

# Greg

Roy Arden

When Greg Girard asked me if I could write this foreword, I deduced he didn't want a prosaic description of his new project *Half the Surface of the World* - that would be well enough accomplished by a press release. What I have to offer instead is insight into his beginnings and personal development. And so I find myself now writing about an artist, and for the first time, referring to him by his given name.

When I met Greg in Vancouver around 1982, he was living downtown in the Lotus Hotel where he showed me his stash of Ektachrome slides of his previous years spent in Japan and other parts of the Far East. Greg started in photography during high school, when for a class assignment he checked into a skid row hotel and documented the junkie life of Hastings Street for a few months. After school he went to the Orient, travelling around and creating mostly personal and poetic images of sailors, prostitutes, and vivid urban scenes. Most of these images were shot at night, Greg had already developed a taste for the lurid, liquid colours that come from the combination of Ektachrome film and artificial light sources. He would go on to develop that taste into the mature style that most significantly resulted in his 2007 book *Phantom Shanghai* - an instant classic, and one of the greatest photo-portraits of a city ever made.

The soundtrack of the early Eighties for two young photographers such as ourselves was the stark minimalism of Iggy Pop's *The Passenger* and post-Punk bands like *Joy Division* and *Young Marble Giants*. The lingering utopianism of the seventies was finally dead and young artists were coming to terms with the abyss. At the time Greg reminded me of Martin Sheen's Willard in the opening scenes of *Apocalypse Now*. He was in a state of restless agitation, almost to the point of insanity - he had to get back to Asia, and soon.

Driving late-shift taxis in order to save for his flight allowed him to make pictures of the night. Most of his photos from that time are depopulated. They depict harbour scenes, industrial buildings, ominous looking cars parked in out of the way places, rooming houses, and other things almost always near or on the waterfront. Greg went on to make similar pictures in San Francisco, Honolulu, Japan and the Philippines. Images that were evocations of mood rather than subject, cinematic in that they suggested scenes for an unknown, fragmentary *noir*. Made in places that ring the Pacific, their deep green skies suggest a mystery as deep, lonely and sublime as the ocean.

At the time, Greg had pinned to a wall a clipping of the famous photo depicting people scrambling up a ladder to a helicopter on a rooftop by the American embassy in Saigon. He had long decided he wanted to be a photojournalist and a war photographer. It seemed to me that Greg regretted missing the war in Vietnam - the distant struggle, tinged with exotic horror, that our generation had grown up with. But his interest in Asia was still strong and he eventually made his way to Hong Kong where he began to work as a photojournalist on serious assignments all over the region. Thirty years later, as an established professional who has seen enough conflict for several lifetimes, he has also established himself as an important artist with several bodies of what photojournalists call 'personal work'.

If the early work was as cinematic, poetic and Romantic as an Edward Hopper painting or a Scorsese film, the new work presented here shows a maturation toward a more even-handed, less dramatic Realism. *Half the Surface of the World* shows us the day to day of PACOM - the U.S. Pacific Command. Travelling to bases in Japan, Korea and Guam, Greg has entered the uncanny realm of the Far East sector of the U.S. military empire. Here there is no war, life as it is in America is simulated with supermarkets stocked full of American food, gated communities, ATM's and 'muscle cars'. A great deal

of effort and American tax dollars have been spent to shelter the troops and their families from foreign culture as much as foreign bombs. The lean, pimply sailors of Greg's 80's photos have been replaced with puffy servicemen, their wives and children doing pretty much what they would be doing if they were stationed in the U.S.. Even if they weren't quarantined, global capitalism, air travel and the internet have made the world smaller, eradicating the exotic and substituting the banal. These pictures tell us how the American Empire is growing old; historical time as synonymous with personal life.

*Half the Surface of the World* is ongoing, but already the tenor has been set closer to Realism than Romanticism. This is an ironic project for Greg; he left the West for something more interesting or different, something new, only to find himself picturing an older same in his adopted land of difference. Since he found a vocation as a photojournalist, Greg's work has been divided between a private, artistic photography of desire and wonder, and the required photography of a 'responsible' need "to inform the folks back home". The new pictures induce me to speculate that Greg is beginning to make a new hybrid from his dual photographic pasts.