

'STILL WORKING THEMSELVES OUT': TAIWANESE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE 1970S AND 1980S

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Over two decades into martial law, Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s faced increasing challenges, with diplomatic setbacks attempting to isolate the country politically, economically and culturally. The most damaging upset for the exiled Kuomintang government came in 1979, when the United States cut official ties with Taiwan, switching its diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China on the mainland. The martial law remained in place for another eight years, before being formally lifted in 1987 and ending a 38-year imposition.

While Taiwan was forced to reposition itself internationally, complex issues of history and national identity remained as urgent local topics, sparking social movements and independence protests in an increasingly turbulent time. The current exhibition 'Wayfaring: Photography in 1970s–80s Taiwan' explores the evolving cultural and urban landscape of this period through 35 images from 12 artists; ten of these actively worked as photojournalists, a profession that informed their socially engaged approach to image-making with a particular sensitivity and acuteness.

Hsieh San-Tai's (謝三泰, born 1958) *Temporary Baseball Field* (1989) depicts a street scene of children playing baseball on a wet road. The title and background of the image reveal that the street is deserted due to a police blockade for a protest at the end of the street. Hsieh's focus on this simultaneous, cheerful and spontaneous play highlights a multiplicity of experiences during a time of unsettling political pressures. This is also reflected in the exhibited photographs of Yeh Ching-Fang's (葉清芳, born 1960) 'Towards the End of Martial Law Series'. The three images – *Taitung* (1982), *Shengping Theater* (1988) and *Kaohsiung* (1986) – have a personal frankness to them, with a framing just close enough, focusing on individual subjects while drawing out their various surroundings and contexts in a way that highlights each idiosyncratic moment.

The urban portraits by Chien Yun-Ping (簡永彬, born 1958) in his series 'Lane 56, Xinyi Road Section 3'

(1981–88) offer an even more intimate approach. An eight-year project, Chien dedicated himself to capturing the changing and complex community living in the then-slum of Taipei's district that had become notorious for its gambling and crime. His close engagement with the residents is evident in his images, demonstrating a familiarity with the place that allows his subjects to be at ease: the couple in *Mute Lovers* pose and hold a soft shy smile; while the boy and the lounging man break into a candid one in *Puppet* (also 1985). These carefully framed moments within the structures and environment of the slum also blur the lines between public and private spaces – both the personal and domestic – echoing an evolving social fabric that is coming into its own.

Hou Tsung-Hui's (侯聰慧, born 1960) 'Longfatang' series (1983), and Lien Hui-Ling's (連慧玲, born 1961) 1980s photographs of animals offer another insight into the experiences of marginalised lives and other beings as they navigate their place in a shifting Taiwanese society. Documenting patients in Longfatang, a controversial Buddhist-run mental asylum, Hou's series is unsettling and perplexing. The life-size images of 2 and 6 are the largest in 'Wayfaring', a confronting scale that opens up the images' intriguing movements and distortions (some of which are a result of mould and other damage to the film as it was left undeveloped for two years). The series is perhaps made less voyeuristic once disclosed that Hou had also spent time at the asylum in 1981 for depression, and is therefore photographing from a deeply personal perspective.

Lien's images are similar in their high contrast black-and-white, intensifying the eeriness in her depiction of animals. Her sharp eye-level focus interestingly raises ambiguity: it is unclear if the wide-eyed pig in *Taitung* is still alive; the wellbeing of the cat in *Bathed Kitten* (also 1989) is undetermined; and what triggered the dog in *Kaohsiung* (1987) to jump up is unknown – more than half the image is blocked by a blurred face in the foreground. Although these animals are not unique to Taiwan, Lien captures a

Wayfaring: Photography in 1970s–80s Taiwan, exhibition installation views, Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University, Canberra, 2021; photos: Chin-Jie Melodie Liu



Lien Hui-Ling, *Kaohsiung*, 1987
連慧玲,《高雄》, 1987
Courtesy the artist



Hou Tsung-Hui, *Longfatang Series - 6*, 1983
侯聰慧,《龍發堂系列-6》, 1983
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distinct locality. Her portrayals are raw and seemingly unsentimental, yet they coax an engagement and curiosity with the inexplicable.

'Wayfaring' draws attention to Taiwan's enduring and flourishing visual culture during martial law, presenting a selection of images that all ultimately speak to a resistance and resilience. Juan I-Jong's (阮義忠, born 1950) seminal 'Man and Land' series (1974–86) of the rural everyday, and Wang Hsin's (王信, born 1941) extensive documentation of the Tao indigenous people in the series 'Farewell, Orchid Island' (1974–75) are both direct examples of that, reflecting on the expanding nativist movement and 'Taiwanisation' efforts from the 1970s, and ongoing issues of indigenous self-determination and national identity. While the particular sociopolitical context of Taiwan frames the experience of living and of being from the island, it does not define it, as all the photographers in 'Wayfaring' demonstrate this defiance in their practice. Curators

Olivier Krischer and Shuxia Chen poignantly described the exhibited images as 'still working themselves out'.¹ As Taiwan continues to exist and thrive under unique international pressures, photography will remain as a crucial witness and iterative process for artists to make sense of their world.

1. Olivier Krischer and Shuxia Chen, *Wayfaring: Photography in 1970s–80s Taiwan*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University, Canberra, 2021, p. 5; see ciw.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Wayfaring_A5_Web.pdf, accessed 3 August 2021.

Curated by Olivier Krischer and Shuxia Chen with work drawn from the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 'Wayfaring: Photography in 1970s–80s Taiwan' is on display at the Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University, Canberra, until 28 October 2021.

Yeh Ching-Fang, *Towards the End of Martial Law Series - Kaohsiung*, 1986
葉清芳,《解嚴前後系列-高雄》,1986
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