

“In-Conversation”

February 2008

Featuring

Steven YEE Pui Chung

MBA, B.Eng, FRPS, FPSS, FPSM, Hon.FPSM, Hon.FKCC, AFIAP
Founder of PhotoVivo.com and Knowledge Bowl

Interview conducted by

PhotoVivo.com



ABOUT STEVEN YEE

Steven Yee has, through his recent achievements, established himself as one of Singapore's most prolific and versatile new-generation photographers who has great competency in digital technology.

His works, many of them influenced by “computer art”, have been widely accepted for display at major exhibitions both in Singapore and overseas. These works have garnered for this artist, who has just turned 29 years old on 11th Feb, numerous awards and honours, doing both his art and his country proud.

In a short span of three years, Steven has also held six solo exhibitions. This is considered a remarkable feat for one so young, but it clearly demonstrates a level of maturity equal to, if not surpassing, those more experienced in the field of photographic art.

In 2003, he achieved the distinction of being the youngest to be admitted to the Fellowship (Applied and Professional Section) of The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. In addition, his achievements have been recognized by the International Federation of Photographic Art and several photographic societies in the region.

It is easy to understand why such eminent institutions have acknowledged his talent. Steven possesses not only technical skills but also the sensitivity of an artist. Honing his craft through the years, he has developed keen visual awareness and a feel for design. His works show an excellent sense of lighting, colour contrast and composition.

Steven's versatility has enabled him to cover a wide range of subjects. Equally important, by translating them into striking images, he has shown a strong desire to communicate his observations to a discerning audience.

Without compromising the message he wishes to convey, he comes up with a final product that is as beautiful or as disturbing as he wants it to be. It is this rare skill that distinguishes an ordinary photographer from an excellent one.

Some of his works can be found on www.discovernikon.com Volume One.

Questions:

1. How did you get your start in photography?

My first camera was a Yashica T3 compact camera. Though I was only a Primary 2 student, it was then that my passion in photography was ignited. I began to realize the constraint of a compact camera, so the next camera I used was a Nikon F301 that my father lent to me. This was followed by a Fujica ST901, which I “inherited” from my Uncle. These 2 SLRs formed the very foundation of my passion.

My passion for photography got serious when I joined the photography club in Catholic High School, where I met my photography “Shifu” (photography teacher and mentor) Mr Chua Swee Ping, who through his strict guidance, in many ways made me what I am as a photographer today. Almost everyday without fail, after my classes ended, I would bring my printed pictures for him to critique and we would also discuss on the various aspects of photography.

I put the knowledge into practice covering school events, take pictures out of school, and I was probably the youngest then to join a few photography clubs where I met those uncles with bigger cameras. The first club which I joined was Singapore Colour Photographic Society when I was in Secondary 1 and the next one was PhotoArt Association of Singapore. I joined the weekly outings which are mainly posed and setup scenes. As a beginner, I found these setups useful to practice my exposure and composition. Many people call these “armchair” photography, but my mentor told me that “before I fly, I must learn to walk”. True enough, these outings did help to build for myself a sound foundation in photography.

Sure enough, the old days of film photography was a real pain due to its cost and also due to the fact that one cannot preview on the spot. In those days, I dreamt and yearned for a camera that can shoot and preview on the camera. Many people said I was crazy. At one point in time, my passion in photography was so strong that my mentor Mr Chua asked me if I am going to be a professional photographer. I thought, “My dad will sure say no.” My dad’s point is getting your degree and masters, and do what you like after that.

2. You have formed PhotoVivo.com and Knowledge Bowl. What made you choose photography as a career?

I was still serving my National Service when I became the clubhouse chairman at The Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS) which is a non-profit organisation. After a year, I was elected to be the youngest Honorary Secretary for the next 8 years with 1 year in between as Assistant Secretary. It was a good training ground where I amassed experience in administration, protocol and strategic planning with mentoring from the Society’s President, Mr David Tay who gave me many opportunities. While spending a great deal of my time in PSS contributing to its tremendous growth with my team mates, I was also juggling my university studies and then followed by a Master in Business Administration (MBA).

For some reasons, I had to leave the Society in 2007. At this point in time, though I was not able to continue to propel the Society to higher grounds with what I have learnt in MBA, my mind was set to embark on a career in photography related services so as to fulfill my dream of promoting photography. This was how thus Knowledge Bowl and PhotoVivo.com were formed to enable myself and my team to fulfill our dreams. Photography courses are conducted at Knowledge Bowl, while photography outings, seminars, overseas trips, online photo critique, photography exhibitions and competitions are part of the activities of PhotoVivo.com. Within a short span of half a year from its formation, PhotoVivo.com’s database consists of 1010 photographers. Sandven Image House is the arm that provides professional photography services.

3. What is your favourite topic/specialization in photography?

My favourite topic, and eventually my specialization, is in Travel photography. No doubt it is one of the more popular specializations among many photographers. I love to travel and capture those fleeting moments that will

one day become part of the heritage of that place. I can imagine myself 20 years down the road, looking at those images that I took and say “Whew! I was fortunate to have took these pictures then!”

I have yet to venture out of Asia as a whole, as there are just too many places to uncover. It is growing very fast economically and I told myself that I should devote more of my overseas travel to Asian destinations before commercialisation set in. I have been to Myanmar 5 times, and each time, I see many changes. I have been to Silkroad 3 times and the nomads are already not wearing traditional clothes! I was lucky to have visited the Naxi’s tribe in Yunnan and captured shots of the elderly in their traditional costumes that you don’t see on the youngsters. Time waits for no men. The splendours of the architecture in Europe can wait (provided there is no earthquake), but not these fast vanishing heritages. My biggest regret is not able to photograph the life and architecture in the villages and temples now flooded by the Three Gorges dam in China.

4. You have been to many places in Asia. Is there any one country or place that has captured your heart?

Asia is a beautiful place to photograph with its rich diversity of races, culture, costumes, dances, religion, architecture, food and sports. The scenery in some places can be awesome. It is hard to get sick of photographing Asia, and it will take one an entire lifetime to cover it well. I would say up to this date, no one photographer has truly covered the whole of Asia yet. It is just too big, too diversified. Every place has its story to tell, be it ancient port of Hoi An in Vietnam, mysterious Tibet, exotic Bali, charming Chiangmai etc.

However, if I were to choose one place that has captured my heart, I would say the Silkroad in Xinjiang, China.

I encountered some emotional moments in Silkroad. I don’t know why, but I can feel or sense how the ancient traders travel the harsh terrains with their camel load of goods in Xinjiang, China. Another encounter was in the Pamir Plateau along the Karakorum highway towards Tashkurgan. The bus we (I was leading a photography tour with my students and friends) were in got stuck in the pothole. So we got out of the bus to enjoy the cool fresh air which smelt real good. While listening to Enya’s Smaointe and Marble Halls on my MP3 player in the midst of the vast wildness, the world seemed to have come to a standstill. The deep blue sky, the huge land, the never ending range of mountains, all made me look so small (not like Singapore, where you can see the city from Jurong Hill). It was like in a different dimension.

5. What do you usually bring for your travel assignment?

It is usual for beginners to purchase a lot of equipments, especially when they are getting serious into this hobby. They will buy big f2.8 lenses, and bigger bags to accommodate the equipment. But as they continue to shoot for a longer period of time, they will slowly try to “shoot lighter”, especially for travel photography.

For my travel assignment on the field, I usually have my main camera body (Nikon D2X), 18-200mm VR, 12-24mm DX and 10.5mm fisheye. A SB800 flashlight will be kept in a pouch. In fact, I do not bring along a camera bag, but LowePro lens pouches (as shown on the right) held together by an elastic sling that is used for the camera bag. Mobility is important to me. The picture on the right was taken while I was on a Mediacorp assignment to cover the pollution in India. Yeah, it was no joke shooting in the waste dumping ground filled with flies. I wished I had an oxygen mask on.



I always standby a “set B” just in case my main set of equipment does not work. This includes a DSLR, 18-105mm and a 70-300mm ED. These, I usually put in my luggage in my hotel room. There were two occasions when my students’ equipment failed them and I had to lend them my “set B”.

6. What do you want people to see in your photograph?

I like to create visually stunning images that people like to see and enjoy for years. I hope these images can stand the test of time, which means that even if they see it everyday, they will not get sick of it but will be inspired. It will be best if they can identify my style. These can be portraits (emotions of people), landscape, still life etc.

An example of an image that had stood the test of time is Steve McCurry's Afghanistan Girl which was used as the cover for National Geographic.

7. What is your most interesting experience during your photo shoot which you would like to share?

Having to secure a spot to shoot fireworks. It was the New Year countdown and I had to be at my favourite spot at 5pm. As the fireworks only start at midnight, it was no fun waiting there for 7 hours. Toilet break is not a blessing as the washroom is a distance away and the place would be so crowded making it impossible to move about easily.

Another interesting experience was when Mediacorp approached me to coach Hong Kong actor Alex Toh in photography while he was filming Mediacorp's Chinese Drama *"Love Concierge"* in which he acted the role of a photographer, and Taiwanese actor Jason Lee Jie Sen in *"Baby Blues"*. Alex Toh has the passion and talent for photography and given effort, he can join Simon Yam in their photography pursuits!



8. How do you get your inspiration?

Many people asked me how I prepare for my travel assignment or how do I get inspired to take certain shots. In my opinion, doing research is very important. I make it a point that before I visit any country, I will try to read up on the place, look at some shots taken of that place so that I know what I am in for. The Internet and picture books are very good sources of information.

Once I am at the location, I will rediscover that place using my own style of photography. This will also ensure that I do not miss out any thing.

9. Which quotation inspired you most?

My dad often says I am crazy to forego the opportunity to climb the ladder in the corporate world with my academic qualifications to do what I am doing now. Ralph Lauren once said, **"I live what I do and I do what I like"**. That has become my way of life. There is truth in this quotation. Life is short. It is important to lead life meaningfully.

Living what you do means you are able to survive well on what you are doing and doing what I like is even more important as this is where you have the passion to keep your livelihood (which is also my passion) alive. This means there will be no retirement date as I am living off what I like to do. By the way, who says we have a retirement age in Singapore? In my generation, we are brought up to believe that we work till our last breath. I am preparing for it; this is why I am doing what I am doing now.

10. How does photography enrich your life?

Photography made me cultivate in myself sharp observation skills. I am more aware of my surroundings. It opens up another dimension of seeing things, and the ability to appreciate the beauty around me. Many people often walk past many beautiful subjects. I am glad that I have the chance to cultivate this skill and enjoy the world around me.

Through photography, which is a good medium which transverse all language barriers, I get to meet photographers all over the world. It does not hurt to have more overseas friends, as you may need their help one day if you happen to pop by their country. Through photography, I also met Mr Kwek Leng Joo, who is now PhotoVivo.com's Honorary Patron. There are many things I want to achieve for the photography community. These, will likely take me a lifetime of work.

11. What would you say is the new challenge for photography as a whole?

Technology in photography is ever changing. I often told my photography students that one day Adobe Photoshop would have a "de-blur" function that will make camera shake images sharp. Similarly, DSLRs will have a "de-blur" plug-in to complement the anti-camera shake devices on the lenses and totally remove camera shake problem. It may even be able to shoot video clips of quality equivalent to digital video cameras. There will be 18-300mm f2.8 lens and handpone cameras that most of us own will have interchangeable lenses (small zoom lenses).

With these new technologies coming up, I believe these will help photographers to take better pictures and not create more problems for them. However, it is still important for the photographers to master the fundamentals of photography as well as cultivate in themselves the art of seeing. With the best of technology, a person not skilled in photographer may take technically alright pictures but the lack of the photography knowledge and techniques will restrain them on what they can take. Do they know how to do panning, long exposure, stepwise or gradual zoom etc?

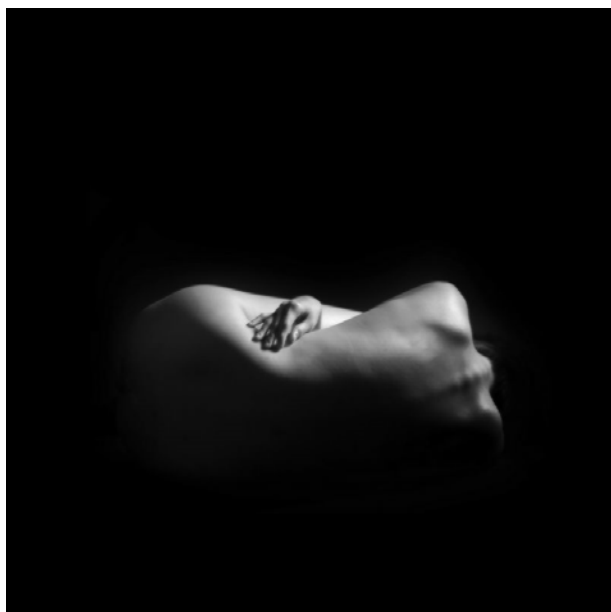
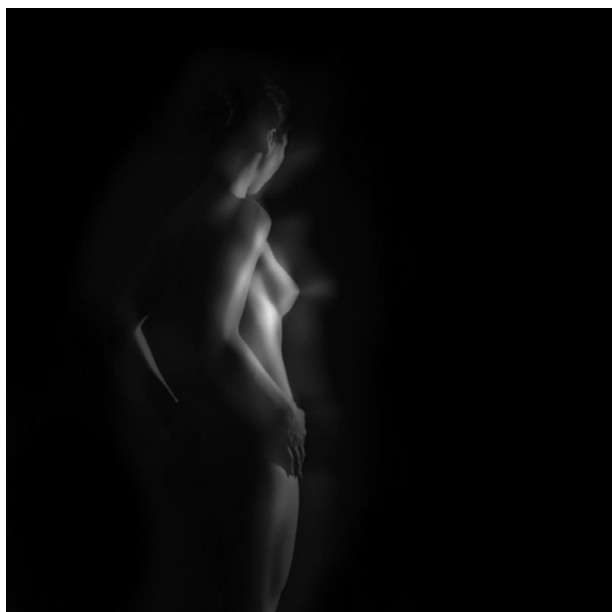
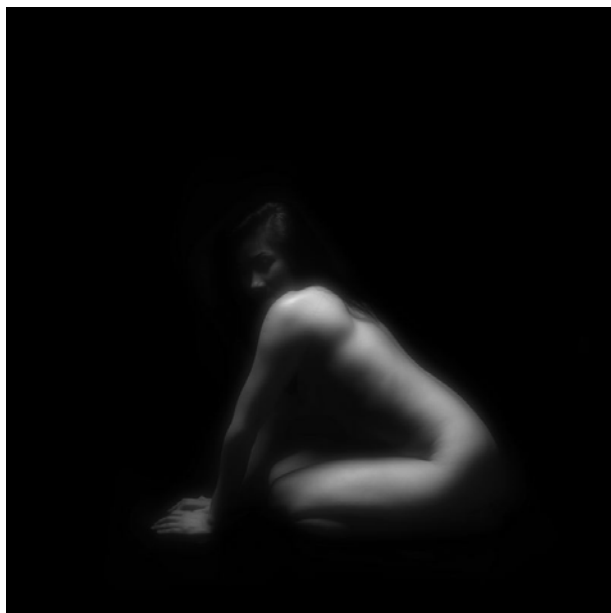
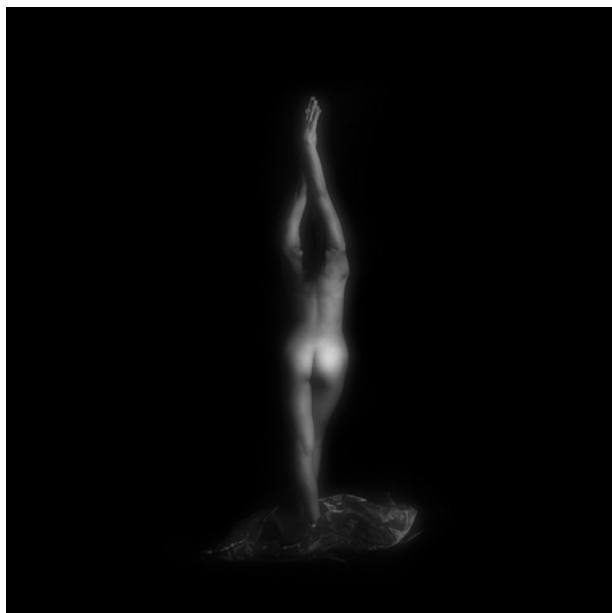
Many people TODAY thought that with digital technology, one can anyhow shoot and "Photoshop" them later. At this point in time, the technology does not really allow it to happen yet.

12. As an advice to beginners, how can they improve in their path in photography?

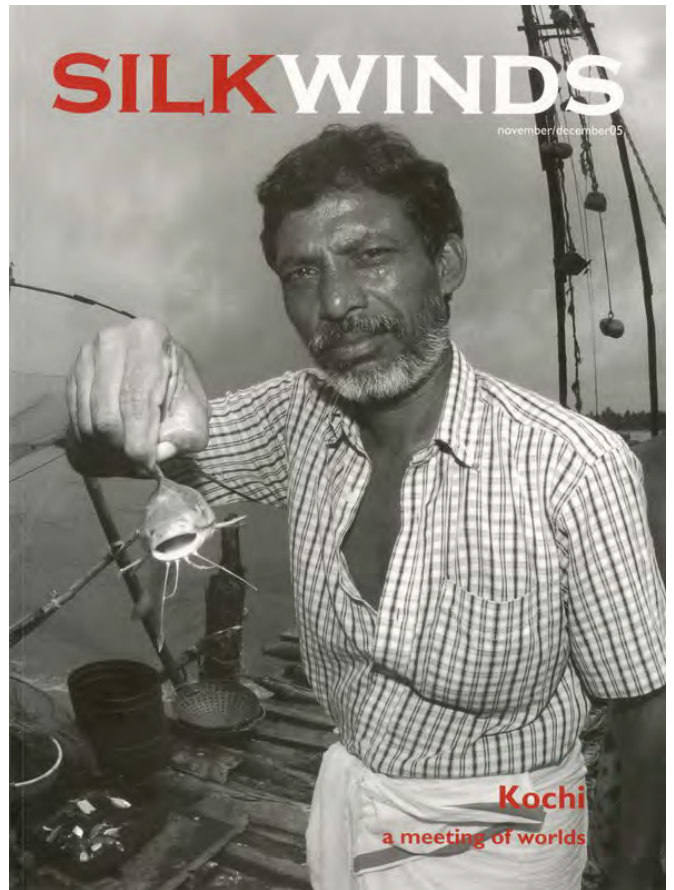
First of all, learn the fundamentals of photography and get them right by taking up classes, refresher classes and reading books. Next, get the right equipment and those you need. Third, look at pictures of great photographers for inspiration. Fourth, form a small group of photography buddies whom you can often go and take pictures with. Fifth, use PhotoVivo.com as a platform to share your pictures and let the instructors critique on the images (one of the best ways to improve). Next, attempt to achieve the RPS (www.rps.org) and PhotoVivo.com distinction titles. These distinction titles in a way are a testament to your capability in photography. While preparing your portfolio for the titles, you are really very focused and trying to create your own style. Got the hint? You are creating your portfolio in your very own style. Portfolio is what photographers need to eventually create for themselves. Once you have your portfolio, you can also look forward to your first solo exhibition and your virtual gallery.

The above is a step-by-step path to success in photography.

Works



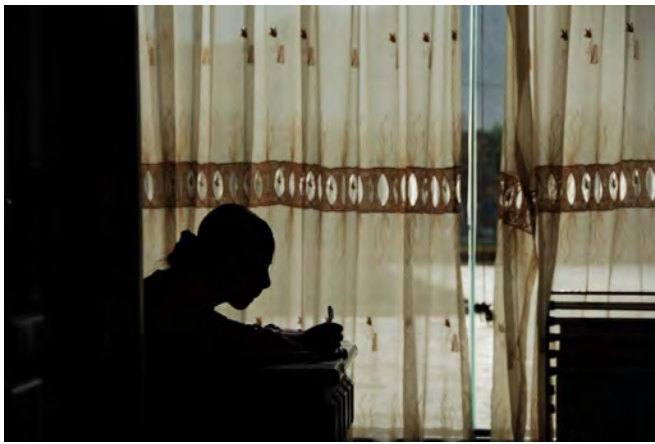






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