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Nam Tam Wan, Cheung Chau, 2016 by Patrick S. Ford

By Local Idea

Patrick S. Ford recently got in touch by email asking if Likink would carry his artist book / project: “Nam Tam Wan, Cheung Chau 2016”. During our negotiations I realized, whether he knew it or not, that the project has a kind of tangential narrative that concerns the *life of the artist*.

The sticky problem for many artistic productions, after the complexities of financing and actual labor are dispensed with, is distribution; how to get the work out there, which adds on yet another, at times tedious, task: the need for publicity.

Likink itself hopes to be a distribution channel, one plagued by an ongoing struggle for publicity. Once history sorts things out Likink may stand out, permanently fade away or come back on a boomerang; but even as a potential failure or success, Likink (as a character in the Hong Kong art world) may make for a good story, the part of history that goes beyond “the facts”.

Given all that, and the actual content of “Nam Tam Wan, Cheung Chau 2016” and how Ford has decided to make and distribute it (printed on demand, self-published and distributed) the project falls within the lineage of a purist kind of conceptualism (see for example On Karawa’s place/date paintings).

The photos in the book document, from a single point of view, the changes that Ford witnessed on a stream’s drainage into the ocean on a beach on the small island of Cheung Chau (part of Hong Kong, located just outside of its harbor). He came across this subtle interaction between vernacular architecture (or infrastructure) and nature almost by chance (this is explained further in the interview with Patrick found below).

The mode of conceptualism implied in this project (as “conceptual art” was originally proposed) means to circumvent traditional exhibition venues (the museum or gallery) and provide alternate distribution channels for art, most especially through the idea of the “artist book”. “Nam Tam Wan, Cheung Chau 2016” fulfills this criterion: it is a book, but it is also an idea and the idea includes production and distribution. The book itself almost hangs there, complete unto itself, whether it is actually produced or simply acts as an idea, as a provocation for the consideration of other cultural and extra-artistic issues.

Putting aside the project's art historical "conceptualism", when I scrolled through the photos, despite their flat presentation and basic intention, I witnessed a fascinating narrative – a story about humans and nature, Hong Kong's harbor, climatology, garbage, sand, concrete and the unstoppable flow of water.

Patrick S. Ford was nice enough to answer a few questions about the project:

Likink: This project was almost begun arbitrarily. Can you talk about that as a working method?

Patrick: When I attended art college in 1977/78 in Leeds, UK I was taught by some amazing artist-teachers who attempted to instill in me an incredibly valuable attitude to making art, rather than specific technical skills. The importance of being flexible and being responsive to what is going on in the work is of paramount importance and this can sometimes mean that the work may take you away from your initial plan or intention.

I have tried to retain this flexibility over the years and within the various themes I explore in my work. There are projects that arose from ideas generated from my personal research and which are built slowly, methodically, with each stage building on the results of the previous stage – and there are other projects that are more serendipitous and which are initiated from chance encounters, or from unexpected observations.

Likink: You noticed a spray-painted silver arrow (above the stream's outlet) that started off your investigation. How does that relate to sign and symbols in the urban environment that have an "official" function but that one might interpret as a kind of "secret language"?

Patrick: One of the subjects I teach at a local tertiary education institute is Cultural Studies and although the subject is targeted at an elementary level, I try to get my students to interpret the people, activities and environment around them in order to construct a cultural identity. Signs and so on, besides having an official message, also bear an unofficial message that can be interpreted or decoded in different ways.

Likink: There is relation in this project to the contemporary condition of one always having a cell phone camera at hand. Can you comment on that?

Patrick: Without the convenience of my mobile phone camera, this project would never have begun. The first few photos were taken purely to satisfy my own curiosity but the ease with which we can take and store photographic images means that more possibilities are open to us.

It is common now, with the availability of phone cameras, for many people to regard themselves as photographers, especially with the proliferation of editing and formatting software that can be used to

'improve' the images. This leads to a debate about what a photographer is, and at what point does an interesting image become 'art'.

There is a belief that what separates 'photographers' from 'the rest of us' is the equipment being used. However, I have met respected, trained photographers who produce acceptable but fairly pedestrian images and other 'photographers' who have enjoyed none of these benefits and yet who consistently produce remarkable images.

Likink: Seeing as the project has a "conceptual" impetus, should your method of presentation and distribution (print on demand/limited edition) also be considered within that praxis?

Patrick: Because of the many and varied techniques and traditions that have been explored throughout the twentieth century, artists today are in the fortunate position of being able to forge a personal language without being beholden to any particular 'ism' or movement. However, I have observed how this freedom to experiment is often abandoned when it comes to the display and presentation of work. In general (with notable exceptions) the variety of display methods does not reflect the variety in working methods.

When I began my photographic project, I decided not to take the usual path, which would have set a regular schedule, with measurable intervals between the photographs. I have seen this method used so many times it has become overly predictable and the whole process would have deteriorated into a chore, something that had to be done, an activity akin to work.

My discovery of the beach, the silver arrow, the drain and the changing state of the beach was born out of serendipity and so I felt that this should be my subsequent working method.

I composed the book using an online publisher's in-house software which meant I could order and print books in any amount at any time, from a single copy up to many hundreds if necessary. Once again serendipity did its work, each time someone feels motivated to consider purchasing a copy, a dialogue will be initiated between the purchaser and the artist.

Likink: Your art practice involves drawing, print-making, collage and performance. How has this project been influenced by those mediums or methods of creation?

Patrick: I think that everything we do can cross over into other activities or experiences. Some of the artists who I admire the most (Robert Rauschenburg being a good example) create work that is difficult to categorise.

I can't give precise examples of how these different media have affected my current project but I do try to allow for a transference of approaches if it seems appropriate.

Likink: Besides the projects "conceptual impetus" can the photographs also be considered as a kind of portrait of Hong Kong?

Patrick: Of course, portraits of people or places need not be recognizable recreations of what the person or place look like. As I was recording the impact of mankind's detritus, it may appear to be more abstract but as the effects on a particular place are then compared over time, it is actually quite site-specific. Portraits are images (usually) captured to indicate the appearance, status, mood, at a particular time and if portraits are repeated over time, then changes in the sitter are also recorded.

Likink: Seeing as you have been a long-term resident of Hong Kong and have exhibited extensively here and in China, can you comment on your role as a "foreign born artist" within this milieu?

Patrick: For a city of around 7 million citizens, Hong Kong has always suffered from the absence of a

significant art scene. This has begun to change but there is still a long way to go. The WKCD development and M+ in particular will hopefully add a lot to the local scene but it would be a mistake to think that there will be an overnight improvement. The Hong Kong government is fond of making comparisons with New York, London, Berlin etc. but what is not often discussed is how long these art scenes have been developing. For me the soul of any art scene does not reside in the major collections, museums or even in the platform of galleries and art spaces. It resides in the activities of artists and artist groups.

The interesting observation I have made over the years is how inward looking the art scene is here. To be fair there are HK artists who are making an impact internationally and deservedly so, but so many artists, exhibitions and installations examine the city, the local culture and decidedly local issues. I'm not criticising this, Hong Kong's past history has left behind plenty of issues to discuss and examine, but this is quite different from what is happening in the international scene. I haven't observed a similar tight focus on the local situation in other places I've visited around the world.

Nam Tam Wan 2016 by Patrick S. Ford

***Customers should contact Patrick S. Ford directly to order or to seek further details:
patricksford@live.com***

Size: 8" x 10", 20 x 25cm

64 pages with introductory text

60 images, colour photos taken by phone camera, portrait format

Hardback cover

Price: HK\$600 – (signed and numbered)

+ Postage:

HK\$50 – local (HK / Macau)

HK\$200 – airmail (takes around 2 weeks)

HK\$100 – surface mail (takes up to 2 months)

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