlying messages, so the ways I create it, the processes I go through, the song I listen to, the drink that I drink or the composition I have, are all important details."

Clang believes that his work holds a unique message that communicates independently to each viewer. "It has all the detailed nuances that I cannot comment on because I only present. A lot of the time I raise questions in my work, but I do not provide an answer because I believe everyone has their own answer. Your own interpretation comes from your own historical context, from your own family environment and what you have gone through."

This ability to challenge the viewer is something that appears to come naturally to Clang. He comes from a humble background, so when he was finally able to afford his first camera, he eagerly set off on his first artistic exploration, at night. Not knowing much about the camera's workings, this project failed, producing plain black images on the print. Unfazed by this, however, he interpreted this as having an empty mind. It was then that Clang realised he wanted to push towards contemporary photography, understanding immediately that the emphasis of his art could be a focus on the world he experienced.



Fear of Losing the Existence (1), 2002



Guilt (Mum), 2010

When working on a project Clang likes to believe that the piece takes a journey with him. While maintaining a strong pre-visualisation of what the image is to be, he describes the process as an odyssey. Focusing mainly on the aspect of time, he uses tools that are authentic to the project's time period, for instance when working on the pieces entitled *Erasure* he allowed himself to use only an old ink eraser on the pictures, since the images had been taken 12 years before. When dealing with the artworks entitled *Being Together*, he encapsulated the technology of

Skype and used a digital camera. Though he prefers an old film camera, he admits that he will use what is relevant to the times, jokingly stating that if the future of photography is to use camera phones, he will be using a camera phone.

Looking to the future, Clang aims to create his own look and to redefine the way contemporary photography is looked at, hopefully cementing his own place in the world of art and photography. He definitely has a unique view on the world and the ability to add meaning to his work with passion. He extensively defines the process of the photographs, but as with most contemporary art the question does linger regarding what comes first – the creation or the interpretation?

In today's art world, an artist like Clang is a valuable asset; a photographer by definition captures the immediate image in front of him. As a contemporary photographer he has used the medium he works with to its fullest, bending



The Moment (Koh Family), 2011

it to incorporate everything about his interpretation of the 'now'. His work consists of a multitude of timeframes and his pieces powerfully bring the concept of time through to the viewer. These are pieces that pull the viewer in and engage with him and for that alone, the exhibition is worth a visit.

Being Together: Family and Portraits with John Clang, is on at Exhibition Gallery 1 at the National Museum of Singapore. It runs from 23 January to 26 May 2013 and is open daily from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm.

Dustin Holohan is a final year student at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, majoring in marketing. In his spare time he enjoys painting with acrylics.

All photos courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore