

Nobel Peace Prize photographer on a roll

Singaporean Sim Chi Yin has an ongoing exhibition, recently joined prestigious photo agency Magnum Photos and plans to further her studies

Toh Wen Li

In a gallery in Lasalle College of the Arts in McNally Street are two video projections, juxtaposing the Cascade Mountains in Washington State with a view of North Korea from Mount Paektu on the border with China.

These run above the ticking of a Geiger counter, North Korean propaganda songs and the voices of Americans.

The twin projections by award-winning documentary photographer Sim Chi Yin, 39, are part of a new installation of an exhibition commissioned by the Nobel Peace Centre last year.

Most People Were Silent presents what she describes as an "open-ended, ambivalent" view of nuclear power.

"The whole gallery becomes a giant diptych," she says of the show, which also features digital prints.

Last month, the Beijing-based photographer became the first South-east Asian to join prestigious co-operative Magnum Photos, where she is now a Nominee Member.

She left photo agency VII last September to "take stock" of her life and was later invited to make a submission for Magnum.

Sim, who is the first Asian Nobel Peace Prize photographer, was asked to do an exhibition on last year's Peace Prize winner, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons civil society group.

She decided it would be more compelling to approach the topic by taking photos of nuclear sites.

The photos at the Earl Lu Gallery were taken last year along the Chinese-North Korean border and in the western part of the United States – in a journey from the "pyramidal anti-missile radar complex stands" in snowy North Dakota to a cratered test site in the Nevada desert.

There were "striking similarities" between the landscapes of North Korea, the only country to have tested nuclear weapons in the 21st century, and the US, the only country to have used them, in 1945.

The show takes its name from the words of Robert Oppenheimer, called the father of the atomic bomb, after he watched the fireball of the 1945 Trinity nuclear test, the first detonation of a nuclear weapon: "A few people laughed. A few people cried. Most people were silent."

Perhaps it is an apt title for an exhibition here, Sim says.

Singaporeans tend to be "not as politically or socially engaged", she says, and the island state abstained from voting in last year's nuclear weapon ban treaty.

During last month's summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore, she was struck by the way people reacted –



from those who expressed pride at Singapore being the host to those focused only on the traffic jams to others who took pictures with the two leaders.

"These two generations of Singaporeans have been consistently depoliticised by the rulers of our country," she adds.

Sim compares this show with her earlier work, which was by contrast "very human-interest, very straight-lined, advocacy-based".

Some of her past projects, which were also less multi-disciplinary, shone a light on migration and labour issues in South-east Asia and China. "Maybe the time for that kind of straightforward advocacy is past," she says.

During her journey, she met people who had views on nuclear weapons that were on both ends of the spectrum. She recalls the awe the director of the Titan Missile Museum in Arizona had for one huge missile illuminated in a silo.

"This was the nuclear-tipped weapon she had commanded in the 1980s. She told us, 'I would have no trouble following the launch command if it had come down to that, because it would mean the US was already under attack.'"

Nuclear sites are often located in vast landscapes. The risk of aestheticising them through photography

raises ethical questions.

One Belgian art collector who had bought Sim's work had a terse reaction to her recent photos: "How does it feel to make something so horrific so beautiful?"

Her response to such criticism is that the beauty is a "hook". "I am trying to invite people in – to look at this landscape – and, hopefully, get them into a contemplative place."

Sim, who won the Chris Hondros Fund Award in April, has degrees in history and international relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

She was a journalist and foreign correspondent for The Straits Times for nine years before quitting to pursue photography. Her photos have appeared in Time and The New York Times, and have highlighted issues such as China's deadly mining industry.

Producing impactful work is hard and she has the scars to show for it.

Three years ago, on an assignment for French daily Le Monde, she snapped photos of a group of women workers weeding along a road in the Tumen Economic Development Zone on the edge of the border between China and North Korea. This happened to be a no-photography area.

About six of the women wrenched the camera from her

while the strap was still wound around her right thumb, splitting her flesh in two places.

After two operations and two years of not being able to work full-on, she holds up both thumbs to show that her right one is still broken. "It's as good as it'll be, but it's never going to be the same again," she says. "I just live with it."

She reacted to the assault not by screaming, but trying to reason with the women in Mandarin.

"I've described myself as always having this sense of social purpose," says Sim, who comes across as stoic. "Now, people read this back and say it's from my grandfather."

Her late grandfather was a chief editor of the Ipoh Daily in the 1940s and known for his leftist politics.

This led to him being arrested in Malaya by the British and deported to Guangdong. He went on to join the Chinese communist guerilla army and died fighting in 1949.

Sim has been doing research on British Malaya – a field she will dig deeper into when she begins a PhD in King's College London's department of war studies in October.

Doing a PhD will feed her hunger for new ideas, but there were also push factors. "As I shuffle towards 40, I am also wondering how to make a sustainable life as an artist."

Sim, who has scholarships from

the Tan Kah Kee Foundation and King's College London, will supplement the funds with freelance work.

Aside from the "arduous four-year process" of working to be considered for a full Magnum membership, she is doing a project on the global depletion of sand and a book on British Malaya.

Her friends, who expected her to drop the PhD after joining Magnum, think she is "mad".

A new chapter has begun. "What will it bring? I don't know. But I'm interested in growing in multiple directions. I'm happily evolving."

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Sim Chi Yin's exhibition, titled **Most People Were Silent**, features photos of nuclear sites. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

VIEWIT/MOST PEOPLE WERE SILENT

WHERE: Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Lasalle College of the Arts, 1 McNally Street

WHEN: Till Oct 10, noon to 7pm (Tuesdays to Sundays); closed on Mondays and public holidays

ADMISSION: Free
INFO: bit.ly/2uYV44W