

Street photography aims to capture the events of our daily lives

STEPPING UP TO THE STREETS

A NEW GENERATION OF MALAYSIAN STREET PHOTOGRAPHERS
SHOW US THE OTHER SIDE OF LIFE

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An alley cat pauses in front of a bicycle at the Chowrasta Market in Penang, contemplating a morsel of fish in the sun. Three geishas, splashes of colour against the twilight, hurry home after a performance in the Gion district of Kyoto, Japan. An old man in a skullcap, his lined face telling the story of years, smiles for the camera in a shipyard in Bangladesh.

Life is made up of moments like these, many of which go unremarked and forgotten amidst the trials and troubles of day-to-day concerns. Capturing them on painstaking rolls of film, a new generation of photographers has dedicated itself to a tradition whose roots harken back to the cobblestoned streets of Paris over a century ago.

"What a lot of people don't realise is that street photography is not a documentary, and it doesn't have to happen on the street. It is an art form which can happen anywhere. You are taking candid snapshots of subjects who have no relativity with each other, but inherent connectivity to your theme and message, and you are creating art out of it," says Paul Gadd, The Print Room KL owner/curator and professional photographer.

In honour of the craft to which he has dedicated his life, as well as the pioneers who brought it to its current state, Gadd established The Print Room KL in 2011 as a platform for a new school of Malaysian photographers to hone their skills and knowledge of film photography, though street photography extends to the digital medium as well.

His students include Linda Chin, Alex Chan, Sha-reem Amry and Leong Weng Wah, whose essays in street photography were featured in The Print Room's recently concluded *Up Your Alley* exhibit.

Gadd's take on the discipline, which is exemplified in *Up Your Alley*, calls to mind the philosophy of Henri Cartier-Bresson. A pioneer of the field and the father of modern photojournalism, Cartier-Bresson was a great believer in what he called the decisive moment: the simultaneous recognition, in an instant, of the significance of an event, as well as the management of aesthetic forms that give that event its proper expression in life.

"You need to be patient, and you need to be in the right place at the right time. Out of a hundred shots, you might get one you are happy with. With street photography, there's also a three-dimensional aspect to the composition, which takes into account the foreground, midground and background to draw viewers into the frame," says Gadd.

Careful consideration of a photo's dimensions is even more crucial given a certain preference among street photographers for black and white, as opposed to colour shots.

While by no means a requirement for the field, black and white has become the norm for a number of reasons, not least as homage to the work of old masters such as Cartier-Bresson and Eugene Atget.

In purely visual terms, black



The Print Room KL is a platform for photographers to learn more about the art





Despite the name, street photography is not limited to the streets



Careful composition of the midground, foreground and background is necessary



Colour, while versatile, requires a more involved film development process



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Leong Weng Wah, Paul Gadd, Linda Chin, Shareem Amry and Alex Chan



and white compositions have the advantage of emphasising shapes and textures on an even plane, while pleasantly accenting the blurs and grains common to film photography. In contrast, colours work to reinforce moods and accentuate subjects, and provide a greater degree of versatility to the photographer.

"One isn't necessarily better than the other. Black and white is a lovely medium, but in some ways getting a good colour shot is a lot harder, especially if it's hand-printed and not digitally enhanced. The equipment and processing involved is also more prohibitive, which is why I send my colour shots for development in South Korea," says Gadd.

"For *Up Your Alley*, we initially focused on Kuala Lumpur. The most interesting parts of the city are its backstreets, because there's so much diversity within the distance of a short walk. I could keep going back there just to shoot. After a while, though, we opened it up to international shots that my guys took while travelling," he adds.

Though her works featured prominently in *Up Your Alley*, Chin only

discovered The Print Room two years ago, and has been developing her shutterbug skills ever since — much like working on exposure in the dark room. Perhaps fittingly, the corporate finance executive shares that her forte lies in film processing, which can make or break a shot.

"According to Paul, I have no patience outside the dark room," laughs Chin. "But I can spend a lot of time inside it. Sometimes, when you are perfecting a shot, you need to do a lot of dodging and burning, and lots of tests, especially if the exposure wasn't optimal."

Others among Gadd's movement, such as Shareem, are drawn to the immediacy of street photography, as well as the challenge of capturing how people interact with urban environments every day. A former feature writer and journalist, she took up photography as a hobby, as well as a form of self-expression.

"If you take any moment and think about it, and you look at it and try to imagine yourself in it, what's going on, what the subjects are thinking about and what led to that moment, then you'll find the extraordinary in the ordinary, and that can be true of almost anything," Shareem remarks. ■