



Michael Wolf's best photograph: four plucked ducks in Hong Kong

'The back alleys of the city are my canvas. Look behind any building and you'll find something strange'

Interview by Natalie Rigg

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I've lived in Hong Kong for 22 years, but I still feel like an outsider. Its back alleys have become my natural habitat as a photographer. I can spend 12 hours a day wandering the narrow walkways behind busy restaurants, housing estates and shops. They can be daunting - filled with broken furniture, electronic castoffs, cockroaches and garbage bags full of food that rots and smells. I'm still surprised by the strange things I come across - and I love that. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

In April 2003, I was walking through a large housing estate on the Kowloon side when I stumbled across a small Chinese restaurant and a terrace that you could stand on. I looked up and saw four pink, plucked ducks strung up on metal hooks. It was a perfectly normal scene to a local, but it was really odd for someone who was still foreign. It was around the time of Sars, the bird-flu epidemic, so it felt controversial - as well as darkly comic - to be photographing dead ducks.

I worked quickly, taking just a few shots with a flash. I framed the ducks tightly against the pastel-coloured housing project. There is no sky, giving the eye no chance to escape. That's a stylistic device I use in much of my work. The shot still makes me smile. It was taken at a pivotal time, after I had quit my job with the German magazine Stern to go it alone as an artist. I had to support my wife and son, so there was a lot of pressure.

Hong Kong became my canvas. I've visited other megacities, but they don't stimulate me in the same way. I find Singapore aesthetically dull and Paris homogenous. The architecture is beautiful, but it's a first-world city that has been maintained like a Hollywood set. You certainly wouldn't find those four old ducks hanging there.

In Hong Kong, there is little space, so people take over public areas as if they were their own private area. I love the inventiveness of that. Look behind any given building and you'll find a strange constellation of mops, hangers, chairs, brushes and old furniture stored in a nifty way. Nothing is ever discarded, which is wonderful. Everything is visible, whereas much of Paris is a facade.

Every city reflects the character of its inhabitants. Tokyo is extremely interesting, so busy and sprawling. I spent months there photographing its subways, and found it even more inscrutable than Hong Kong. These days, I'd rather dig deep into one city, though, than just scratch the surface of others. Besides, Hong Kong is changing so rapidly: I feel as if I'm making an important contribution in documenting its evolution.

Lately, the younger generation seem more able to identify with the city. For the first time in years, it seems as if they don't want to be somewhere else. They have a strong identification with their neighbourhoods and the unique characteristics of their city, and realise that urban renewal is destroying both of those things.

There are still some local artists who resent me. They feel that as a foreigner, a German, I have exploited their city. But I just captured what I saw, small details that I found valuable. I paid attention.



Michael Wolf

Michael Wolf's CV

Born: Munich, 1954.

Studied: Photography and visual communications at the University of Duisburg-Essen with Otto Steinert.

Influences: "A whole myriad, but I love the humanistic approach of W Eugene Smith."

High point: "The ability to feel totally free and do what I want."

Low point: "Going from being a photojournalist to an artist who could actually support a family."

Top tip: "Look even harder."

. Michael Wolf's work is in the Prix Pictet at the V&A, London, 6 -28 May and part of Look photo festival, Liverpool, until 14 May. His exhibition Tokyo Compression: Final Cut is at Flowers E2, London, 26 May to 1 July.

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