

The big picture

A new retrospective at Vancouver's Polygon Gallery attempts to capture the wide-ranging, time-spanning career of photographer Greg Girard

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Photographer Greg Girard's work has taken him across Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hanoi and now finally, back home to Vancouver.

ALANA PATERSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

We're in the boardroom of the Polygon Gallery in Vancouver when it strikes me how complicated a task it is for curators to mount a full career retrospective of photographer Greg Girard, a man who's been shooting pictures in the cities of the Pacific Rim since his late teenage years in the mid-1970s.

It's about three months out from the opening, and co-curators Reid Shier and Elliott Ramsey are hunched over their laptops. Girard has Zoomed into the meeting from his home in Surrey, B.C. So, he's up there nearly life-size on the projected wall screen next to a shared Excel spreadsheet of images, a slightly spectral presence, peering down as 50 years' worth of photographs scroll past, shots from Vancouver, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hanoi and other places.

The order of business is print sizes and whether these are to be sourced from existing collections or printed fresh. Straightforward enough. But even having winnowed a master list of 1,500 of Girard's images down to just 150 that will hang in the show, the curators are still constantly arrested by individual pictures that stop the procedural flow.



Sheep and Power Station, Shandong, China, 2007.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

There's a moody 2007 shot of sheep grazing near a Shandong nuclear power station that Shier says is one of his favourites. There's the 1987 photo of a Macau high roller playing baccarat that Girard explains he took with a camera hidden in his shirt. There's a long digression about a black-and-white image of two demure schoolgirls that Girard captured in 1975 on his very first visit to Tokyo.

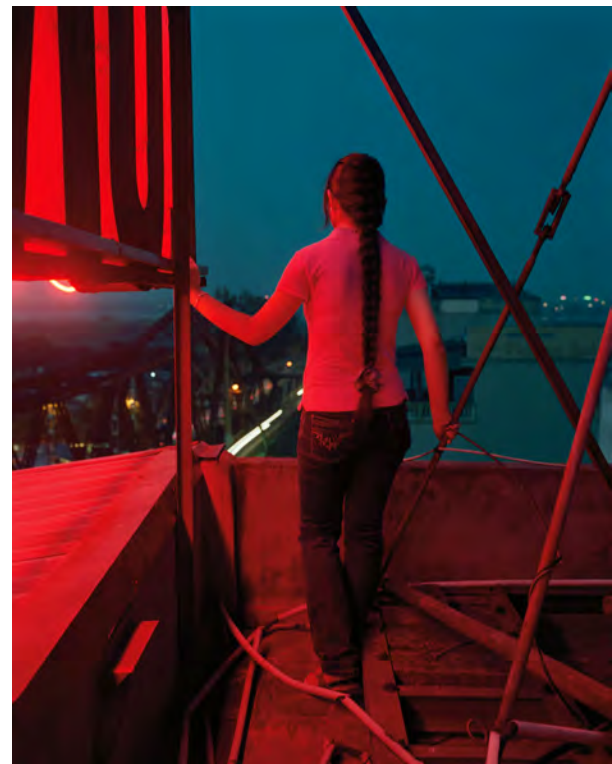
The image that has interrupted us just now is breathtaking. Shot in Hanoi in 2009, *Young Woman on Hotel Rooftop* captures a subject gazing out over the city lights below. Dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and sandals, with a long, dark braid falling down her back, she seems lost at some point of decision.

Even with her face concealed, the tension of the scene is palpable: her feet nudging towards the parapet, her hand resting on a thin bar of scaffolding, the red glow of a billboard spilling down on her from just out of frame, overwhelming, almost apocalyptic.

"This one is critical," Shier says, as the room grows still. "You ever print this?"

Girard considers this, appearing from his position onscreen to gaze down on this tableau from above. Finally, he says: "It's a fine picture. But no, I don't think so."

It's not one of his most famous shots. Girard is better known for the pictures in his critically acclaimed photo book *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*, or for shots of condemned buildings in old Shanghai collected in his second, also critically acclaimed photo book *Phantom Shanghai*, or for the early photos of his hometown collected in yet another book called *Under Vancouver 1972-1982*, which is in its fourth printing and remains the best-selling title that the Polygon Gallery bookstore has ever carried.



Young Woman on Hotel Rooftop, Hanoi, 2009.
GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

That woman on a hotel rooftop in Hanoi doesn't appear in any of those beloved series, which have put Greg Girard in a tiny group of Vancouver photographers who are known around the world. This photo isn't even one that Girard has ever printed. And yet all of us are leaning in close, captivated by the woman's moment of decision, bathing ourselves in that crimson light.

The photo snares the eye for being so many things at once: a portrait and a landscape, documentary and art, a waypoint in the journey of Girard's own life as well as for a city on the cusp of its own transformation. Each of these possibilities surges in the silence of the boardroom, then dissolves away with nothing quite settled. Which leaves a question hanging in the air: What has Girard captured here – in Hanoi, yes, but in all of these photos across all these years and places – that so consistently generates this effect?

It's a complicated question. But it's one that the Polygon retrospective, which opens on July 10, is attempting to answer.



Yuyuanmingyuan Lu Apartment Interior, Shanghai, 2006.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

If Girard has his own answer to the question, he's unlikely to expound on it. He's self-effacing in conversation – and this goes back to the first time we met in Shanghai in 2007. On that occasion, I was writing about Shanghai's then-booming expat scene, on which Girard had a front-row seat. Even though it was one of my first times in Asia, Girard showed as much interest in discussing my work as his own, as if his Shanghai project wasn't quite enough to sustain conversation.

For our second exchange, a mere 20 years later, we're sitting in the booth of a sandwich shop on Main Street in Vancouver, where he's returned to live after 30 years abroad. Even now, when I press him to return to the very beginning of things, those *Under Vancouver* pictures that now seem so formative, he frames things in humble terms. "I wasn't even thinking about if this is going to work out in some make-a-living kind of way. ... Those were just pictures for myself."

Yet it seems he did understand a couple of things from the start that would end up being crucial to this work becoming a career. In 1972, the 17-year-old Girard knew he was interested in shooting pictures of things most people ignored. And he knew he was interested in doing so at night.

He was out there prowling East Hastings Street in the wee hours with his new Canon TLb that he'd bought with money saved from his part-time job at a Burnaby lumber yard, shooting pictures of people in pool halls and diners, capturing hotel rooms and lobbies, memorializing abandoned cars and empty buildings and lonely ships along the waterfront.



Silver Grill Cafe, Vancouver, 1975.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

“I was learning the craft,” Girard says. “What different materials did, what different kinds of film did under different kinds of artificial light at night. I had night to myself. Nobody was photographing ordinary things ... a street in a non-glamorous part of town ... to see what it looks like at night.”

Girard also knew early that he wanted to travel. And he cites two photographs from the Life Library of Photography book series as having inspired him. The first was by renowned travel photographer Eliot Elisofon, a 1962 colour shot of Chinese junks in Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbour. The second was by celebrated American photographer Marie Cosindas, whose 1966 portrait of two sailors on shore leave in Florida’s Key West catches them lounging on a Persian carpet, louche and shirtless.

Girard describes feeling overwhelmed by the sense of adventure and romance captured in the Cosindas photo. But in the Elisofon shot there was something else. Adventure, sure.

“But more than that,” Girard tells me. “I knew there was something going on in the shot that the photographer had consciously done. The framing showed intent. It evoked a feeling but also an assessment. I wanted to do what he was doing. And I wanted to do it there.” Emphasis on *there*.



Woman at Tram Stop, Hong Kong, 1985.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Girard got to Hong Kong only two years later, hitching a ride on a Philippine freighter leaving Vancouver. Two years after that, he first visited Tokyo, where he rode the Yamanote Line in stunned amazement, finally getting off the train in Shinjuku, which seemed like the brightest section of town.

“I sort of spent the night wandering around, drinking expensive coffee, taking a few pictures. And by morning I’d decided I had to figure out how to stay.”

He eked it out at first, teaching English and living in Koenji. But he found his groove eventually. By the time I caught up with him in 2007, he’d been in Asia for more than 25 years – Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai. He’d built and then retired from an entire career in photojournalism, shooting for BBC and international magazines.

He’d published the well-received *City of Darkness* with British architect Ian Lambot, documenting life for the 35,000 residents of the most densely populated place on the planet, the 2.6-hectare Kowloon Walled City.



Kowloon Walled City, apartment interior. Law Yu Yi, 90, lived in a small and exceptionally humid third-floor flat off Lung Chun First Alley with her 68-year-old daughter-in-law.
GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

And he’d just released his follow-up book, *Phantom Shanghai*, which recorded the demolition of old Shanghai in favour of a glitzier newer version, a book that legendary Vancouver School photographer Roy Arden would describe as “an instant classic and one of the greatest photo books on a city ever made.”

But incredibly, when we met in Shanghai – at a Starbucks in affluent Xintiandi, emblem of a city in the process of eating itself alive – Girard was, in a way, starting all over again.

He would publish eight more photo books over the course of the next 15 years, collections of his old work, collections of newer work. He’d have five solo shows in Vancouver and seven group shows everywhere from the Royal Ontario Museum to the Vancouver Art Gallery, the International Center of Photography in New York to the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Greg Girard would become a fully realized professional photographer in that time. As a teen, he’d imagined Elisofon and Cosindas beckoning him forward. Four decades into a journey that began on the streets of downtown Vancouver armed with his first camera, it seemed clear that he’d arrived.

Only he’d done so without any explanation for the long journey, without acknowledging any particular artistic mission, or even, for that matter, that he was on one.



Kowloon Walled City, from SE Corner, 1987.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Which is not to say that people haven't attached broader meaning to Girard's work along the way. In fact, Girard has had the uncanny fortune to release books that arrived just as proponents of some idea-set ambient in the culture were eager to conscript them – into cyberpunk, notably, or into elegy for what was churned under by the Asian Miracle, or nostalgia for lost urban vernaculars.

Right from the start, *City of Darkness* set up this dynamic. Girard and Lambot's 1993 book was bundled almost immediately into the literary and aesthetic grouping that originated with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*.

That conscription isn't hard to understand. In Kowloon Walled City, as Girard shot it, there was human dignity and resilience, but also dramatic overcrowding, garbage in the overhead wires, and, within its alleys and corridors, almost permanent night. The vibe was cyberpunk, no matter that the book came out a decade after those two megaliths of the genre. As Roy Arden puts it: "The book has become essential for every art director or cinematographer aiming to create dystopian future settings."



Kowloon Walled City Postman, 1989.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Fifteen years later, Girard's next book, *Phantom Shanghai*, would carry a foreword written by Gibson himself, who put Girard again into association with a conceptual current of real potency. This time, Girard's images of condemned buildings and neighbourhoods in Shanghai became a comment on the relentless forward momentum of Asian economic growth and the concurrent tendency to till under any evidence of the past.

Girard's photographs were a record of dereliction in this rendering. As Gibson saw it, citing both novelist J. G. Ballard and photographer Robert Polidori, who photographed Chernobyl, Girard collected "documents of the gone world" – an allusion to Ballard's notion of imagined artifacts from the end of humanity.

That elegiac reading is interesting in part for the explanation it seemed to offer in advance for the Girard projects that followed. In the 2010s, Girard would publish a trilogy of books – *Under Vancouver 1972-1982*, *HK: PM Hong Kong Nightlife 1974-1989* and *Tokyo-Yokosuka 1976-1983* – each collecting photographs taken before his first two books came out, and after each of the cities being photographed had started to undergo reinvention.

By the time the last of these three books was published in 2017, Girard's photos from the seventies and eighties might well have scanned as Ballard's "terminal documents" in the sense that the subjects – those nighttime streets and diners in Vancouver, Girard's often-nocturnal wanderings in Shibuya and Golden Gai, and his after-hours adventures in Hong Kong during its last months before handover from Britain to China in 1997 – each captured something that was by publication date no longer available to be seen.

Yet something seems pat about these associations with dystopia, vanishing and nostalgia.



House on Yuyuan Lu, Shanghai, 2001.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Admittedly, *Phantom Shanghai* collects the most beautiful images of destruction I've ever seen. Girard's old Shanghai mansions are dignified despite broken windows and peeling walls, collapsed roofs, yards strewn with bricks and splintered wood frame. A condemned house on Haushan Road is bathed in regal orange street light. Girard captures another derelict structure on Yuyuan Road with its windows glowing yellow from lingering activity within. Behind all of these structures, meanwhile, rise the towers of the Pudong district, gaudy, glittering, overrunning the horizon.

But this material could only be an elegy in Ektachrome if you didn't talk to Girard over coffee in a Xintiandi Starbucks just after the images were captured.

The project wasn't about the loss of heritage buildings, he said that day in 2007. It was a penetrating look at how Shanghai was actually used. The Westerners arriving in droves for the new restaurant M on the Bund were likely none the wiser. But for the nearly 40 years after Mao Zedong's victory and the establishment of the Chinese Communist state, much of the city was a low-rise slum. The mansions of former capitalists were split up into housing for 10, 20, 30, even 40 families.



Shanghai Falling (Fuxing Lu Neighborhood Demolition), 2002.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

So, when Beijing decided in the nineties to start developing Shanghai to compete with other Pacific Rim cities like Tokyo and Singapore, it wasn't tilling under grand old examples of colonialist architecture. It was erasing the state's own footprints that had been stamped onto the surface of the city and the lives of its people.

"There was horror at what was being demolished," Girard says now, almost 20 years later over a sandwich in Vancouver. "But most of the people who were horrified had never been inside any of these places."

Girard did go inside. And he did that for *City of Darkness* as well, cracking the door open and entering – not to lament or eulogize, but to prove these places were still alive, to reveal the dignity and even the beauty of how people were still living.



Young boy in Kowloon Walled City in a family-run convenience store, 1989.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

This framing appears across Girard's work as one tries to grasp the totality of his contributions. And it's the same quality that brings the curatorial meeting to a halt over and over in the Polygon boardroom. The feeling that emerges from each image doesn't feel dystopian or ruinous. These aren't nostalgic last photographs taken of something discarded or slipping from view.

Instead, leading with the lens of his camera, Girard's images are guiding the eye to those fragments of human story that remain.

Those shots of condemned houses and neighbourhoods from Shanghai aren't ruin porn but the magnificent construction of living scenes, the rubble-strewn yards and hulking structures tenaciously animated and glowing with life.



Kids on Rooftop with 747, Hong Kong.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

In *City of Darkness*, the images don't merely capture the nighttime atmosphere of the city's stacked layers, but also the human characters Girard found when he opened the door. Children on a rooftop among radio and TV aerials. Ordinary people reading newspapers, or sunbathing, or tending pigeons, or playing mah-jong. Baker Law Kim Kwong making steamed sweet cakes next to a wood fire. Cook Yim Kwok Yeun splitting pig carcasses for char siu, barbecued pork.

But maybe this quality is most powerfully evident in that trilogy of books collecting Girard's earliest efforts with a camera in the seventies and eighties in Vancouver, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. A man stepping off a snowy, nighttime Davie Street into the Silver Grill Cafe. An American sailor blowing smoke rings on his bed in Tsim Sha Tsui. A pool player, a shirtless young man, a woman in a bar. The improbably warm spill of light through the glass doors of the Arco Hotel on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The world as captured in these images is indeed partly gone. And Girard might mourn what's missing. On Main Street over lunch, he remembers a list of things that Vancouver is arguably lesser without: a particular newsstand, a notable hat store.



The exhibition at Polygon will survey over 50 years of Girard's work, a career first for the acclaimed photographer.

ALANA PATERSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

But nostalgia isn't the only feeling triggered by those early images, in what time has proven to be Girard's signature colours and compositions. They also activate empathy, forcing the viewer to pause, to lean in, to consider the fragments of narrative frozen by the shutter's movement.

Polygon co-curator Elliott Ramsey lands on this idea in his introduction to a new book that accompanies the gallery's retrospective: *Greg Girard Photographs 1972-2026*.

Girard's journalistic practice trained him to see the story in each scene, Ramsey notes. "Questions of who, where, and when haunt his images," he writes, a truth that should echo as you leaf these pages or stroll the exhibition.

It brings to mind that woman on a Hanoi rooftop, and the pause she provokes that afternoon in the Polygon boardroom, each of us joining her in that light, over that city, quietly triangulating the co-ordinates of her story.



Snack Sakura, Shikoku, 2022.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Last year, Girard published his last photo book before the retrospective. *Snack Sakura* is both typical and a departure for him.

It's familiar subject matter, documenting another human element of his broader urban nighttime preoccupation: in this case, the Japanese local drinking establishment known as a "snack."

But it's unusual for being formally about his own journey. In *Snack Sakura*, Girard sets out deliberately to visit bars across Japan bearing that very popular name, which translates roughly to Bar Cherry Blossom.

Girard has of course been on a journey this entire time, but he rarely turns the lens on himself. In *Snack Sakura*, he does that. You'll see him in these photographs through his use of interior flash, the presence of Girard as a wink of white light in a bar mirror, reflected in a raised glass, or in the corner of a smiling eye. You also see him in a short film about the project by co-directors Jia Li and Joshua Frank, in which Girard likens his search for the quintessential snack as the quest for a single person.

"It's kind of a conceit or a fiction," Girard says in a voiceover, "that you move across Japan looking for this one person."

Girard doesn't acknowledge having found that one person, or the perfect snack, or whatever else might have been the object of his search.

But in the northern Iwate prefecture town of Mizusawa, the Snack Sakura he's come hundreds of kilometres to visit is closed. And while shooting pictures of the exterior, he ends up talking to a woman who invites him to her own snack, which she's run for 50 years.



Mama Akiko, Iwate, Japan, 2023.

GREG GIRARD/SUPPLIED

Her name is Akiko, and her bar is Snack Yuri. Wrong name. But Girard ends up shooting it anyway, because Akiko has such great stories. “She’d survived three husbands,” Girard tells me. “The Yakuza were her biggest customers back in the eighties and nineties.”

Plus, the place is a seventies time capsule, from the furniture to the glassware to the wall panelling made of – could this detail be more exquisitely perfect? – Sakura wood.

You’ll find Akiko on the back cover of *Snack Sakura* in what I consider a punctuating image, resonant with those haunting Girardian essentials: the when, the where and, most importantly, the who.

Here is Mama Akiko with her bottles of Nikka Rare Old Super Whisky arrayed on the glass shelf behind her, green blazer, black blouse, hair dyed a tinge of purple. She’s leaned on one elbow. But her eyes are up, heavy with life, brimming with story, squared to Girard’s lens, and through it, steadily meeting our gaze.