

# Imaging Displacement

Carrie Julian

**Pok Chi Lau: *From Hong Kong With Love*  
Jan Weiner Gallery  
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Pok Chi Lau has traveled on a 30-year quest to document the Chinese diaspora. In his most recent exhibition at Jan Weiner Gallery, *From Hong Kong with Love*, Lau assembled a body of images and prose, aspiring to crystalize his life's work by linking "three decades of visual history across a global distance."

Lau, now associate professor of art and design at the University of Kansas, lived the immigrant experience when he left Hong Kong at age 19. Experiencing isolation and loneliness in a fast-paced world, he was quickly shaken with the realization that dreams of Gaum Sahn (the Golden Mountain), or America's promise of "the good life," were mere constructs. Yet through working as a kitchen helper in a Chinese Restaurant in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he began to find solace, comfort, and a greater sense of belonging — this firsthand exposure to an ethnic Chinatown served as the starting point for his social documentary photography of the next quarter century.

Lau traveled throughout North America, photographing Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York City, Pittsburgh, Boston, Tijuana, and Vancouver. On film, he captured immigrants who put dreams on hold to take jobs in kitchens, factories and laundromats, only to go home to bleak, one-room homes.

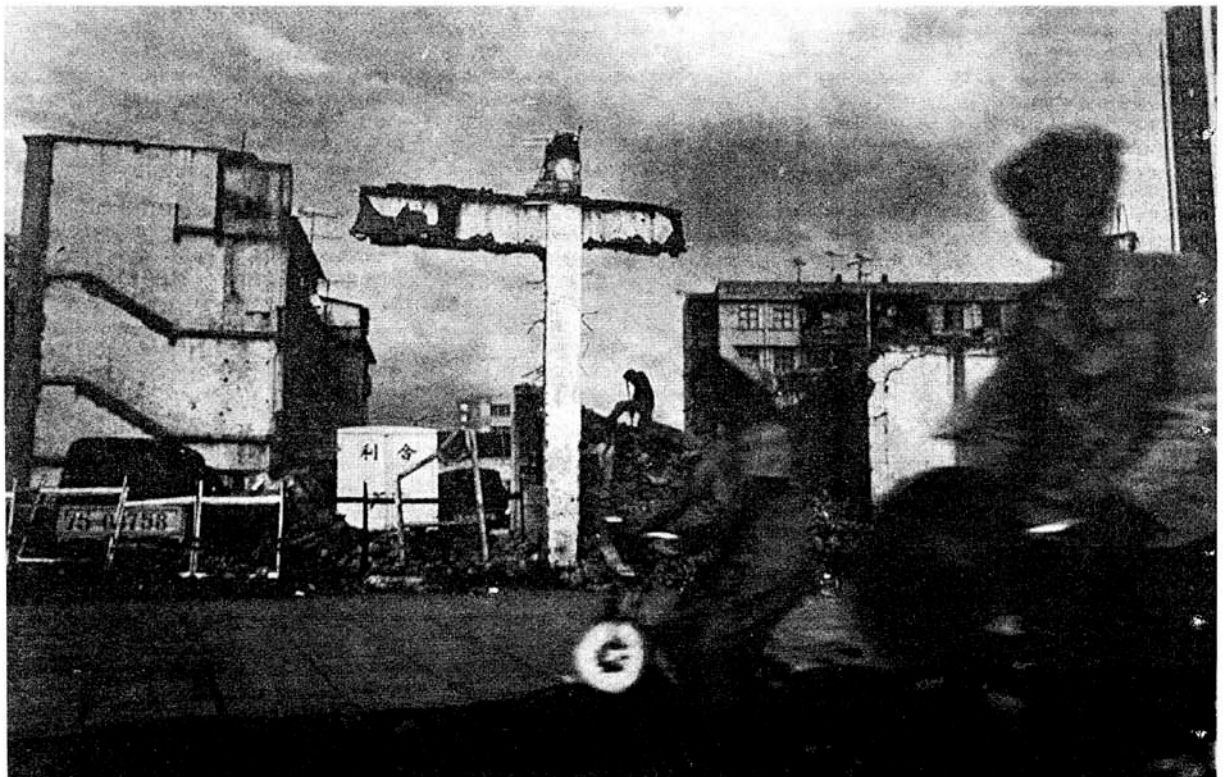
In one of Lau's most strikingly-composed photographs, a diagonally-draped string of Christmas lights, leading to a barren, white wall, converges with lines of its own shadow to reveal a March calendar. Hanging on the wall are four family photographs of a single mother and her son. In images like these, Lau uses common elements of the Chinatown home — calendars, meager possessions, shabby mattresses — to reveal profound emptiness from a displaced cultural identity. They imply a sense of transience and impermanence, a harsh contrast from visions one would conjure of the gold mountain.

In 1995, Lau traveled throughout Southern China to observe communities in transition from communist control to a capitalistic society. The message of these works is made clear through his elegantly-executed use of juxtaposition. A soft foreground of crumbling piles of rubble — what once was a traditional village in Shen Zhen, China — is set against a sharp skyline of skyscrapers, narrating a forgotten story of destruction and chaos as China followed Hong Kong's "quasi westernized model" for rapid economic growth.

In the stormy *Demolition Worker*, 1995, another work from Shen Zhen, the structural frame of a demolished building eerily resembles that of a cross, while a demolition worker carries out his duties. Again, Lau's anger is eminent. "We were Christianized overnight," Lau writes in an essay about Hong Kong's takeover by British Rule. "Even people with no command of English would have an English name. Such erosion of basic identity will haunt us sooner or later."

Shifting between bleak portrayals of Western-world Chinatowns and destructive, exploitative practices in Southern China, the viewer could not help but ask, "what exactly are we searching for?" Lau's work documents the uniquely Chinese migration experience, but his collective images and prose form a body of work that far surpasses a story of one people's migration. His show encompasses a universally human experience, one that transcends the socially-divisive lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

Lau's resolution lies within his newer works, focusing on a path toward a greater mixing of multiracial and multiethnic identities. He speculates that with greater acceptance will come a profound sense of spiritual richness and growth. *From Hong Kong With Love* succeeds in humanizing the differences between people of vastly different social and economic backgrounds — a task which he eloquently executes, with a resolution that is hopeful and open, for the quest is still an untold fortune.



Below: *Demolition Worker*, Shen Zhen, China, 1995, silver gelatin print. Above: *Home of a single mother, a Vietnamese refugee of Chinese descent, Chinatown, San Francisco, 1981*, silver gelatin print.