

Vietnamese photographer Long Thanh's work is celebrated internationally, but he's content to stay in the remote town where he was born, writes **Morgan Ommer**



Eyes wide shutter

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON once described photography as "the ability to capture the world in its actual state of movement and transformation". But Long Thanh, one of Vietnam's most distinctive photographers, begs to differ. His shots of everyday life seem timeless.

The 54-year-old's photographic repertoire is as wide-ranging as it is unique. His photos are infused with a naturalness reconstituted in luminous, contrasting and expressive images.

His most famous photograph *In the Rain*, depicts two girls walking with an umbrella in the middle of a street. They're caught in a heavy downpour yet lit by a ray of sunshine. You can see the raindrops and the reflection of the sun on the umbrella as well as on the street. The scene could be taken from a movie – it's every director of photography's dream.

Long Thanh's portraits capture the essence of the Vietnamese people – their expressions of fear, loneliness, love and happiness – while his landscapes are often moody, contrasting the natural beauty of Vietnam.

Born in Nha Trang in 1951, Long Thanh took his first photo at age 13. Self-taught, he develops and prints his work in his studio/kitchen.

According to the 700-member Professional Photographers Association, Long Thanh is one of the few to work solely in black and white. Most Vietnamese photographers work in colour or digital, mainly because there's no paper, film or chemicals for black and white photography available in Vietnam.

For the past 15 years, he's managed to

get clients and friends to send or bring him the necessary material for his work. He obviously hasn't chosen the easy way to go about his business.

Long Thanh started out as a wedding photographer, but after 15 years he gave it up to roam the country with an old Leica (an M4 model, with no light meter). "I've travelled all over Vietnam," he says. "The best place remains Nha Trang. I was born here. I don't see why I should move."

This is another of Long Thanh's distinctive traits. He's probably the only professional not based in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Instead, he chose to remain in the beachside resort town of Nha Trang.

But this hasn't prevented him from being exhibited around the world. To date Long Thanh's work has appeared in 57 exhibitions worldwide. He won two gold medals at the *Asahi Shimbun* International Photographic Salon in Japan (1988 and 1995) – he's been selected for the final competition again this year – and a silver medal at the International Photographic Competition in Holland in 1993. He also received the Award ACCU (Asian Cultural Centre) in 1991, and had two photographs selected to appear in the internationally published Milk series of coffee-table books.

The Cyclo Gallery in San Francisco, and the Coombe Farm Gallery in Britain both have permanent exhibitions of his work. Not bad for someone who lives 450km from the nearest international airport.

But for all his glory, Long Thanh remains a local man. The international awards and solo exhibitions haven't prevented him from being the vice-chairman

of his neighbourhood photo club. He's decided to stop printing his old work and to sell his future shots only through limited prints. This way, the photos will become more valuable.

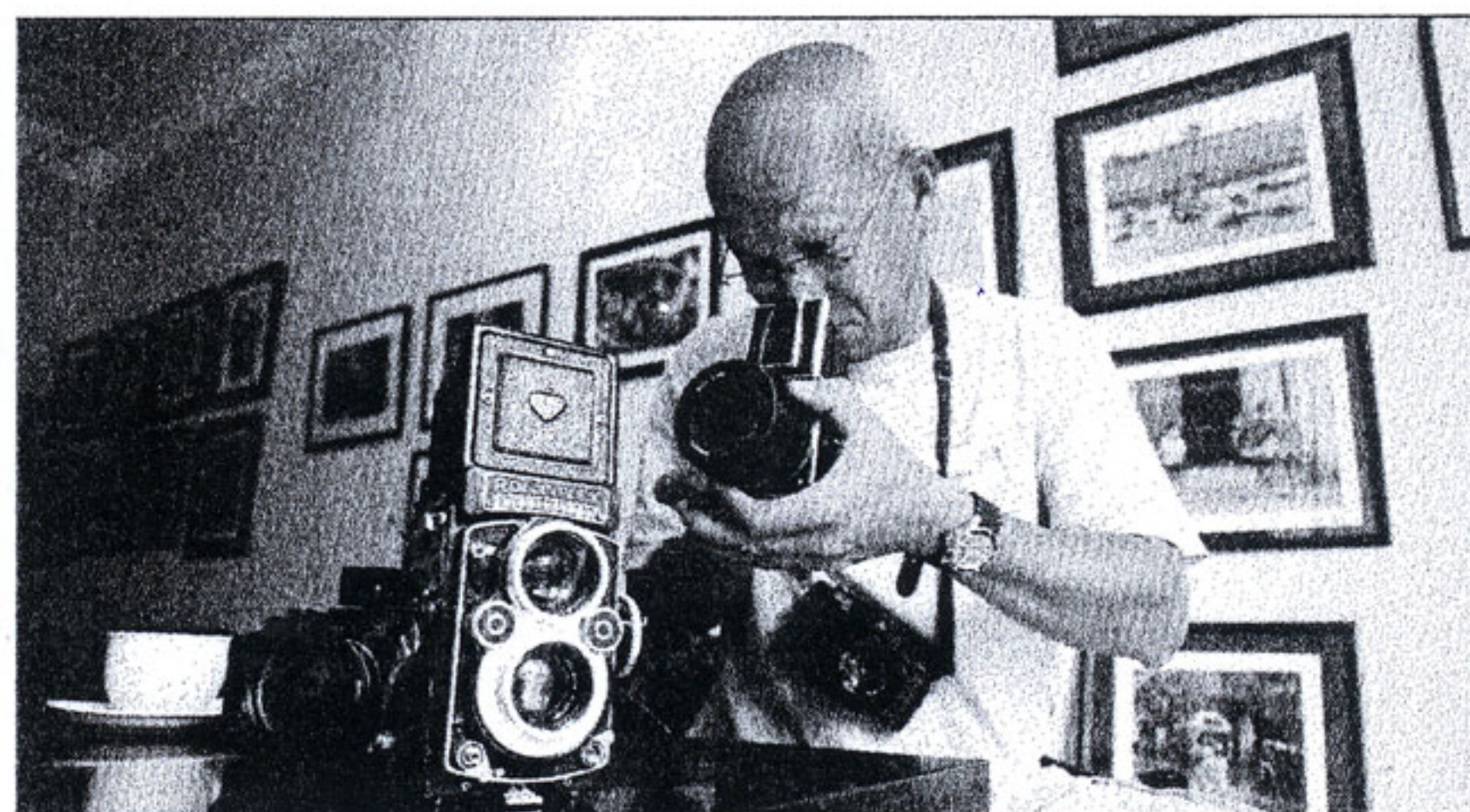
At his gallery, the shelves are filled with classic photographic literature, including works by Ansel Adams, Robert Capa, Sebastiao Salgado and Werner Bischof.

He's also a collector. He owns a Rolleiflex that once belonged to Ho Chi Minh's

official photographer, Lam Hong Long. Long Thanh is an artisan of photography. He uses his old Leica to catch the poetry in everyday life, searching for essences. Through his black and white photographs, he seeks to capture things just "as they are".

These small, marvellous moments of life, he says, are all around him every day, as he walks around his childhood suburb in Nha Trang.

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Long Thanh (above) and three shots, including *In the Rain* (top right). Photo: Morgan Ommer