

Seeking out the Beauty of Whampoa

If you have lived in a neighbourhood for decades, you probably have seen everything, right? Charlie Goh and Helen Lee discovered how this isn't true. These longtime residents of Whampoa recently developed a new appreciation for their neighbourhood, after picking up photography through *Everyday Whampoa*, a project of *Curating Whampoa*. Through the camera lens, they saw beauty that they never noticed before, such as the greeneries that lined both sides of a big canal, as well as the motifs on the eaves of a block of flats.

Together with 10 other elderly residents, Charlie and Helen took a class on basic camera skills taught by Photovoice SG, a company that helps disadvantaged communities express themselves through photography. They were then paired with a mentor photographer who guided them as they documented their day-to-day experiences of the neighbourhood.

When we met Charlie and Helen, they were going through their pictures with the mentors. One week from this meeting, the participants would present their work to one another. These photographs would then be displayed at the "living museum", to tell the stories of Whampoa as how its residents experienced it.

Charlie took photos of retirees idling in a coffee shop, a stray cat lazing in the shade, and a cleaner cycling on the road, as part of his plan to document "activities in the neighbourhood". As his mentor, Ronald Low, paused to assess one of his pictures, Charlie jumped in to explain his work: "You see, with the lady is better, otherwise the picture will be very plain." Ronald turned to us, looking rather pleased. "He's talking like a photographer already," he said.

One can hardly make out the face of the people in Charlie's photos, because the 71-year-old retiree was too shy to walk up to the strangers. "Close view is not so appealing [to me] because people are suspicious of me taking photos of them," he explained. But because of that, his mentor commented, his wide-angled shots presented interesting lines and symmetries found in the surrounding environments.

While Charlie preferred taking photos of people from a distance, gregarious Helen liked chatting her neighbours up, so that by the end of the conversations they became willing subjects of her project. Among her photos was a neighbour resting her legs at a public seat, a yong tau foo hawker going about his business at the market, and children spinning tops at the void deck. But the one that Helen was particularly fond of was the picture of a slanted tree. She exclaimed: "I've been passing by this tree but I never noticed it until I had to shoot for this project!" "Helen was very enthusiastic," said her mentor, Karen Koh. "She took so many photos over the past week that we had to narrow our selection to a particular day."

Charlie also made some discoveries through this project. He said photography taught him to "seek out beauty from the usual things in Whampoa". He added: "I wanted to take some more [photos] but I ran out of battery!"