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Tugo Cheng, who has been shortlisted for the Sony World Photography Award, talks to Kylie Knott



It will come as no surprise to learn that amateur Hong Kong photographer Tugo Cheng is an architect by trade. Look through his portfolio and you'll see that his images, many of vast landscapes in remote parts of China, are dominated by geometrically sharp lines and freakish symmetry.

And nowhere is this better captured than in *Farming in the Sea*, Cheng's image that was shortlisted last month for the Sony World Photography Award. One of a record breaking 230,000 entries, the photo was taken in Fujian province and shows a man aqua-farming between long bamboo rods.

"I was fascinated by those patterns," says Cheng as he settles into a chair at the foyer of the Asia Society in Admiralty.

He opens his iPad and flicks through thumbnails of images before zooming in on the shot. "It shows how humans unintentionally shape the environment, creating interesting sceneries when they are looking for food."

While focusing on capturing shapes, Cheng also likes to add a human element to give dimension

to a photograph, resulting in an almost abstract finish.

"This image is not an aerial shot," he says, correcting me. "I was standing on a mountain and I could see this farmer going about his work – farming oysters and other seafood. It looked like a Chinese painting – or a line drawing."

"That's how I like to do landscape photography: from an artistic perspective."

The image is part of a black-and-white series, "Discovering Fujian".

"This isn't the first time Cheng has been the focus of attention. Last year he won a National Geographic international photo contest with an image showing the north faces of part of the Tian Shan, the largest mountain range in Central Asia, the layers of coloured sediment eroded and exposed by wind, transforming the landscape into colourful terraces. Again there is a surreal quality to it."

"It's images like this that Cheng wants to share with a global audience, to draw attention to China's unknown natural beauty. "China is full of unique landscapes that often go unnoticed, so I want to

change that, to expose a different side of the country."

He says that, while he's not giving up his day job just yet, he aims to spend a lot more time exploring China. "To capture the things you see and turn them into a visual story, you have to hone your technical skills by practice."

But Cheng says a sense of adventure and desire to explore also helps. "We should also look at what others have been doing and what has not been done yet, always in search of new perspectives and insights," says the 33-year-old.

Hong Kong-born Cheng says his love for photography started when he was studying architecture in London. "While I was there I bought a camera and started taking photography seriously. I won an exchange to China and it was a real eye-opener. To be honest, before my exchange I had not idea about the country – I don't even speak Putonghua."

"The exchange programme really introduced me to the world-class landscape that is rarely seen by those inside and outside China."

"When I look at the entries for

Most people in Hong Kong and overseas only think of polluted and crowded cities when they think about China

TUGO CHENG (ABOVE)

National Geographic competitions, many are from Iceland and Africa – places known for their dramatic landscapes. But China is yet to be discovered in photo platforms – most people in Hong Kong and living overseas really only think of polluted and crowded cities when they think about China – so I really wanted to open it up on that level... I wanted to bring something new to the competition."

Asked about the logistical dangers of visiting such far-flung places, Cheng seems unfazed.

"I don't think of the dangers. Once my driver and I got stuck in a tunnel in Yunnan and rocks – I'm talking about one-metre cubes – were falling down."

Cheng will hold his first exhibition at Tsim Sha Tsui's Harbour City in November.

"It's images like this that galleries are interested in," he says, pointing to a photo of people walking across a white frozen lake carved with swirls where skaters once roamed. Another shows a sheep herder dwarfed by the stark snowy landscape.

"I love this interaction between nature and humans. I like this kind of natural pattern and I always put some scale in photos to give it a sense of dimension. I just want to keep doing what I'm doing – combining my two passions of photography and travel."

Photographers shortlisted in the 2016 Sony World Photography Awards will have their work shown in London in April and May, and published in the 2016 edition of the Sony World Photography Awards book. The winners will be announced on April 21. kylie.knott@scmp.com