

Alvin Lee (b. 1956, Manila) was introduced to photography at age twelve when his grandmother gave him a Kodak Instamatic. In college, his interest in photography took a more serious turn when he served as the De La Salle University Camera Club president and met other notable photographers like Toch Arellano, Luis Nepomuceno Jr., Willy Co, Voltaire Yap, and Hubert Lizares. Influenced by W. Eugene Smith's approach to photojournalism, Lee's photographs of ex-convicts and Smokey Mountain was included in the Cultural Center of the Philippines ASEAN Road Show.

Not long after, he met the late Honesto Vitug during one of his photography workshops. The premier photographer became his mentor and friend, teaching him how to capture his subject matter with depth. "Mr. Vitug would show me photographs and ask me questions like, 'What do you think of the subject?,' 'Why do you think so?,' and 'What else do you see?'" This inductive approach provided Lee a mental framework to look at photographs with a critical eye which had proven to be handy as he taught himself how to be a better photographer through the years that followed.

In 1992, he started a manufacturing business in Mariveles, Bataan—the landscape he often revisits in his photographs. This time also served as his incubation period during which he acquired a comprehensive collection of photobooks and explored other photographers who would later inform his aesthetic philosophy: Graciela Iturbide, Laura Wilson, Annie Leibovitz, Richard Avedon, Keith Carter, and Mary Ellen Mark, among others. "They talk about people in their photographs," Lee observes. "You can't be a photographer if you don't have compassion and empathy for others," he adds.

A staunch advocate of photography as a print medium, Lee systematically develops and prints his negatives a week after he takes the photographs to keep the images fresh in his mind. He spends hours in the darkroom, working alongside master printer Leo Nabuya of Studio 58 Lab 10 using dodge and burn techniques. There is one image Lee captured in 1976-77 in Tondo, which he continues to print up to this day, hoping to find the right tones that will effectively convey the atmosphere he is trying to achieve. For him, a photograph will never be complete without seeing it on print. "There are many things that you can't see in a photograph flashed on the screen," Lee says, "like the different tones found in the shadows or in the darker parts of the photograph which you can only see when printed on quality paper."

Lee hopes to spend the next phase of his life sharing his photography and darkroom practices with young photographers through talks and seminars.

References:

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Ortiga, Kara. "Veteran Photographer Alvin Lee Captures Scenes In New Light Beyond The Snapshot." *The Philippine Star*. 5 April 2017.

“GLIMPSES - a Photo Exhibit by Veteran Film Photographer: Mr. Alvin Lee.” Facebook, uploaded by Shutter Master Pro. 8 Feb 2019.