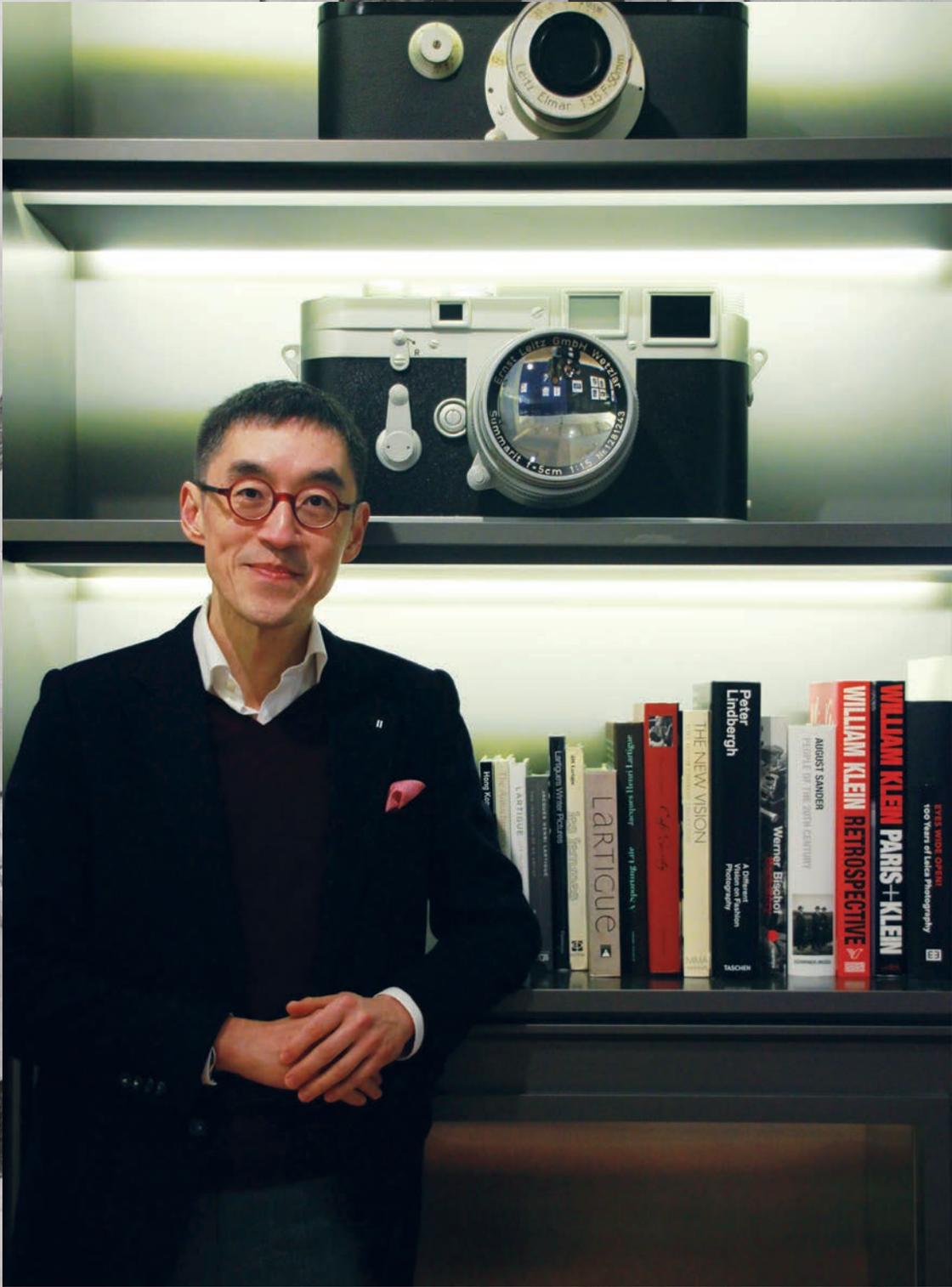




NOR 89 NYC KWOK

DOUGLAS SO



Portrait of Douglas So.
Photo by Esther Chan for ArtAsiaPacific.

ALEXANDER RODCHENKO, *Untitled*, 1919, paper collage, 40.5 x 26 cm.
Courtesy F11 Foto Museum, Hong Kong.

Decisive Moments

BY CHLOE CHU

What's in a moment? For those who wield cameras, a single instant can reveal a whole story. This is also the case with Hong Kong-born and based collector Douglas So. His moment began in 1997, when his wife gave him the Leica M6 camera that would instantaneously spark his obsession with the brand of complex instruments. The ever-curious So didn't stop there, however. He began looking into the photographers who shared his Leica fixation—particularly those who possessed a proclivity for the exact same camera model. It so happens that the famed German manufacturer has a whole host of loyal fans among key 20th-century photographers, including Henri Cartier-Bresson—known for training his light and speedy M6 on the streets, rather than on stiffly posed subjects against nondescript studio backdrops—as well as combat journalist Robert Capa, who, together with Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David Seymour, co-founded the collective Magnum Photos in 1947. Today, the group has grown to comprise some of the world's most frequently published photojournalists—many of whom feature in So's collection. Iconic works by Magnum's members include Steve McCurry's green-eyed *Afghan Girl* (1984) and Stuart Franklin's "Tank Man," taken from a hotel balcony, at the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. And yet, seldom do the viewers of these widely proliferated images look beyond the frozen moment toward the person behind the lens or the equipment that framed the action, and how these elements, each facilitating the other, intertwine to tell of overlooked narratives.

So's penetrating curiosity is unique in that regard. His approach to collecting is predicated on thorough research and careful analysis—strategies that are perhaps informed by his former career as a corporate finance lawyer. His investigations revolve around three things: camera, photo and book. For example, perusing a catalog may lead to the discovery of a new artist, which draws him to a print and the camera that captured it, or the other way around. Collecting, as So sees it, is a never-ending quest to learn, of which the act of purchasing an object is just one insignificant part: "The more you dig, the more you find, and the more questions you'll have," he explained. What has also fueled his 21-year research and collecting process is the richness of what photography offers—an ability to document life and communities of the past. These tenets are apparent in his body of more than 1,000 photographs as well as signed and limited-edition photobooks.

Of his treasured pieces are prints depicting 1950s Hong Kong by Swiss-born photojournalist Werner Bischof. For So, the value of Bischof's images is in the tale they tell of the city's working classes, and how the images shed light on life outside of glamorous colonial-era gatherings and white-collar industries. Fashion photographers such as Helmut Newton, whose erotically charged images were a mainstay in 1970s issues of French *Vogue*, and Horst P. Horst's surreal framings of the female body evoke moments of what society has perceived as beauty through the ages. Injecting a touch of humor are documentary photographer Elliott Erwitt's midcentury images of ironic and absurd situations, such as an unusually smiley soldier sticking his tongue out at the photographer while his fellow troop members marched. From an earlier period are French photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue's photos of ladies in decadent 1920s fashion and the upper echelons of French society frolicking along the Riviera, the concept of the weekend still irrelevant, opening a window into a fantasia of the past.

Many of the same artists are featured in So's collection of books. Specifically, So owns the *Life* magazine issue that first included Lartigue's works, published in 1963. Many people didn't pay attention to the images, So told me, because they happened to be in the issue released immediately following President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Besides the copy of *Life*, there is a signed edition of French journalist Gilles Peress's *Telex Iran*, which comprises photos of Iran's revolution of 1978 and '79 alongside Peress's telex messages that he relayed to the Magnum headquarters from the ground, bypassing the news blockade. W. Eugene Smith, known for pioneering the photo-essay format, is represented in a monograph, as is Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken with his intimate portraits of Hong Kong's inhabitants.

After amassing works and primary documents, So began to contemplate the possibilities of going one step further: sharing the narratives that he had gathered. At the same time, he came to the realization that it was impossible for him to juggle the pursuit of his collection with his career as executive director of charities for the Hong Kong Jockey Club, where he oversaw the distribution of philanthropic funds. Cementing his decision to pursue a new venture was when the 1930s heritage building that he walked past frequently as a child in Hong Kong's Happy Valley came to market in 2012. He snapped it up to prevent the

jewel from slipping into the hands of real-estate developers who would have seized the chance to destroy the structure. The three-story building's restoration took more than 18 months and the input of a team of experts, including a group of conservation architects from Chinese University. Every element, from the Leica-inspired handles at the front door to the subtly differentiated duo-toned facade, highlighting the original art-deco ornamentation, was extensively thought out. However, with construction already underway, So was still unsure about what the building would be exactly. It wasn't until another decisive moment when he was looking out at the Baltic channel from the Fotografiska in Stockholm, having just seen Brazilian photographer Sebastião Selgado's exhibition "Genesis," that the vision for a private photography museum crystallized in his mind. Thus, F11 Foto Museum was conceived and officially opened its doors in 2014.

Nowadays, So's time is spent collecting, meeting artists and developing the programming for F11, which he intends as a place to foster an appreciation of photography. The museum mounts three to four exhibitions revolving around European masterworks from So's collections per year, and also holds So's library of photobooks as well as vintage cameras. When he isn't at F11, So is developing its infant sibling, f22 Foto Space—a commercial gallery venture he established in 2017 that spotlights a mix of Hong Kong and international contemporary artists. He also sits on M+ museum's collections board, where his focused approach to building a body of works no doubt will guide the institution's direction: "For both public and private collections there needs to be a strategy—you can't possibly collect everything," as So put it.

F11, now almost four years old, clearly carries So's touch. At the museum's most recent exhibition, dedicated to Russian constructivist and photographer Alexander Rodchenko, the artist's prints were deliberately mounted off-kilter as opposed to being in the center—a design envisioned by So, based on records he saw of the exhibitions Rodchenko organized in his day. The wall texts were presented in fonts referencing ones Rodchenko used as a graphic designer, and 1920s Russian music played in the background. It isn't hard to see how the works, rendering scenes of Moscow from unusual angles that estrange the subjects and that create a moment of delayed recognition, would be attractive to So, who himself is in perennial pursuit of new perspectives.