

Message in a Bottle: The Art of Slow Living

Contemplating ‘*Over the Ocean, On the Road: A Multimedia Exhibition by Leong Ka Tai*’

“Age has no reality except in the physical world. The essence of a human being is resistant to the passage of time. Our inner lives are eternal, which is to say that our spirits remain as youthful and vigorous as when we were in full bloom. Think of love as a state of grace, not the means to anything, but the alpha and omega. An end in itself.”

— Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

In late October 2013, photographer Leong Ka Tai, with his wife Rebecca Ng, left Hong Kong for South America, crossing the Pacific Ocean on a container ship in 35 days, and afterwards for 3 months on land, taking a circuitous route from Columbia to Cuba; this journey bears poetic resemblance to the nomadic voyage of the Colombian Nobel Prize laureate, García Márquez, described in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). The role of sea and land travel in human culture is reflected in a variety of art forms - literature, art, music and film. Although oceans are often depicted as hostile environments, full of monsters and storms, they can also be tranquil retreats for contemplation. Natural forces and human agency including socio-political and historical elements shape our landscapes, the resulted cultural landscape is like a map to be read as texts. Through a series of visual experiments while traveling at sea and on land, Leong produced a trilogy of well defined and stylistic mixed media works ranged from still photography, video, performance and installation as shown in this exhibition, ‘*Over the Ocean, On the Road: A Multimedia Exhibition by Leong Ka Tai*’.

In the first section of the exhibition ‘Over the Ocean’, we could see a time lapse photographic record of the seascapes as seen from the vessel window, this ‘room with a view’ sequence presented in undulating kinetic presentation is a topology of their water days, a passage to silence revealed among the repeated appearance of the sea horizon.

But the core interest of the exhibition falls on the video installation comprising 32 television monitors.

Before embarking on his journey, Leong invited artists and friends to participate in a 'Message in a Bottle' project. Responding to the challenge: "How would you like to send a message to somebody you have never met, is unlikely to meet, halfway around the world but in a place unknown, and further more, the message may never get there?", they provided individual messages which Leong inserted one by one, everyday at sea, inside a bottle, which was then thrown into the Pacific Ocean, with the date, time and GPS location of each throw registered and the process videotaped. One bottle was luckily retrieved in the Canada territory by a marine biologist, Carla Crossman, eight months after that particular bottle was thrown. Her reply to Leong completed the performance of the "send" and "receive" cycle.

This installation is an orchestrated re-representation of an old communication process, a flickering audio-visual celebration of this slow and uncertain way of connecting people; Leong's intention is to contrast the ways of a classical age with that of the present fast forward and globally connected digital world.

The second section 'On the Road' is Leong's authentic photographic documentation of their land travel with a focus upon connecting with the communities in Latin American countries, including Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina and Cuba. Leong is like a human geographer, excavating exotic cultural symbols blessed under the southern hemisphere's golden sun; like the explorers of the 15th century who discovered this '*Nuevo Mundo*', his fresh vision captured the vivid colors and vibrant energy of these regional cultures in their diversity. Visitors are encouraged to experience Leong's adventure through a physical involvement by moving and looking around the 'plateau of photographs' displayed in this section.

The material constellations displayed in this exhibition should not be read merely as a linear travel log book, but a product of interrelationships among various art medium springing from Leong's initial master plan. This exhibition reveals a 'Kinesthetics' in which choreographies of movements and spaces among human, territories, exotic signs or symbols of selected seascapes and landscapes are smoothly interweaved; the three staged exhibition navigation in the Hong Kong Design Institute

Gallery works like a hyper-text, and invites the viewers to a layered glimpse of Leong's 'cabinet of curiosities' (Wunderkammer), a microcosm of the artist's interiors which is far beyond a declaration of love between two lovers, as in Marquez's book, but a collective memory of the slow living and authenticity in traditional communication. Through multimedia expressions, he gives a positive account of the precious essence and surprises of slow living before the advent of globalization. Apart from straight photography, Leong have extended his creative paradigm to moving images, sound and three dimensional environmental design in this exhibition; his progressive tactics run parallel with the recent theatrical trend of international museum and gallery practices in which temporal exhibitions are held with an emphasis on the 'total viewing experience' more than merely displaying permanent collectable art works resulted from years of art or historical research. This kind of alternative or supplementary form of exhibition with a focus on a speculated theme often provides a more accessible and interactive link to the general public. *'Over the Ocean, On the Road: A Multimedia Exhibition by Leong Ka Tai'* provides a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk) under exotic cultural settings, saturated with multiple mediums within a temporal interactive and educational environment; it's re-visitation of the glorious traditional values opens up a fertile visual dialogue between the artists, the institution and the viewers.

Blues Wong has contributed extensively as a photography critic and independent curator; his writings have translated into Chinese, English, Japanese and Russian. He is at present a museum expert advisor (Hong Kong photography) for the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

黃啟裕從事攝影評論及獨立策展工作，文章翻譯成中、英、日及俄語。現任康樂及文化事務署博物館專家顧問（香港攝影）。