

SERENITY

The soft tones and generous use of negative space heighten the perception of distance in this photo, inviting the viewer to explore the open spaces.

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A STUDENT OF INFINITY

DPP features the art of Red Ognita, a Filipino photographer based in China with a talent for enthralling black and white photography

It's said the main difference between Chinese and Western painting is that in a Chinese painting, the viewer is invited to complete the picture in his head. Simple outlines and subtle washes of shade merely suggest the scene, and you do the rest. After seven years in China, artist Red Ognita seems to have thoroughly imbibed that minimalist aesthetic, but applies it in photography. There's a dreaminess, an invitation to explore the wide open spaces, in his images. He has since been featured in BULB Magazine, Mabuhay, and Digital Camera World, and has exhibited at the Ayala Malls. Join us as DPP chats with this up-and-coming fine art photographer.

"I consider my photographs to be my personal time machine," he says, "wherein I can always go back to the good times. When I was a kid I used to avoid those family picture-taking moments. It was the passing away of my youngest brother that really solidified my love of photographs. What used to be stupid photos are now gold to me." Ognita first seriously picked up a camera some three years ago,



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▲ WINTER DAWN

Lots of negative space makes this a very open image, making it suitable for hanging in a room or gallery to give the feeling of more space.

starting with a Canon S3IS, and quickly discovered he had a passion for black and white. He now shoots with a Canon 5D, and mostly wide angle lenses.

“What catches my attention are shades, shapes and symmetry rather than colors. I’m a fan of vast open spaces, places where you can’t see the end of things – infinity,” he says of his ruling aesthetic. “I don’t really aim to create an exact record of a scene. I always involve my creative vision to create visually arresting images. When I’m shooting I don’t immediately pull out my camera and shoot. I let the scene come to me, I stay quiet and just look around, and before I know it, something will call. I listen. Or I can go out and suddenly go home if the wind whispers that there’s something off. Moody? Yeah,” he laughs. “But that’s how I shoot – I can go out to shoot, come home empty-handed, and not feel bad about it.”

“It’s black and white that makes the things that first called my attention stand out. Symmetry can be easily seen without the distraction of color,” he adds. “And when I shoot, I shoot to crop because I know I’ll be presenting it in square format, which heightens the symmetry I’m trying to show. I also know that since I’m going to crop, I can stack up my filters without worrying about vignetting,

and I can get the best of my lens because I’ll be cropping out the soft edges.”

He shoots in RAW and does his black and white conversion in the computer, and here again his inner eye displays his leaning toward monochrome: “I find that I’m always happy with my black and white, it’s only once in a blue moon that I’ll decide to present a picture in color.” Ognita also notes that his black and white style is evolving over time. In his first exhibit he presented photos using a punchy high-contrast style, while his current work is characterized more by subtle, dreamy tones a la Michael Burdeny or a Chinese ink wash painting.

Ognita’s usual processing routine is to edit in Lab color mode in 16 bits, and change modes as needed. The image is rendered to black and white and the tones adjusted by creating multiple layers of black and white conversion or Channel Mixer, and he then masks the layers and paints out the masks to bring up the desired tones in various areas of the image. Final tone adjustments are done using Curves. Though definitely a child of the digital age, Ognita has the ethos of the traditional darkroom monkey: “I’ve learned that shooting and post-processing, although two different things, must go hand in hand for my vision to be realized. I can’t shoot and then let somebody else post process it,” he says. “And I don’t rush things. When I feel like saying ‘this will do’ that only means I’m tired. So I just save it and

look at it again the next morning.”

Red Ognita works for a foreign embassy in Beijing, and picked up photography while there. He’s never had formal training in the craft, but notes that research, hard work, and mentoring by Owen Tiam have gotten him to where he is. “I learned so much from Mark, my S3 (he has a penchant for naming his cameras). I simply shot a lot, researched techniques on the Internet, and I’d look at the works of black and white artists like Hironori Nakamura, Philippe Marchand, David Fokos, and Michel Rajkovic. I’d study their works and fuse their styles with my own. And Tiam is always there to push me and mentor me. I believe there are two secrets to learning – having a mentor that will lead you, and you have to be prepared to follow.”

What does the future hold for Ognita? More black and white photography, and some adventures into the avant-garde side of the field. “For the longest time I have these things in my head that I would want to create. It’s along the lines of rivers in the sky or a kid running through a series of mirrors. But doing so will need a truckload of Photoshop talent,” he grins. “The road is still long for me. I have so much to learn still. I’ll push more with long exposures shots, maximizing the new filters I have. The plan is to keep doing what I love and to continue to create images that please me and hope that the gods will smile upon me.”

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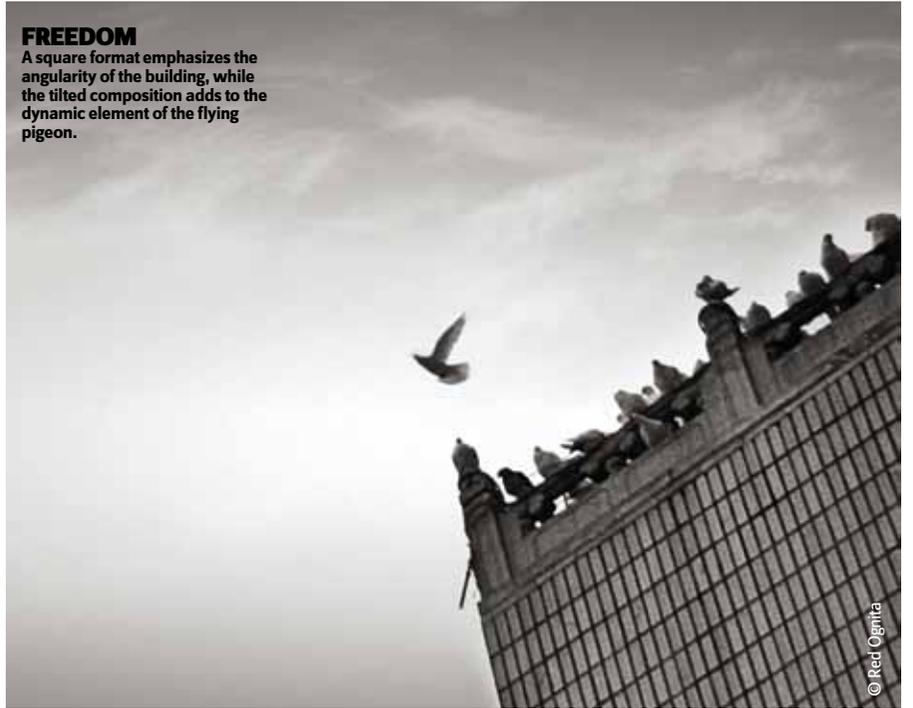
II
Paired subjects are always good for showing symmetry. Ognita's serendipitous shooting method allows him to capture details most usually ignore.



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FREEDOM
A square format emphasizes the angularity of the building, while the tilted composition adds to the dynamic element of the flying pigeon.



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THE MOON

Another image inviting exploration, this shot of the moon is exemplary of Ognita's fascination with minimalism. There's no foreground, nothing but the moon and the clouds that set it off against the black sky - in this image, there's no need for them.

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