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Photographer finds calling in Malaysia

WHAT started as a casual trip to Malaysia in the hope of setting up a small business venture for celebrated South Korean photographer You Jae Ryuk turned out into a stay of more than 15 years.

He abandoned a successful photography career in his homeland to live in his 'adopted country', capturing some of the most memorable images of faces, places and events across the diverse and colourful tapestry of Malaysian life.

Better known as Ryuk, his photos have graced the billboards along our national expressways featuring the various tourist destinations Malaysia has to offer.

His work is highly-sought after by magazines, advertising agencies for product and fashion work, those in the travel and tourism trade. He has even done a photo shoot for a Sheila Majid album cover.

Ryuk probably has the largest repertoire of Malaysian people and travel images. His over-100,000 slides and his images are showcased in two of his lavish 'photo essay' books titled Malaysia in My Eyes and Labuan - Island in the Sun.

He considers both achievements as a labour of love with his first book taking almost 10 years to complete.

In 1990, he was appointed by the Tourism Development Corporation Malaysia as the official photographer for Visit Malaysia Year.

An avid collector of all things connected with photography, from lenses, old cameras to photo frames, I paid a visit to his humble yet cosy office cum studio in Petaling Jaya recently.

S: Tell us, what brought you to Malaysia?

Y: I believe it was destiny that brought me to Malaysia.

In the early 80s, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir headed a delegation to South Korea. It was then that I got to learn about Malaysia and I met a Malaysian businessman who eventually convinced me to visit the country.

When I arrived here and saw the country, it was love at first sight. The rest is captured in my multitude of images of this colourful nation.

S: How do you capture so many interesting images of people and places?

Y: The idea is for the photographer to be 'invisible' while shooting. That way, some of the best moments can be easily drawn out in a spontaneous way.

Patience is important and I am willing to wait for the right moment to get the right image. Research is also important and I don't spare any time in getting to know my subject well before loading any film into my camera.

The different races, cultures, customs and places here offer me a fascinating opportunity to expand my library of pictures.

S: So in the course of your work, Malaysia is not just a subject, it is like a product?

Y: Of course, there's a story in every picture. You have to find that special story and capture it vividly. Just like finding a unique selling point to a product.

Every individual translates a picture differently, in their own unique way. I cherish this sort of challenge, providing the viewer with many possibilities and conclusions from a single image.

Some of my best pictures were not planned, they just happened. The trick is to be there when it happens.

S: Do you work closely with an art director or independently at most times?

Y: Over the years, I've built up a steady rapport with clients and agency art directors. This has also given me the space and time to prove myself to them.

Nowadays, I take the brief and undertake the job with minimum supervision. I think some of my clients are confident about what I can offer them, they have come to trust me. In some ways, this sort of creative freedom has enabled me to push the limits.

I like to explore new interpretations of regular assignments and sometimes I do surprise my clients in a pleasant sort of way. This can be very rewarding in my line of work where there so many ways to execute a certain job and yet there are probably only a few ways to do it.

S: What other type of shoots do you handle?

Y: I also do catalogue photography covering all kind of subjects from people, locations, food, landmarks and even industrial products.

My passion for photography makes me go out often and shoot pictures for my ever expanding collection of pictures which I intend to offer as stock offerings to the advertising industry.

S: After 35 years in the business, do you have any words of advice to budding photographers?

Y: They should not regard a camera as an end in itself but as a means to an end.

It is very dangerous to be overawed by technology and allow that to drive the creative spirit. Because at the end of the day, the better photographer is the one who uses his eyes to see the wonder of any scene and then work towards replicating that truthfully onto film.

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