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15.11.2018

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## Interview with Maika Elan, member of the jury of the GC Visual Contest



Interview with Maika Elan, member of the jury of the Global Campus Visual Contest 2018/2019 titled “Free and equal in dignity and rights: images of the everyday lives of LGBTIQ+ persons”.

In 2010, she moved to documentary photography and her first project called [The Pink Choice](#), focused on personal life of gay couples in Vietnam, has been published in many magazines on print and online such as in USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Romania, Spain, China, India and Brazil.

She has been double-awarded for the “best photo essay” and the “best single photo” in 2010 at Indochina Media Memorial Foundation and in 2012 The Pink Choice was finalist at Asian Women Photographers.

**Your photographic project “Pink Choice” started in 2011. Could you please briefly explain how did this project come about?**

*It all began in 2010 when I attended a photo workshop at the Angkor Photo Festival in Siem Reap, Cambodia. My teacher was [the French Magnum photographer] Antoine d'Agata. While there, I was searching for a subject to photograph and came across a travel website dedicated to the LGBT community called The Pink Choice. Reading the webpages, I discovered that there were a number of gay-only or lesbian-only hotels and many gay bars in Siem Reap... At the time, this was all new to me, so I decided to explore this world...*

*This was not easy. Initially, the owners of the hotels and bars refused to let me photograph, even with no people in the room. They said that I must seek permission from all the guests: this was a private, not a public place. I only had three days to shoot, so I began knocking on doors. To my surprise, almost everyone agreed; they were very open and generous. So, the first photographs in this series were made in hotel rooms in Siem Reap and the title for the series was borrowed from the website, through which I had first been introduced to this community.*

**Which differences did you notice between the way homosexual couples are portrayed in the media and the real life of people you met through your photography project?**

*Initially, I did not think I would continue to do this story. However, I became increasingly aware of the negative and impolite ways in which homosexuals are represented publicly. Homosexuality has always been legal in Vietnam, but it is often not ‘accepted’. In the newspapers, the only news about homosexuals is bad (theft, rape, murder...). In films made in Vietnam, gay men and women are either presented as ridiculous caricatures or as sentimentally tragic figures to be pitied because they made the ‘mistake’ of ‘coming out’. They were always shown as ‘outside’ the community. The point is, in real life, there are many homosexual couples who love, nurture and build a happy family life together as valuable members of the community.*

*Artists exploiting gay themes always seemed to highlight their differences from the rest of the community, no-one was describing their similarities. I want to avoid the stereotypes of homosexuality and capture moments of ordinary domestic intimacy. Importantly, I want to show that their loving and caring for each other is nothing*

*deviant. These are simply normal and natural emotions and behaviours.*

*Then, there were three phases in this project. Initially, I worked in my home city of Hanoi with the help of my friend, Dung. He was the first Vietnamese gay man to make his sexuality public through an autobiography. Consequently, he was widely known and trusted within the gay community. After about six months, I moved south and began researching and making new connections through various gay support centres and an LGBT online discussion forum. Finally, when the series was already well developed, I showed some of the work on social media. The project received a lot of attention and encouragement, and many couples contacted me to ask to be in the project. Interestingly, many of them had not previously made their sexuality public. They did not know how to 'come out' and decided to participate in my project as a way of doing so.*

*Over a period of almost two years, I met more than one hundred couples and took pictures of seventy-two of them. After the editing process, I decided to use the images of thirty-two couples. They represent a range of ages, classes and occupations: students, workers, teachers, entertainers, business people...*

**Although same-sex marriage is now permitted in Vietnam, lawmakers have not granted full recognition to the unions, which do not provide legal protections for spouses. Do you think there will be full legal recognition for them any time soon?**

*Yes, I am very confident that soon there will be more legal solutions. I know a lot of activists are working hard and supporting the government for this job. It is not simple and takes more time than we can imagine.*

This is a call to everyone to dispel stereotypes and uphold an unwavering commitment to LGBTIQ+ rights so as to help them in their cause for worldwide **acceptance and human dignity**.

Share your image on Instagram by 8 February 2019 at 12 PM CET.

To learn more visit [www.globalcampusvisualcontest.org](http://www.globalcampusvisualcontest.org)

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This initiative is **funded by the European Union**.

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