

**George Gascon** (b. 1952, San Juan, Ilocos Sur) worked as a farmhand harvesting Virginia tobacco after graduation. Keen to earn a better living in the city, he assisted his uncle in Manila who was then working for a large broadcast company. After helping out as a darkroom technician, he landed a job as photographer at the Bureau of National and Foreign Information where he would be trained under Sonny Yabao. It was also in the same office where he would meet Sylvia, a young photographer like him, who would later on become his wife. When out of the city on assignments to document government projects, the autodidact would squeeze in several rolls of his own work. For Gascon during this period, Henri Cartier-Bresson's meticulously composed images would be exemplary of an approach he would work out on his own. Similar to the French photojournalist, he would hold the virtues of observation and unobtrusiveness in high regard together with what would now seem to be stringent restrictions: no posing, no cropping, and under no circumstances (or very rarely) would flash or any other form of artificial lighting be used; almost everything, too, in monochrome.

Gascon would usually sling two cameras with fixed lenses on his shoulders and describe how it was possible to manipulate the intrusive sound of the camera's motor drive which could be off-putting: "make it like music", he avers, "there is a cadence." This was a kind of ethic he developed while working for politicians which would later on prove to be decisive. When he was in Singapore working at *The Times*, Gascon would take on a chance assignment to document a press interview with Lee Kuan Yew. The city-state's strongman liked him so much that he would since deem Gascon his official photographer.

Concerned not so much with spectacle but its environs, he would linger until the aftermath. "My dream assignments are the boring ones," he would say during an interview. His images, while informed by the tropes and methods of photojournalism, yield to the surreal and sensual qualities embedded in the everyday. There are also the more schematic pictures of people in tones of grey, their proximity to their surroundings emphasizing the bold geometric shapes of holes on walls or the pitch of a roof against a bright sky. Easy affinities with Yabao and Cartier-Bresson can be made out but there are also the unexpected deviations-- a clandestine lightness evident in the series of gleeful elderly women smoking tobacco in close up, or a brass band in formation, seemingly waiting for someone to take their portrait.

After the quell of Martial Law, Gascon worked for a succession of short-lived periodicals: *The*

*Observer, The Philippine Daily Globe, and Newsday.* In 1992 he moved to Singapore to work as a news photographer for *The Straits Times* where he would win several awards within his first year. It was also in Singapore where he would organize an informal group of colleagues and young photographers called 759 after their 7:59 am call time. The group would go out and take photographs around the streets of Singapore on Sundays with no apparent agenda. After 10 years of working for the *Times* he returned to the Philippines, gave up photography, and set up a farm in Mendez, Cavite. He has lived there since, growing produce and tending to poultry.

### **References**

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