

Signs of the times

Kaid Ashton's aim is to leave his mark everywhere, which is why Ben Sin finds him pasting photos on Hong Kong walls

On the side of a residential building in Kai Chiu Road in Causeway Bay, 10 storeys and some 40 metres above ground, hangs a picture of Myanmarese farmers. It's the work of Kaid Ashton, a twentysomething teacher from Canada now living in Hong Kong. "Teacher" is a loose description, because Ashton only teaches to fund his photography and travelling, and he relocates so frequently it's probably inaccurate for him to call Canada home at this point.

For the past few years, he's travelled around Asia, from Manila to Myanmar, venturing into areas not covered by guidebooks, snapping portraits of strangers. He considers that the best way to get to know a city and its culture – by interacting directly with the people. Ashton developed a love for

photography during the 90s, starting with shots of local graffiti and rail tracks. Shortly after university, he packed his bags and moved to Taiwan on a whim. He knew no one in Asia; he just wanted to explore.

"I came to Asia not knowing what to expect. I'd get up each day with no real plan other than to just take photos," he says. After Taiwan, he moved to Cambodia, Laos, and other parts of Southeast Asia. His interaction with the people from the region, especially those living in poverty, proved to be an eye-opening experience.

"I don't think many North Americans are accustomed to seeing this level of poverty," he says. "Some situations in places like Manila, for example, are quite dire."

Inspired to give back, Ashton started, with the support of Manila's Office of Culture and Design, the Homeschool Foundation, an arts education project, in the Philippine capital earlier this year. It's a small project, Ashton says, where he "basically goes to the slums and teaches kids how to paint".

His "big project" is leaving his mark everywhere he goes. Over the past few years, Ashton has discreetly pasted blown-up prints of his photos on, well, everything, from a dark alley in Myanmar to the walls of a squatter settlement in the Philippines to the Great Wall.

He's been in Hong Kong since last December and his mark can be seen all around town. In addition to the print high up in Causeway Bay, there's a shot of a smiling Myanmar woman, carrying a pile of bricks on her head, in Sheung Wan; another image of an Iranian mother is hanging off the side of a Tin Shui Wai cha chaan teng (cafe); there's another image of a young



A Kaid Ashton photograph of a trash collector in the Philippines adorns a Kennedy Town wall (above), and Ashton extends himself to post another picture (top right)

Filipino trash collector, knee deep in a pile of rubbish, in Kennedy Town.

Surprisingly, Ashton says his street art exploits throughout Asia have been mostly free of trouble. "I was nervous the first few times I pasted an image in Kaohsiung, but then one time I got caught by a Taiwanese officer," he recalls the incident, back in 2004. "He actually liked my photo and let me go."

Another time, he was posting in a part of Manila known for its lawlessness when some men approached him – to praise his work. "Generally, people in rural areas are very supportive and appreciate my photos," he says.

In Hong Kong, what Ashton is doing is technically illegal, but the locals who catch him in the act don't exactly seem to care. Putting up that Causeway Bay print, for example, required the help of a resident who lived in the building. "I sort of hung out the window, with one arm holding on to a broom handle to paste the photo, while this lady held

on to me from inside the building," he says.

Doing, in his words, "the Spider-Man thing" is nothing new – he's used to jumping or climbing to put his photos in obscure places. These locations, which he's always scouting on a daily basis, provide a good "frame" for his photos, he says.

In Hong Kong, he's pasted some 30 photos, making two separate sets. The first set, which he calls "People

in Poverty", was put up earlier this year. The other set, which he's still posting, is titled "Women: Strong and Confident", and features women Ashton met on his travels. "I don't think society does a good job of portraying women in a healthy way. Most images we see are manipulated images, where the women look like Barbie dolls."

This set of photos – which include a female poet from Los Angeles and a ballet dancer from New York, among female gardeners and factory workers in Southeast Asia – aims to show the natural beauty of independent women, Ashton says. There's a third set, of trees and nature, which he hopes to put up in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. He has about six months to do this, as he's leaving next June.

"I don't know where I'm going yet, it depends on how much money I have on me," he says. "I look at the map of the world, and I get excited with ideas and possibilities." ben.sin@scmp.com

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