

'Lucky Brake' spent lifetime looking through lens

With a name like Brake you could expect the odd nickname, but one particularly suited New Zealand's most internationally acclaimed photographer, Brian Brake.

He was known as Lucky Brake, says his assistant Raymond Lau, who spent 20 years "carrying Brian's camera bag."

Brake was lucky, for example, when he wanted to photograph Mt Cook.

"We flew over it," Lau remembers, "and there were no clouds, and when we saw the summit, there were three climbers on it."

The lucky break which precipitated him into the company of the most prestigious in his profession happened in 1954 after he'd spent a difficult period roaming England with an old Leica 35mm camera, looking for work. He went to Europe and visited the Leica factory, where he ran into French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Viennese photo-journalist Ernst Haas.

Brake showed them examples of his work and they invited him to join the international agency of freelance photographers, Magnum — and Brake was launched.

He was also lucky to be one of three Magnum photographers allowed to enter China in 1957, and then two years later to be the only Western photographer allowed into Beijing to record the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the communist takeover.

These pictures have been selected for exhibition at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, until September 22. Called "China: the 1950s," the exhibition was organised by the Museum of New Zealand and will tour Australia and Asia. It consists of 120 images, of which 60 can be seen at the Fisher.

Selecting the photographs for this exhibition was part of Lau's continuing work for Brake. Eight years since the photographer's death, Lau is still hard at it, sorting negatives, dating them and working out exactly where they were taken.

"It's a huge job, looking after Brian's file. He had no time to keep records himself. He would put his negatives aside saying he would organise them when he wasn't too busy. But he never had time," Lau, who lives in Herne Bay, says he

Photographer Brian Brake combined total professionalism with a measure of good fortune, his long-time assistant tells PAT BASKETT.

hardly budges from the long task, which he describes as "very sad, but very comforting."

"We were very close. We worked together for so long."

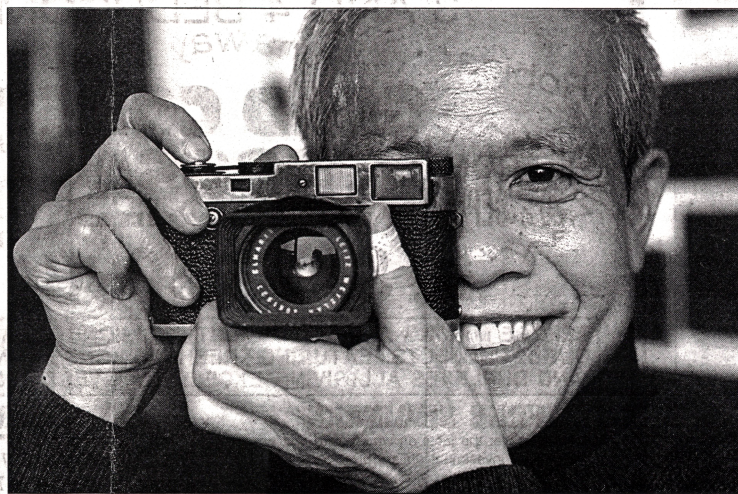
They met in Hong Kong where Brake set up base in 1961. Lau was disenchanted with a career in business and joined Brake's team making documentaries. They moved permanently to New Zealand in 1976.

Brake was born in Wellington in 1927

Blumhardt helping to wash his prints.

Blumhardt found Brake an apprenticeship with Wellington portrait photographer Spencer Digby, for whom he worked from 1945 to 1949. That year he joined the National Film Unit and in 1950 he won a British Council bursary to study colour cinematography in England.

When he came back Brake worked again for the National Film Unit but found the work unsatisfactory and he set off back to England.



Raymond Lau, Brian Brake's assistant of many years, holds Brake's well-worn Leica M2.

HERALD PICTURE / GLENN JEFFREY

but was adopted by an aunt and uncle who lived in Christchurch and owned a grocery shop in Arthur's Pass, where Brake spent time as a child. A neighbour gave him a box camera and taught him to take photographs.

When he was 13 his adoptive mother died and he lived in Christchurch by himself. But friends — the potter Doreen Blumhardt and her mother — kept an eye on him. Legend has it that he turned the whole house into a darkroom and had

This time he was away for more than 20 years and established a career as an internationally respected photographer whose work appeared regularly in *Life* magazine.

One of his most famous photographic essays was called *Monsoon* and consisted of images taken in India when the rainy season began in 1960. It was published in many major magazines and exhibited two years later in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Brake had several books published in his lifetime. On one of his visits to New Zealand in the early 1960s he worked with writer Maurice Shadbolt on a book called *New Zealand: Gift of the Sea*, which was reprinted six times.

His other well-known New Zealand books include *Craft New Zealand*, with text by Doreen Blumhardt, and *Art of the Pacific*.

Lau is working on a selection of Brake's photographs for a major retrospective in book form and as an exhibition.

Brake had a special love of oriental art and antiques, accumulating a significant collection.

"He knew a lot of artists and antique dealers and we worked a lot in overseas museums," Lau recalls.

One trip on which Lau was the assistant involved photographing the collection of a wealthy Filipino architect who had designed a palace for the Sultan of Brunei.

"We worked every day for three months, from 8 am till 6 pm, and still we didn't finish the job."

Some of the pieces were so valuable Lau and Brake were too nervous to touch them.

"We knew from the Sotheby's catalogue how much they were worth. We were so frightened of having an accident we asked the man's wife to move them for us."

Lau laughs about one accident that did happen. It was the Sultan's 40th birthday party and Brake was taking photographs. But Lau had loaded his camera with the wrong film.

"Brian never got angry. He never said anything bad about anybody. He always went out of his way to help people. That's why he was always so busy. He worked every night till 11 or 11.30."

"He always kept up his correspondence. No matter how busy he was he always had time to write a postcard. That's why he had so many good friends."

But Brake didn't like being on the other end of the photographic process. He hid his face behind a black cloth when the Magnum photographers were having a group shot taken.

"He said that taking a good portrait was almost like stealing. So he never intruded. He was always discreet."