

All in the Family

CHRIS DE WOLF talks to DAPHNE KING-YAO of Alisan Fine Arts, and her brother STEPHEN KING, on the eve of the opening of the latter's exhibition of photographs at the gallery

FAMILY BUSINESSES ARE common in Hong Kong, but they don't normally involve art. Alisan Fine Arts is the exception. Founded in 1981 by Alice King, daughter of shipping magnate CY Tung (and sister of former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa), Alisan was one of Hong Kong's first art galleries, and it blazed a trail in promoting Chinese contemporary works.

Now the gallery is run by Alice's daughter, Daphne King-Yao, who is preparing to host an exhibition of photographs by her brother, Stephen King. We sat down with the siblings as they prepared for the show, which opens on December 5.

WAS THE GALLERY A BIG PART OF YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP?

DKY: It was a little bit, through osmosis. When we were young my mom would always take us to museums. At that age, it was like, "What a drag, we have to do this." But that was one way she shared her passion with us. Another way was that we would actually meet the artists. We would have lunch or dinner with them when they were in town or when we were travelling. I met Zao Wou-ki in Paris at an exhibition opening. I met Walasse Ting in New York – he took us to Chinatown for a meal.

Another time I met Chu Teh Chun. I was in university and I was going to study French and art in Paris for half a year and my mom was really worried that I didn't know anybody there, so she called up Chu Teh Chun and his wife and said,

"My daughter's going to be here. Can you take care of her?" I thought I wouldn't ask these people for help, because I didn't know them, but I guess for my mom it was just really natural, because they were friends.

SO YOU WEREN'T BEING GROOMED TO TAKE OVER THE GALLERY?

DKY: I don't think so. For my mom, it wasn't really just about the business. She was an art patron. When the Arts Festival first began in Hong Kong, she was really involved in that. I remember in those early days she hosted guest artists who came from overseas. She was very much involved in the

RIVER DELTA 5 BY STEPHEN KING





“Even though I was her daughter I had to start from the bottom”

Daphne King-Yao

arts scene, not just the gallery. That was the environment that we grew up in.

SK: I never really thought about a career in the arts. I was thinking business, finance, maybe academia or maybe journalism. Photography was just something I did for fun back then. I did pursue it quite a

bit when I went to boarding school, but it was all black-and-white film in the darkroom. I found it quite time consuming. I ended up giving it up when I went to university.

DKY: I think I always knew it was something I would be involved in. Actually, in my freshman year in university I signed up for Art History 101 and I failed the first midterm test. I kind of shied away from it. I thought maybe I should explore some other opportunities.

WHAT HAPPENED?

DKY: I think I just didn't study properly. I was probably just having too much fun in school. I ended up majoring in history but by my junior year I regretted that I didn't do art history, so I took a lot of art history courses but I didn't formally major in it. When I graduated, my parents said, "Don't come back right away. Stay out there, learn more." So when I was in New York I was looking for jobs in the galleries, but I was also really interested in advertising. I'd taken a few marketing classes. I looked for advertising jobs

and gallery jobs – and advertising came first. I ended up working for a big ad agency and I was actually transferred back to Hong Kong by that agency, which is when my mom asked me to join her. That was in 1997.

WAS IT EASY TO WORK WITH YOUR MOTHER?

DKY: Even though I was her daughter I had to start from the bottom. I had to find my own path. My mom is very much like an artist – very free-flow. It was difficult for me at first because I came from advertising, a big agency where I had to work with a lot of people, and here there were only four of us. My mom would ask me to write a speech or type a letter for her and I was like, "What? I'm not your secretary!"

RIVER DELTA 2 BY STEPHEN KING AND (OPPOSITE) DAPHNE KING-YAO AND STEPHEN KING



OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, THERE'S BEEN AN EXPLOSION IN THE ART SCENE AND ART MARKET IN HONG KONG AND CHINA. HOW HAS ALISAN ADAPTED?

DKY: When it first started in the '80s, there weren't many people who understood art. A lot of our clients were expats. Local Chinese weren't looking at Chinese contemporary art. If they were collectors, they would collect Chinese porcelain or Chinese traditional art. They would rather spend \$10,000 on a handbag than a painting. It was a steep learning curve. My mom's goal was really to educate the public about Chinese contemporary art, so over

the years she worked with many museums, not just in Hong Kong but overseas also.

If you fast forward to present-day Hong Kong, the gallery scene has just gone crazy. I think there are more than 100 galleries here now. We've gone from being a pioneer to promoting more established artists. I hope we're setting a high standard for other galleries to follow.

STEPHEN'S EXHIBITION, UN/NATURAL, SHOWCASES HIS OWN AERIAL PHOTOS OF ICELAND WITH SOME CLOSE-UP SHOTS OF MACHINERY BY MALAYSIAN PHOTOGRAPHER MING THEIN. HOW DOES THAT FIT INTO THE GALLERY'S PROGRAMME?

DKY: It's a new thing for all of us because we've never done photography before and this is actually Stephen's first exhibition. I think we're approaching it more from what we know – if you

look at his work it's actually very abstract, almost painterly. Ming Thein was Stephen's teacher, and his works are quite abstract as well.

STEPHEN, HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING ON THIS SERIES?

SK: This was my second trip to Iceland. I went a few years ago and found the place really captivating – it was almost like being on another planet. We explored it on the ground but we also managed to get a plane, which made it apparent that it was really beautiful from the sky. This trip, we focused on that and got a helicopter.

HOW DID YOU GET BACK INTO PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER GIVING IT UP IN UNIVERSITY?

SK: My wife started getting into photography after our kids were born. She wanted me to take trips with her to do photography and I thought, "OK, we'll have some nice wine, good food and I'll take a few pictures." But it recaptured my passion, only this time it was through digital, and that really changes everything because it makes the feedback a lot quicker.

WAS IT HARD TO CONVINCE DAPHNE TO STAGE THE GALLERY'S FIRST PHOTOGRAPHY SHOW?

SK: We felt what we were doing was tending more towards fine-art photography, so we approached Daphne about hosting the show. She was a little bit sceptical at first, but after she saw our work she was pretty receptive. ■