

DEPARTURE LOUNGE

PRESS RELEASE

13 May 2021

KURT TONG: In Case it Rains in Heaven (2021)

21 May – 1 August 2021

Departure Lounge, 64 Bute Street, Luton LU1 2EY

Departure Lounge is delighted to be reopening to the public from Friday 21 May 2021, with an exhibition of new work by award-winning, Hong Kong-based photographer Kurt Tong.

In this update of his 2009 project of the same name, Tong re-visits the centuries-old Chinese funerary tradition of making Joss paper offerings to the dead, and poses the question of what we might need, or want to provide for our loved ones, in the afterlife.

Today, everything from the most mundane household necessities to luxurious accessories and aspirational status symbols are mass-produced or custom-made in Joss paper, designed specifically for burning to honour the departed. Chinese Joss paper is traditionally made from coarse bamboo paper and is often cremated in Chinese deity or ancestor worship ceremonies during special holidays. *In Case it Rains in Heaven* explores how this traditional practice reflects the materialism of Asia's rapidly developing economy.

Tong's whimsical new photographs present a dizzying array of consumer goods replicated in paper. From the latest iPhone, brand new laptops, designer clothes, fully functioning sets of tools and this season's must-have handbag, to a delicious array of dim sum, espresso machines and copious amounts of cash, Hong Kong's industrious Joss paper manufacturers respond quickly to changing fashions and world events.

Following the recent political unrest in Hong Kong and the global pandemic, Joss paper helmets, replicas of the industrial heavy-duty masks used by protestors and colourful Covid PPE now join the catalogue of offerings to accompany the city's loved ones on their journey to the next life.

Kurt Tong said "Burning these paper offerings gives people peace of mind and the security of knowing their departed loved ones are provided for. It helps us to grieve and believe that we can still look after them, and perhaps assuage any guilt or regret we might feel. To my surprise, aside from the technology-based items, very little has actually changed since I first photographed this subject in 2009. The trends that I have observed over the past 12 years came and went. After all is said and done, the tradition it is about sending shelter, food and clothing to the departed family and friends, our basic needs have stayed the same. In death, life goes on."



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Matthew Shaul, Director of Departure Lounge said “As well as a remarkable and entirely non-western approach to the celebration of those we have lost, Kurt’s exhibition poses enduring questions about the functions and purpose of photography; its ability to redefine and reinterpret ancient traditions of visual communication, and to reflect some of the lively, joyous approaches to the memory of the departed observed around the world.”

Departure Lounge’s exhibition programme is supported using public funding by Arts Council England and delivered in partnership with The Culture Trust Luton.

Visitor information

Departure Lounge, The Storefront, 64 Bute Street, Luton LU1 2EY

Open (**covid permitting**) Thursday – Saturday 1.00pm– 6.00pm, and by appointment

Admission free

Telephone 01582 878100

www.departure-lounge.org.uk email: gallery@departure-lounge.org.uk



PRESS ENQUIRIES:

For further information, interview requests and images please contact:

Hazel Foxon email hazel@foxon.org or tel 07801 234930 (not for publication)

Notes to Editors

Kurt Tong

Born in Hong Kong in 1977, Tong was originally trained as a health visitor at the University of Liverpool. He worked and traveled extensively across Europe, the Americas and Asia. In 1999, Kurt co-founded Prema Vasam, a charitable home for disabled and disadvantaged children in Chennai, South India. Kurt became a full-time photographer in 2003 and was the winner of the Luis Valtuena International Humanitarian Photography Award with his first picture story documenting the treatment of disabled children in India. He worked for many other NGOs and covered stories from Female Infanticide to ballroom dancers.

He gained his Masters in documentary photography at the LCC in 2006 and began working on much more personal projects exploring his Chinese roots and understanding of his motherland. ‘In Case it Rains in Heaven’, exploring the practice of Chinese funeral offerings, has been widely exhibited including a solo exhibition at Compton Verney and features in several public collections. A monograph of the work was published by Kehrer Verlag in 2011.

‘The Queen, The Chairman and I’, which reconnected the artist with his Chinese roots, is a multilayered narrative book dealing with the story of Hong Kong of the last 100 years and the Asian Diaspora through the lives of his own family, is presented as a Chinese teahouse. The project has been exhibited across 4 continents, including the Victoria Museum in Liverpool, UK; Galleri Image in Denmark; the Visual Art Center at the Chinese Cultural Foundation of San Francisco, Impressions Gallery in Bradford. The work made its China debut in Lianzhou Museum of Photography in 2018 has since travelled to OCAT Institute,



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Beijing and Somerset House, London in 2019 and Times Art Museum in Beijing in 2020. The monograph was published by Dewi Lewis Publishing and Lianzhou Museum of Photography in 2019.

Much of Kurt's recent work incorporates elements of installation and sculptural, pushing the boundaries of the medium. Echoed Visions, a series of installation questioning the medium of photography, made its debut at the Identity Art Gallery in 2014.

Returning to exploring his Chinese roots, 'Combing for Ice and Jade', a love letter to the artist's nanny, one of the few remaining self-combed women in the world, has won him the WMA, the Punctum award at Lianzhou Foto, the Asia Reference Photo Award and the Photo Folio award at Rencontre d'Arles. The installation has been shown at the Himalayas Museum in Shanghai, the Zhongshan Museum of Art, Finnish Museum of Photography and Rencontres d'Arles. The work will travel to Grote Kerk in Breda and Singapore Esplanade and Mai Manó House in Budapest in 2020. A monograph of the work was published by Jiazazhi Press in 2019 and was named one of best Photobooks of 2019 by Time, El País, Esquire, Art Paper and Lens Culture amongst others.

He is represented by The Photographer's Gallery in London, Up Gallery in Taiwan and Jen Bekman Gallery in New York.

Departure Lounge was set up in Luton 2010 initially organising a series of international contemporary art exhibitions in empty shops. With a particular emphasis on photography and portraiture, the gallery collaborated closely with Culture Trust, Luton, delivering 'As You Change So Do I' a series of public art events for Luton which concluded in March 2019. The Gallery is now curating an independent exhibition programme with the support of The Culture Trust Luton, Arts Council England and other funders.

The Culture Trust Luton is an arts and cultural charity providing exceptional and meaningful engagement with museums, arts centres, libraries and public art for the people of Luton and beyond. Luton Culture aims to deliver exemplary public engagement with arts and culture through its locally relevant and nationally important arts and cultural programmes, whilst actively nurturing creativity and artistic talent.



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