

The documenters

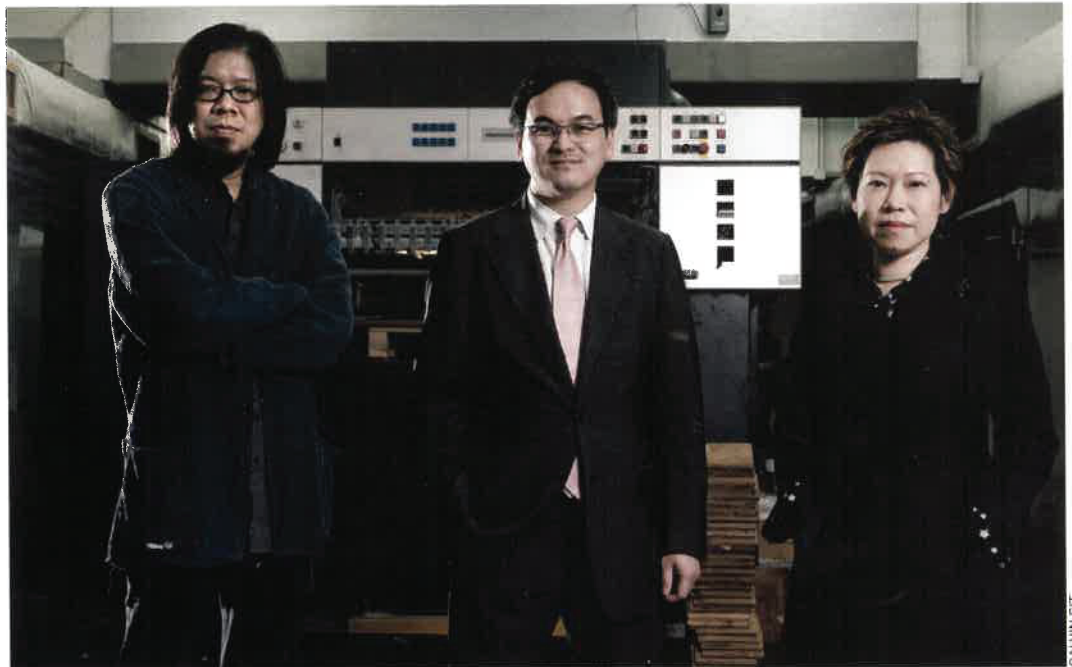
Clare Morin hunts down the city's art book publishers, and discovers there are exciting new developments coming hot off the presses

The grandiosely named Asia One Tower lies sandwiched between two industrial buildings on a mean strip in Chai Wan. This stretch of gritty Fung Yip Street is filled with men of the tattooed variety, shouting at one another as they hurtle past in huge trucks, loudly offloading crates onto the streets. So it is a stark contrast when one steps into the gleaming Asia One Tower, with its silent, elegant lobby holding a solitary statue of an antique tall ship.

This is the empire of Peter Lau, printer-turned publisher, and owner of the Asia One Communications Group, whose latest project has been to create lushly illustrated books documenting the city's art scene. Ascending in the slightly less glamorous elevator, we find Lau hard at work in his tranquil office on the 13th floor, a scholarly setting with antique furniture and art books lining the walls.

Lau, it transpires, was a banker, but 11 years ago he threw his life savings into setting up a printing company. In good old Hong Kong spirit, his business has grown exponentially, and Lau now owns the entire building.

"After a while you get sick of it and want to create something of your own," he tells me about his former career in



Wordsmiths Carl Cheng (left), Peter Lau (centre) and Heidi Chan (right) of Asia One

banking, as I settle down in a Ming dynasty wooden chair. "I myself love art, but I am more of a traditionalist, I collect seals. But being Hong Kong Chinese, I knew very little about the art scene here. There isn't that much coverage and it's very fragmented. I was quite frustrated, but there wasn't much I could do. Until one day Carl bumped into me and told me his idea."

That would be Carl Cheng a respected visual artist and art educator, who must have been delighted to meet the owner of one of Hong Kong's leading integrated printing companies. Asia One do it all, from printing to design, binding and output. Indeed, Lau has been printing the Sotheby's Hong Kong catalogues for years, so if anyone were to

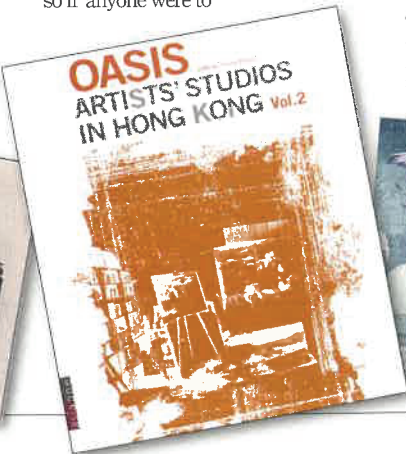
undertake the expensive task of publishing art books, he was a likely contender. "Carl said to me, why don't we have a survey of the entire Hong Kong [art] scene, have very good coverage of Hong Kong artists," remembers Lau. "No-one had done

"Publishing is a very expensive exercise, but because I'm a printer, it's easier for me to do something for a good cause"

this before. Plus printing is expensive, publishing is a very expensive exercise; but because I'm a printer, it's easier for me to do something for a good cause."

In December 2007, their first book, *Oasis – Artists' Studios in Hong Kong*, was published in both Chinese and English versions, and was very well received. The 365-page, hard-backed volume offers a fantastic insight into the studios and lives of 25 Hong Kong artists. The lavish design and readable prose, edited by artist and curator Tang Ying-chi, provides an intimate portrait of a diverse group of artists. This autumn, volume two was released, with the involvement of art critic Victor Lai. Asia One has also added to the momentum by releasing the first two works in a seven-book series focusing on Hong Kong photographers. The first profiles the work of So Hing-keung with a critical essay by Oscar Ho, while the second focuses on another mountain man (Stanley Wong) with an accompanying article by art critic John Batten.

While Peter Lau's story is an inspiring one, he is by no means alone. On the opposite end of the island, where Hollywood Road trails off into Sheung Wan, lies the humble offices of MCCM Creations, run by the pioneering Mary Chan. MCCM was set up in 2001 when Chan, in a striking coincidence to Lau's story, also bumped into an ▶



Nathan Road
彌敦道

artist on the street. This time it was the talented illustrator and children's book author Peter Stuart. "I met him in the street and he asked me if I would like to publish a book," recalls Chan with a smile. "I had a strong interest, and trusted what he did."

Since then, Chan has created some of the city's most iconic books on Hong Kong culture. There have been true classics such as *Our Home, Shek Kip Mei 1954-2006*, an intriguing book by photojournalist Vincent Yu that profiles the living quarters of 120 elderly residents in one of Shek Kip Mei's first housing estates – before it was torn down in November 2006. This December, MCCM have launched *One Square Foot*, which features the photography of John Fung, in addition to *Metaflora*, a tome profiling the poetry and designs of Michael Holland.

Chan admits that it's not an easy business to be in. "The print run of our books is very small, I always joke with people that most of the time we are working for the printer," she says. Yet recent years have seen a significant improvement, with the opening of more lifestyle stores such as G.O.D. selling art books – and increased interest from distributors around the world in taking books about Hong Kong artists.

"It's great that Peter and Mary Chan are trying to fill a niche market," says John Batten, former gallery owner and prolific art critic. Batten himself is adding to the momentum of arts writing this month, with the launch of the website for the International Association of Art Critics Hong Kong (www.aicahk.org), which offers a one-stop shop for local arts news and reviews "It's really important for the art scene to have a record," he continues. "When I had the gallery, curators would come in and say 'show me some Hong Kong artists', and the only thing I could show them were various catalogues."

Predictably, as Batten points out, the government is doing little to help small publishers. Museums, he argues, could actively engage with publishing houses in creating high-quality catalogues for important exhibitions. "That's what happens elsewhere: a museum will work with a commercial enterprise to do it. It's about passion and thinking out of the box, and we don't have that with our museums."

The Museum of Art bookshop also carries a dismally low number of books on local artists. Despite allegedly carrying some MCCM books, on the day that *Time Out* visited, none were visible.

Mary Chan, however, is not wasting any time complaining about a lack of support. Later this month, she is taking over the bookshop at the Art Centre. "I want to unite the small presses in Hong Kong," she says. "And also bring in art books from lesser known countries like Italy, Iran and India." Show your support this Christmas by making an artful purchase.

Preview

Imaging Hong Kong: Contemporary Photography Exhibition

Central Library Opens Saturday 20

One of the largest photography exhibitions this city has seen in more than 20 years is about to be unveiled at the Central Library. *Imaging Hong Kong* will showcase works by 42 active Hong Kong photographers, who all use the city as the subject of their works. This is the third in a series of exhibitions that was launched by the Arts Development Council in 2007, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Handover. With the academic brains of the PH5 Photo Group organising the show, it promises to offer a comprehensive insight into the state of local photography.

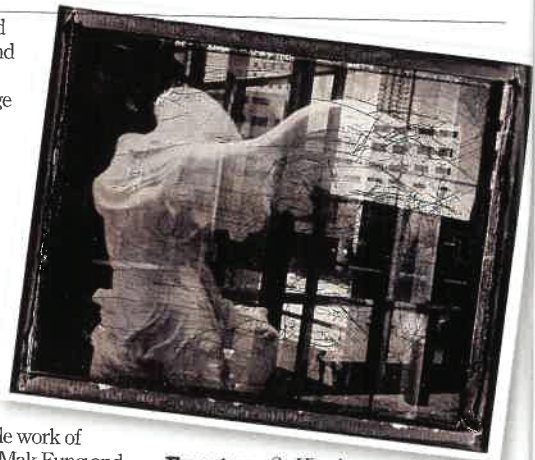
The PH5 group was formed three years ago when Blues Wong, a former professor of photography at both Polytechnic University and Chinese University, and one of the directors of the Shanghai Street Artspace in Yau Ma Tei, approached photographic historian Edwin Lai. He had the idea of forming a group in response to lacklustre energy in the photography scene. "We have been trying to look at different ways to promote photography," explains Lai. The group of five was completed with the celebrated photographer Almond

Chu, photographer and educator Yvonne Lo and Janet Fong, who is a former curator at Osage Gallery. This year they have made significant progress with the publication of the *PHI* photography journal, but *Imaging Hong Kong* is by far their biggest project to date.

The show is divided into four themes.

Visible City takes a literal

look at the city, including the remarkable work of veteran photographers Mak Fung and Leung Bor, with Ducky Tse Chi-tak's 'Unmeasured City' project, which has charted the gradual urbanisation of Hong Kong's countryside, and prominent photographers Wan Lai-ching, Galen Tse and Tse Pak-chai, who all took the destruction of Lee Tung Street (aka Wedding Card Street) as their subject. The second layer of *Power to the People* focuses on the individual stories, including Chan Chiu-man and Chat Wai-leung, who captured the lives of people who still live under Lion Rock. The third part is



The veteran So Hing-keung

Freedom to Mix, Dare To Be New, which focuses on new media, while the final section labelled *Liberty of Imagination* moves into the personal expressive terrain of photographers, as well as installation artists. Make sure you check out the symposium. *Post 97 Art Photography in China, Hong Kong and Macau* at the library on the Saturday 20 opening – it's just a taste of the visual riches to come. *Clare Morin*
See: www.imaginghk.com.

Review

Fall

★★★★★

Art Statements Gallery
Until Saturday 27

Erwin Olaf is one of the world's best-known fashion and advertising photographers, having made his name over the past 25 years shooting international campaigns for the likes of Diesel, BMW and Nokia. And – as if one wildly successful career weren't enough – he also moonlights as a fine artist, creating wry, often erotic, always surrealistic studio images that expand on, rather than reject, his commercial background. Take past projects such as his *Fashion Victims* series. A lewd, in-your-face take on sex and consumerism, the pictures showed naked male and female models, genitalia splayed, sporting Chanel, Gucci and Hugo Boss shopping bags over their heads.

At first glance, his most recent work seems subdued by comparison. *Fall*, on show at Art Statements Gallery, is a set of perfectly styled portraits in austere, washed-out tones, depicting conventionally photogenic youths in varying states of semi-undress

– so far, so Vogue. Juxtaposed with these are still-lives cast in the same neutral palette, showing plants in earthenware pots worthy of a *House & Garden* spread. It's in his models' eyes, however, that Olaf diverges from the script. Instead of portraying them staring sultrily at the camera, or gazing moodily into the middle distance as you might expect, he snaps them at a moment when few of us would ever choose to be photographed: that is, mid-blink.

Like a glitch in the Matrix, these deliberately off-kilter images are both troubling and compelling. Capturing his subjects' eyelids in the act of falling, the photographer draws our attention to the precise millisecond at which he chooses to press the shutter, highlighting the fleetingness of the present moment, and, by insinuation, the imminence of death. The static nature of the still-lives only amplifies this message.

It's a testament to the strength of Olaf's vision that it makes one recall the words of Shakespeare, another artist who successfully bridged the divide between art and commerce: "Golden



Falling Olaf captures his models mid-blink

boys and girls all must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust." *Lara Day*
See: www.erwinolaf.com.