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Queering Photography from the SinoSphere: (In)Directions at Eli Klein



Lin Zhipeng (No.223), *Pumpkin Is A Girl*, Archival pigment print, 67 x100 cm. 2013.

By **MIKE MAIZELS** November 21, 2023

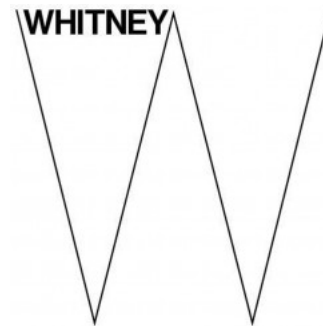
"Neoliberal, market-based populist culture...proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called 'postmodernism'" — David Harvey, 2007

Opening this week at Eli Klein Gallery, *(In)Directions* is an important new retrospective looking at queer, photo-based practices from mainland China, Hong Kong and the greater Chinese diaspora in both Southeast Asia and the West. The show, which features nearly two dozen artists and encompassed more than a year of planning, adds further momentum to Klein's program, which is emerging as a leader

(<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/zhang-dali-at-eli-klein/5887>) in the exhibition of East Asian contemporary art in New York. While most shows are organized by Klein himself, the present exhibition is curated by Klein director Phil Cai alongside guest contributor Douglas Ray.

The exhibition opens with the work of Ren Hang, a pioneering photographer whose work with nudes (sometimes in public spaces) repeatedly put him afoul of Party censors. Ren's sensual, fashion-inspired idiom is carried forward by a number of the other artists in the show,

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including Lin Zhipeng and Alec Dai, whose still life *Pot Fisting* is among the most arresting of the works presented. A number of the artists reprise touchstones from recent Western art and queer photography—many of which have a personal resonance from my own work on the Smithsonian’s groundbreaking *Hide/Seek* exhibition (<https://www.npr.org/2010/12/01/131730255/smithsonian-under-fire-for-gay-portraiture-exhibit>) more than a decade ago. The metaphors may be familiar—like Fang Daqi’s fish out of water—but the work is earnest and fresh. Other examples like, Whiskey Chow’s reprise of Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries*, are overtly referential in a smart way. The drum beat, or obtuse violin score, goes on evermore.

Some of the most instructive contrasts can be down between artists based in mainland China and those working elsewhere. While Beijing-based Chi Peng’s subtle, metaphor-laden pieces are reminiscent of early Jasper Johns, American-Indonesian artist Leonard Suryajaya’s vibrant scenographies are magnets for attention. Hong Konger Liao Jiaming contributes one of the boldest pieces—AI-generated buff male torso images manifested as tradable playing cards. The pieces hark back to the “secret stash” idiom of artists like David Wojnarowicz (whose ghost can be felt to hover over much of the show), but the piece is threaded into technology-driven vectors that would have overawed the earlier generation. Time passes slowly and yet all at once.



Leonard Suryajaya Arisan, *Archival inkjet print*, 102 x 127 cm. 2017.

Which brings us to the works of Tseng Kwong, a veteran of *Hide/Seek* and the oldest artist presented by several decades. His two images from the early 1980s are given an entire, otherwise blank wall—a nod to all of those who would otherwise be represented, but who have been lost to erasure. Tseng’s works, singular as they are, have staying one. Staging himself as



an effete everyman with standing in the Party, Tseng poses in front of tourist scenes almost too good to be true. The artist appears dressed in the military-style standing collar made famous by Mao and Chiang Kai Shek, posing in front of an “oriental dress” museum exhibition and at the White House easter egg hunt. Dressing and undressing, hiding and passing. Pink and Red scares seen darkly from the other sides of the Pacific.

Indeed, Tseng’s more deeply historical works insist we foreground the geopolitical context of the present. The past several years has seen an upsurge in “queer China” studies—a group of new monographs (<https://criticalasianstudies.org/commentary/2022/4/5/notes-from-the-field-jamie-j-zhao-and-hongwei-bao-queering-china-theorizing-chinese-genders-and-sexualities-through-a-transnational-lens>) as well as attendant exhibitions, conferences, etc . Within this new framework, Petrus Liu, a Boston-based historian and queer theorist, has emerged as a leading voice. For Liu, whose ideas are referenced repeatedly by the curators, Chinese voices are capable of articulating “a unique form of queer Marxism by theorizing the material conditions of possibility for queer thinking and expression in the age of China’s entry into global capitalism.” What exactly is meant by this intersection of queerness, Chinese-ness and Marxism is worthy of further elaboration. For Liu et al, queerness is not reducible gender or sexuality, but “a material reminder of one’s relation to an unequal structure of power” and a vantage from which to “recognize the distance between sexual diversity in human cultures and the liberal-pluralist creations of identity categories under global capitalism.” Queer Marxism, you could say, wants to insist on identity as a site of agency and not only as a locus of differentiated consumption.

The comparative histories of repression and subjugation of same-sex desire across East and West are far too deep to delve into in the present review, but suffice it to say that “homosexual activity” has been taboo in China for centuries for reasons independent of the Christian West. And yet, the question of how exactly these attitudes hardened into the official discrimination of the present remains open; some scholars argue that a harsher anti-gay line crystalized in the Qing dynasty as the Empire fitfully adopted select ideas and attitudes from the West. It is one of those difficulty ironies that the movement for women’s liberation came out of the same zones of contact with Christian ministries and European governments, but feminist-liberatory impulses had to be prised apart from a Western instinct for colonialist meddling. As I have written elsewhere (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/bringing-forth-the-new-9781350341579/>), the resulting Maoist insistence on equality between the genders must be understood as a rejection *two kinds* of subjugation—the historical repression of women and the ongoing colonial exploitation of China.



Dai Alec, Pot Fisting, archival pigment print, 51 x 76 cm. 2021.

The Marxist to Maoist piece can sometimes slide by without sufficient attention. And yet, this tension is important to surface explicitly, in no small part because of the ways that queerness has been received as inimical to the rationalized, harmonious society envisaged by the CCP in both the 20th century and the 21st. The figure of Chen Ruoxi is important to flag here. A native of Taiwan (seen by the CCP as a schismatic splinter state), Chen made the highly

unusual decision to move to the Mainland to participate in Mao’s Cultural Revolution. She returned several years later, bitterly disillusioned and highly critical of the Party. Her prominence as a regime critic and subsequent fame as the author of one of the first queer Chinese novels cannot be understood apart from one another. And over the intervening decades, queer identity and practice in the Mainland has remained suspect because of its sense of taintedness with the decadence and corruption of the West. “Spiritual pollution” has referred to opium, rock music, and gay desire. It is a line adopted as well by Western Marxists with no need of recourse to Mao. As David Harvey has famously argued, capitalist-induced consciousness of gender and sexuality can form a heady distraction to class solidarity. What used to be the opium of the masses may now be (individual) identity.

Solidarity can indeed be a tough nut to crack, and ideological consistency is rarely the productive purview of the artist. As Ren Hang put it, the censorship of his practice was entirely beside the point. “My pictures’ politics have nothing to do with China,” he told Dazed magazine in 2015, “It’s Chinese politics that wants to interfere with my art’.” The State does reach in this way, in China more than in most Western countries. And yet, artists always manage to envision further beyond—to new modes of being in the world, no matter how much (in)direction they require. **WM**



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