

## **WITNESS – PHOTOGRAPHER ANGELA WONG**

Meet a unique photographic artist, Angela Wong, a first generation Canadian of Chinese parents who escaped what would seem the oppressive culture of China more than two decades ago. What you will discover, however, is that escape is somewhat illusory. Being careful and respectful toward her parents, she shares a journey of discovery, of awareness, of a pained mind and emotions, and their all-consuming nature through a collection of unique photographic self-imagery and brief biography.

A young woman, raised in a repressive environment, given burdensome responsibilities for younger siblings, a recipient of blame, indifference, and a host of other negative influences, jumps at the opportunity for escape through marriage. Whether choices are right or wrong is of little consequence given cultural norms, societal values, family expectations, and self-imposed sense of responsibilities, and yet, the nightmare begins. An unexpected child, Angela, is born into the world.

Whatever the burdens and nightmares are that haunt her mother, Angela grows up in a home environment that consumes the validity of her existence and value. Of no particular fault, only of consequence, she has to grow up fast and hard as her mother is haunted by psychosis. The drama acts out while an absent father works six days a week desperately trying to support a family. When he is at home, the emotional and mental chaos drives him to seek help through traditional Chinese fortune-tellers and rituals. With work as his escape, Angela bears the brunt of a mother's chaotic mental and emotional state.

Years of mental and emotional abuse from an un-well mother reach a climax midway through Angela's teenage years with the possible threats of physical harm. It is the first time that Angela seeks help through school counselors that result in Social Services intervention, the hospitalization of her mother, and a gradual, albeit incomplete, return to a sense normalcy for her family. The heartache remains – a father with a heavy heart, the impact on Angela, and the concern for her three younger siblings.

“When going through intense life circumstances and feeling these emotions, they consume your entire body and they twist the internal sense of the body in every way. It's like seeing the destruction of your entire body in your mind. People don't see this though, they only see that you're sad and if you're sad for too long, they think there is something wrong with you. This isn't the case though. Something is wrong, yes, but not with me; it is with my life and life experience. As a child born into these circumstances and relations, it was not a choice, it was a burden.”

A full-time History student the University of British Columbia, a relationship served as a catalyst for Angela late 2006 as the imagery of her mental and emotional struggle had her realize that she was not free, nor felt that she had ownership of her life. She shared a lot about the experience, the realizations, and her process and how it came about in this particular series of photographs.

Relating to others with a mask for so long, a mask of happiness, of being interested and concerned about other's lives, she never revealed the truth of who she is.

“When I’d come home and take the mask off, everything would hurt so intensely. I wanted to be open, to be vulnerable, to be real, and to be authentic with who I am and what my life has been. I wanted people to know who I really was, where I came from, and what had shaped the “me” that I’ve become. Minimizing who I am and what my experiences were did nothing to heal or make me whole. More importantly, it didn’t allow others to know and accept me in the way that allowed me to know and accept myself.”

Images are a means for expression with Angela and always have been. Yet, an inability to draw, paint or write left her void of an ability to get these images out into the open. Then a high-school photography class gave her a medium that resonated for her. It is scary to reveal so much of the deeper inner life to an audience, and she didn’t want to burden people with something so personal that it may make others feel discomfort, hence, the love-hate relationship she has with this body of work and what it represents: Authenticity, vulnerability, processing, healing, and even educating and helping others.

The choice of Polaroid film is inspired by the simple fact that you can’t expect what you want to always come out, much like life. You have one chance, one shot, and that’s it, that’s all. I was attracted to the idea of one moment with all its’ beauty and blemishes exposed. Expired Polaroid film, with the multiple exposures applied give a ghost-like quality, much like a mind occupied with so much emotional and mental conflict. Images arise in multitudes and very quickly, each one not as clear and sharp as we experience in real life. The multiple exposures really convey this inner-conflict as the images arise quickly, passing from frame-to-frame, and creating inner-conflict, so this Polaroid medium became a bridge between the physical and mental experience.