

Time Out Singapore

Creatures of the night

French photographer Alain Soldeville's images of Bugis Street in the 1980s show a glimpse of the area's colourful past. **Gwen Pew** takes a trip down memory lane.

January 2014 by [iamgwenpew](#)

Armed with a degree in Economic Sciences but a passion for photography, Alain Soldeville, now 56, decided to take a trip to Asia from his native France in the early 1980s. Having read about the transgender community that used to gather around Singapore's Bugis Street, his curiosity led him – and his camera – to the fascinating underbelly of town.

After spending a few months in Singapore, he went on to become a photojournalist for a range of magazines, including *The New York Times*, *Vogue Homme* and the French edition of *National Geographic*, before quitting the commercial side of the art form to focus on taking images centred on the themes of memory, identity and globalisation. Amidst the many projects he immersed himself in, he had completely forgotten about the photographs he took in Bugis Street for almost 25 years, until he reencountered them by chance and realised how incredible his shots of the long-disappeared scenes are.

As the works finally make their way back to Singapore for an exhibition at Objectifs at the end of this month, Soldeville shares his memories of yesteryear's Singapore with us.

What first brought you to Singapore back in the 1980s?

I left Paris for Bangkok in December 1980 to make a long trip across Asia to take photographs wherever my mood would take me. I never studied photography at school, as there were not a lot of arts schools around at the beginning of the '80s. I ended up in Singapore to buy photo equipment as it was cheaper there than in France.

What brought you to Bugis Street? And how did you first become acquainted with the people in your photographs?

I read an article about Bugis Street in a travel book, and I was interested to see it and make some photos. I met two Swiss guys in the hotel I stayed in and we went together to visit the area at night. I quickly met Anita, a friendly transgender of Malaysian background, who introduced me to her friends. I carried my camera everywhere and everybody knew it. I made portraits of them in the street, sometimes with sailors when they arrived from the harbour. They liked having me photograph them and they often posed for pictures.

What were some of the surprising things you discovered about the community?

I found out that they had a strong sense of community: they were living in a communal apartment building far from downtown. In doing so, they could defend themselves against the attacks of aggressive clients and neighbours. As Anita told me, they were rejected by people close to them, but they were tolerated by society and could live upon their trade.

Why did you decide to start photographing them? Did it ever feel awkward?

Before going to Singapore, I knew that I wanted to photograph Bugis Street and the girls there. I was interested by transsexuality and I had read about the subject a long time before going to Singapore, when I was in France. I was curious about people living on the edges of society and those not accepting its codes. It was not awkward to photograph the Bugis Street community, but sometimes I had to be cautious, as I was close to some girls and not to others – they considered themselves as women and jealousy was a part of the game – but most of them permitted me to make photos. One of the few refusals I got was from a girl who was modeling for fashion magazines and didn't want casual photos made of her.

How long did you spend with them?

I spent about six weeks in Singapore from February to May 1981 before I left for Australia, where I worked for six months in order to continue traveling. I returned briefly to Singapore after Australia in 1984, as I was traveling to Indonesia to photograph stories for magazines, and made a brief stop to stay a few weeks at some friends' house. I met the girls I knew again and made new photos of them.

Did you find that the photos you took on your first trip were vastly different from the ones you took on the second one?

Looking at the photos, I would say the latter ones were maybe technically a bit better, but they were all made in the same spirit, as that work was, to me, a continuing series. From 1985, I became a photojournalist and worked for magazines until 1999. The kind of series I am doing now, 32 years later, are very different. I changed a lot and my photos did too. They are more conceptual and more mises en scène (set up or staging) between fiction and reality. I explore the edges between documentary and mise en scène. That said, the Bugis Street series contains a lot of set up photos, too.

What are some interesting stories from your time with the transsexual community?

In 1984, as I was going back to Singapore for the second time, a friend of mine took me to the notorious Thief Alley behind Bugis Street at night. Transsexuals were selling their charms in a park; nearby, the dimly-lit alley was full of people walking

along, and we could hardly move. I was taking photographs of girls posing inside houses and trying to get clients in – my friend told me later on that the houses were used a long time ago by opium smokers. As we reached the end of the lane, I felt hands along my body searching for my wallet and my money – a thief in Thief Alley!

How many photos did you take in total, and how many will you be showing at Objectifs?

I made a few hundreds photographs altogether, and 50 out of those are especially interesting. I will show about 27 prints in both colour and black and white at Objectifs.

Are you still in touch with anyone from the photographs?

No. Unfortunately, I lost contact with them after 1984. I would be happy to find and meet them again after all this time, though.

What do you think when you look back on the photos today?

I forgot about that work for almost 25 years. It felt strange the first time I looked at the photos again – it was like watching excerpts from the film of my own life, my youth. I was trying to find a way as a photographer and to discover the world through it. I am rather touched by these photos as they illustrate the way I always used to represent people in my work: in respecting them, showing their fragility and their humanity.