



RUSSEL WONG: THE "RICHARD AVEDON OF ASIA"

BY WILLIAM RYAN • PHOTOS BY RUSSEL WONG '82

IT'S DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE WHERE RUSSEL WONG'S HOME ENDS and his studio begins. Photographs are *everywhere*. They hang all over the roomy colonial bungalow on Holland Road, a main thoroughfare in the "little Bohemia" section of Singapore. Some images are propped against a teak bookcase lined with photography monographs. Framed work is bubble-wrapped and stacked in deep rows against the walls throughout the house.

I am visiting Wong just after his twenty-five year retrospective at the Singapore Art Museum — *Russel Wong: Photographs 1980–2005*. The exhibit, which occupied four galleries, broke attendance records and had to be extended two weeks to accommodate more than 72,000 visitors. Wong has been invited to hang most of the show at the 2006 Venice Film Festival.

A framed, symmetrically composed image of the temple at Angkor Wat dominates the living room wall. The photograph's golden tint adds to its understated beauty. A muted, large-screen TV



Russel Wong

Amos Wong

FACING PAGE: Oliver Stone, *Heaven and Earth, Phuket*, 1992; Robert Downey, Jr., *Los Angeles*, 1986; Marcus Miller, *Capitol Studios, Hollywood*, 1988; ABOVE: Zhang Ziyi, *Hero, Hengidan, China*, 2002

sits inside a maple cabinet to the immediate left of the Cambodian print. An English soccer championship game flickers silently. It seems surreal and out of place amid the quiet grace and beauty of Wong's images. The set remains turned on throughout the interview.

This is the first clue that Russel Wong is — along with being one of the most sought-after photographers in the world — a sports fanatic.

In fact, it was track and field that brought him in the late Seventies to the University of Oregon from Singapore — not the UO's academic reputation. While a student, Wong ran the

Prefontaine trail along the millrace and through Hendricks Park daily. A self-described "track nut," Wong loved to run.

"I hung out every day at the track. Ran 10K and Butte-to-Butte," Wong says. He sought out and befriended legendary UO track coach Bill Bowerman.

But Russel Wong had another passion — photography. Using a low-end 35mm Topcon camera his father had given him, he began his career by shooting what he loved, track and field. That turned out to be a great combination.

In 1979, Nike offered Wong a pair of running shoes in exchange for a photograph he shot of storied British middle-



Jackie (Chan) Deconstructed, 2004, six-color silkscreen and lithograph on Aquarelle Arches Satine and Plexiglas. Created in collaboration with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, where Wong was artist-in-residence for 2004.

distance runner Sebastian Coe. One year later, he received a call from the editor of *Track & Field News*, who offered him \$160 to use the Coe image on the publication's cover.

Wong kept up his sports photography and the shoes-for-shots arrangement but received no press pass from Nike. Meanwhile, the *Oregon Daily Emerald* turned him down for a photography position. So — lacking proper credentials and getting tired of being bounced (often multiple times for the same meet) — he used his own ingenuity to wriggle into Hayward Field.

His story is interrupted when the ceiling of his living room suddenly sounds like a chorus line of tap dancers gone amok. “My dogs,” he says, smiling. His four golden Labrador retrievers are scrambling across the marble floor above us.

He continues, “So, one Saturday, I struck up a friendship with one of the marshals who assumed I had a pass, and I was in.” For nearly three years, Wong

successfully “jumped the fence” at that corner of the stadium. Eventually his portfolio would include such sports luminaries as Carl Lewis, Mary Decker, and John McEnroe.

After graduating with a finance degree from the UO, Wong accepted a photojournalism internship at *The Straits Times* — the Singapore newspaper of record. Then he fulfilled his two-year national service obligation by working as a photographer for *Pioneer*, Singapore's armed services magazine. That was his “day job.” In the evenings, he experimented with fashion photography. Wong studied the work of master photographers such as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Herb Ritts. He admired their “stripped-down, timeless style.” He also reflected on how much he enjoyed shooting the fashion work and portraits he'd done for Nike and the “Life” section of *The Straits Times*.

In 1984, he saw the portfolio of an old friend who had recently graduated from the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. “That cemented it. I knew I needed to go there for the technical grounding. The training was amazing.”

Wong shoots a quick glance to the soccer game on TV, but doesn't miss a beat. “They were *hardcore* at Art Center. The entire first year we worked on 8x10 view cameras. That's about the time I began shooting celebrities.” Since then his lens has captured myriad celebs including Michael Jackson, Isabella Rossellini, Paloma Picasso, Pavarotti, Andrew Lloyd Weber, Glenn Close, David Lynch, and Bruce Willis.

The following year, he spent four months in Milan, Italy, taking in the trendy cafes where he met fashion designers and photographers the likes of Paul Jasmin and Antonio Lopez. They encouraged him to continue his fashion photography and portraiture. Heeding their advice, Wong framed a who's who of the fashion world, including supermodels Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, and Naomi Campbell, as well as designers such as Kenzo and Anna Sui.

Today, Russel Wong has ten *Time* magazine covers to his credit and many exhibitions, and he has received a litany of awards for his editorial and commercial work — including a Clio and other international advertising awards. But his true love is still black and white portraiture.

His celebrity portraits have earned him celebrity status. He is heralded as “the Richard Avedon of Asia” — an association Wong doesn't seem to mind.

Like Avedon, Wong creates stunning portraits that are minimal, dramatic, and brilliantly composed. However, his photographs lack the cool indifference and stiffness of Avedon's work; instead, the imagery is warm, personal, engaging.

Where does that gift come from? “It's difficult to explain,” he begins. “When I shoot someone, I feel like I'm dancing. The idea I'm working with is equivalent to the melody I hear in my head . . . then I improvise with that song's ups and downs. I often try something really wild at the end.”

But great dancing is also born of trust



Aishwarya Rai: Lotus Dream, 2004, ten-color silkscreen, lithograph and gold leafing on Rives BFK Tan paper and TGL handmade light blue paper. Created in collaboration with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.



Joan Chen, Los Angeles, 1989

— not an easy thing with photography, a medium that is notorious for being invasive, particularly among celebrities.

“Photography is a very intrusive medium. We come into your life. We come into your home, your hotel room. We take your photograph,” he explains. “But I feel rather than taking a photograph, I'm giving you an image.” He stops in mid-thought.

Outside, the cicadas are buzzing loudly. Their drone rises and mixes with the late-morning traffic. He continues, “You know, I give a print to every single person I shoot.”

Wong stands up and shuts the jalousie windows behind the couch to muffle the noise. One of the dogs charges into the room and nuzzles me.

“Sidney, cool it,” he says. Sidney's tail is wagging wildly as he moves away.

Wong picks up another thought.

“You know some people find it strange I started at Oregon. Occasionally, people will ask me why I just didn't go to Art Center. Me? I wouldn't change a thing. If I hadn't gone to the UO, I wouldn't have the Coe cover or all my work with Nike. The sports stuff sharpened me.”

He hesitates. “And I've so many great memories of Oregon.” Wong pauses, and then speaks very intently. “The Swensons were my host family; they took me in from scratch. . . . I was one of their kids. Because of them, I got to see and feel the American psyche from the inside out. I still call them every Thanksgiving.”

“They had season tickets for everything. They explained the whole culture of sports there — put me on to baseball, basketball, football. Showed me where Pre lived, where he ran . . . where he died near Hendricks Park. Took me to

football games at Autzen, to basketball games at Mac Court.” He checks out the TV and looks back. “You know what? I was the first one to sneak a live duck into Mac Court. Let it go during a UCLA game.” We both laugh.

Wong shifts gears and begins to talk about future projects. “I'd like to continue my landscape work” — he gestures at the Angkor Wat image. “Actually, that wasn't shot for show; it's personal work — all done in 8x10 — and it's therapeutic. It's like back to basics and very peaceful for me. The exhibition invitation came out of the blue.” (The image is one of a series he shot that exhibited along with pieces by Ansel Adams two years ago at a gallery in New York City.)

“The Venice Film Festival is in the works. I'll continue to document popular culture, work on film sets, and do the portraiture of course.” Wong also has plans to direct a film for a script he's been writing and is working on a more protracted project documenting the different cultures, races, and people of Singapore — whatever “excites” him.

To Wong, the work is all one continuum: “Everything I've ever done adds to what I do right now. People try to pigeonhole me, but I don't care. Light is light for me, you know? I shoot. That's all I do.”

He glances quickly at the soccer game and back again. “Actually, we let ducks go in Mac Court twice. They couldn't catch us.”

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