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FEATURESTORIES

Macau-based Portuguese-American Hugo Teixeira has been exploring alternative photographic techniques that date back to the 19th century. Bamboo scaffolding is the topic of his first exhibition in Macau, which offers unique views of the city and of some of the masters that have helped build it. The artist, who is also an English lecturer and “an amateur craftsman,” talked to mART about his passion and his do-it-yourself approach to life.

BY SOFIA JESUS

Hugo Teixeira says he cannot call an electrician to his home, or go to a mechanic. “I need to do it myself.” His conviction as “an amateur craftsman” combined with his passion for photography — and its roots — have led him to explore some of the photographic processes used in the 1860s.

When people use a digital camera, “they want their picture to look like someone else’s,” the Macau-based artist and English lecturer tells mART. “So, everything looks the same.” The mere use of digital cameras — even without a Photoshop treatment later on — “changes everything,” he says. “Maybe you didn’t have an active role, but it’s interpreted,” he says.

His first exhibition in Macau, Transience: Daredevils and Towering Webs, which opened on Friday at Taipa Village Art Space and lasts until March 31, offers visitors unique views of the art of the city’s bamboo scaffolding and of some of its masters.

The exhibition presents a number of larger and smaller format cyanotypes — cyan-blue prints — as well as several portraits of bamboo masters — the daredevils — in ambrotype, a positive picture made of a photographic negative on glass backed by a dark surface.

“We shouldn’t believe what we see. We see what we believe. And in this case it should be removed enough from reality to reveal that matrix behind what we have perceived to be reality,” he tells mART.



Mr Teixeira has been gathering equipment — such as a large format camera bought on E-bay or a head brace made by a blacksmith in Slovenia — and the right chemicals to explore these alternative photographic processes.

He built a dark room in his spare bathroom at home; and he photographed the bamboo masters in his terrace.

Mr Teixeira explains he was challenged by Macau architect and artist João Ó — the exhibition’s curator — to showcase the alternative techniques he had been developing in his home studio for the past two years.

Mr Teixeira had been photographing bamboo scaffoldings in Macau since 2015. When Mr Ó challenged him to photograph his and Rita Machado’ temporary bamboo structure Treeplets — an installation built in the University of Macau’s Hengqin campus during the Macau Architecture Promenade, in 2015 — that somehow served as an inspiration for Mr Teixeira’s showcase, he explains.

While the cyanotypes illustrate buildings — old and modern — covered in the bamboo structures, the ambrotypes portrait the masters — some of them retired — behind that type of scaffolding work. “I think it [the ambrotype] literally brings out layers under the skin, which reflects ultra violet light we don’t normally see with our naked eye”.



Mr Teixeira has been living in Macau for six years. His interest in Asia started with a train journey from Portugal to China in 2007. After some visits to Macau, he settled in the city in 2010, following a Skype interview for a teaching job in the territory. But his first connection with Macau dates back much further.

It was in the United States, in the end of the 1990s, in the high school where he studied Portuguese, that a teacher showed him and his classmates a slideshow of a trip he had made to Macau before the handover. Those images somehow got stuck in his mind. “Eventually I found myself here, showing these pictures, the same way he did 20 years ago.” It was fate, he agrees.



Son of a Portuguese couple that emigrated to the United States, Mr Teixeira says he was born in Portugal out of “bureaucratic reasons” related to his mother’s insurance. He grew up in the Luso-American community of San Jose, in California, and used to visit the European nation during summer. “So, I always had contact with Portugal,” he says.

He briefly studied photography in the United States before focusing his tertiary education studies on linguistics and education. He studied documentary photography at Escola Técnica de Imagem e Comunicação, in Lisbon, Portugal, and studied the 19th century wet plate collodion process with photographer and conservator Luís Pavão. His work has been exhibited in the United States and in Portugal.

Mr Teixeira is currently an English lecturer at the Institute of Tourism Studies. He has also taught in the Macao Polytechnic Institute and in the University of Saint Joseph. “Photography is a hobby” he wishes to continue to explore, he tells mART. “It’s a passion, a vocation rather than a profession. It will always be part of my life.”