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PRESSURE COOKER AND REHEARSAL GROUND

A Conversation with Phil Zheng Cai on Eli Klein Gallery's Residency-Then-Exhibition Program

Text by Webson Ji, Asian Art Contemporary™

Recent conversations around contemporary Asian art and the Asian diaspora led to an invitation to visit Eli Klein Gallery and its residency program. I was drawn to the program's format: a months-long residency situated within a gallery, followed by an exhibition that grew out of the artists' evolving ideas and work in the space.

On August 26, 2026, I visited the gallery and met with Tianyi Sun and Clare Hu, learning more about their practices and experiences during the residency. The visit left me thinking about how artists engage with a space while developing their work, and how a temporary residency can become an extension of an artist's ongoing practice.

These questions led to a broader conversation with Phil, Partner at Eli Klein Gallery, about the program from different perspectives—the artists, the gallery, and the development of the program itself. Rather

than approaching this as a conventional interview, we wanted to explore some of the ideas that emerged from the visit and let the conversation move naturally between our observations, questions, and perspectives.



Installation view of *Best by 07/21/2026*, Photo courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery

Webson: Thank you for joining me in this conversation. I had a great time getting to know the artists and their practices through our one-on-one conversations, and it was meaningful to exchange thoughts and share some of my own perspectives with them. And of course, thank you again for inviting me to the studio visit.

I was particularly interested in the shift in spatial relationships between the residency and the final exhibition. During the residency, each artist seemed to develop their work within a more defined area of the gallery, while in the exhibition, those boundaries became much more fluid, creating a different rhythm and relationship between the works and the space. I'm curious about how you were thinking about that transition as a curator. But perhaps before getting into that, could you tell us a little more about the program itself, and what you hoped to create through the residency?



Studio visit, Photo courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery

Phil: Thank you, Webson for this opportunity to share and elaborate. And much appreciated on becoming one of our guest visitors for the residency-then-exhibition. It is a biannual program that we started in 2024 with our first cohort featuring artists Shuai Yang, Wenfei Quan, and Echo Youyi Yan. That experience was extremely rewarding both for us and the artists, and we decided that this model of work has to be executed repeatedly, hence the 2026 second cohort. The program actually came from my disagreement with how most galleries treat their summer calendar-more often than not with loosely curated group exhibitions that pronounce more as a space filler than actual artistic progression. To take advantage of the summer “slow” time, instead, we thought to emphasize on the real development of emerging artists that we believe in. To further aid this vision, we worked very hard during the summer to help the artists and we continue to invite many experts to visit the residency to provide opinions and critiques for the three artists. In 2024 we had around 30 visitors, and this year that number was 31, with you included.

As the curator for the residency and the exhibition that culminates the residency, I was inspired by one of the catalog essays for the new New Museum's inaugural exhibition written by Sophie Lewis where she questioned the concept of the human after the discovery of how the "sausage" of us is made. The idea of discarding fascinates me, and is something that I believe is rarely discussed in the contemporary art world where everything seems to be perfectly packaged and presented for either the collectors or the institutions. This theme is perfect for a residency when the process of discarding is not only preferable but absolutely necessary. This was the main concept that weaves the three artists together. The fact that they show particularly coherently is perhaps attributed to the fact that they worked together for two months in the gallery.



Webson Ji and Clare Hu during the studio visit, August 26, 2026, Photo courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery

Webson: Yes, and thank you again for inviting me to the studio visit. I really enjoyed the close-up observation of the artists' practices and the in-depth conversations with them. Since the residency takes place directly within the gallery's exhibition space during business hours, rather than in a separate studio or back-of-house space, the process of making becomes part of what visitors encounter. I think that creates an interesting dynamic, because some organizations and artists prefer not to reveal the process

before the final presentation. So I want to challenge you with a straightforward question: how do you balance supporting the artists' process with promoting and presenting their work, and how does that consideration shape your selection of artists?

Phil: You are absolutely right that a shadeless fitting room is not for everyone. I love this question and have a two-fold response to it. On the one hand, almost all the visitors that we invited are experts in the field, including curators from major institutions and residency programs, established artists, active writers, and gallery directors. Like myself, they visit hundreds of studios every year, so seeing "how sausage is made" is not new to them, and perhaps is arguably their preferred way to see art and meet the artists. From our perspective, this is more beneficial for the three participants because they tend to receive honest feedback rather than easy praise after a work is finalized and cannot be modified.

On the other hand, the new simulacrum of contemporary art is an amalgam of fast processing, easy consumption, and attention-oriented promotion, which is constantly flattened and accelerated. Artists are often thrown into this pressure cooker of the contemporary art world against their will. The residency, to us, can be regarded as a rehearsal ground where it is both short (two months) so they have to work at a fast pace and open (gallery is kept open during their residency) so that they are accustomed to progressing in a panopticon.



Webson: That's interesting. So, what made you choose Clare Hu, Tianyi Sun, and Shaan Ken Rao for this particular program? Was there something they shared that you felt aligned with the core values of the residency, or were you more interested in how their different practices could expand the possibilities of the program?

Phil: This is particularly interesting because the residency to the three artists are, to some degree, this question to me, asking for a disclosure of how I work – therefore I'd be obliged to provide some clarification.

Tianyi was the first artist I confirmed, about half a year ago. She has such a diverse practice, ranging from film and performance to sculpture and installation. Knowing her for quite some time, I approached her with the proposal for her to only focus on sculptures and installations for this residency. The vision later made our collaboration very smooth and generative. I met Clare via Hunter's MFA open studio earlier this year. Why I particularly like her for our program is her fundamental understanding of weaving. Primarily a result-driven medium, weaving includes a variety of "prep work" before the final application of a loom. Clare has a unique ability to single out many of the prerequisite steps to provide deconstructive and reconstructive inquiries on this very specific medium. Her "table" series in our final exhibition is a terrific example of this approach where we define it as "weaving without the loom." I have a strong personal preference for artists who understand mediums rather than simply applying mediums, therefore I felt the program wouldn't be complete without Clare. Shaan was the last artist I approached. Having only been painting for two years made this selection somewhat of a flyer. But his dedication to painting, choice of mixing Japanese ink into paint, approach to paint structurally and architecturally, him being an excellent photographer, him being a very good musician are all reasons that convinced me that he will soon be a rising star in painting as well.

Aside from these verbalized reasons, there are more thoughts and hunches that are intuitive and subconscious. Therefore, similarly to how artists tell you that they can't explain a hundred percent of their practice, I would be lying if I try to convince you the above mentioned were the entirety of my reasoning behind deciding to work with Clare, Shaan, and Tianyi.



Studio visit, Photo courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery

Webson: I want to push this a little bit further. When working with artists with potential, especially those you may be collaborating with for the first time, is there anything you absolutely don't want to see happen in the process, or any kind of experience you would want to avoid? And more broadly, is there a core value or boundary that you feel you need to stand by throughout the program, no matter how the residency evolves?

Phil: I will try to provide a more general and abstract answer, and hope you or the readers will put this into context in their own experience. I am a firm believer of art for art sake, and that this transcendental and Platonic concept of ART should be the priority. In recent years, lots of people start to mix art with a lot of other disciplines, and the result is that we rarely see art appear on its own. Rather, it starts to appear with many other things: art and design, art and technology, art and science, the van Gogh experience!! etc etc. If the co-appearance is still defensible, I cannot stand when the other discipline starts to overtake art. To give examples, nowadays we see artists who are better fashion designers than artists, better coders than artists, better activists than artists, and even better philosophers than artists. To look at this from another angle, I'd love to see artists who use another discipline, but then in the

practice, he or she provides a critique on both their art and the other discipline. For example, many read Tianyi as a tech artist. But Tianyi is a real contemporary artist above anything else, and her practice actually questions the legitimacy of technology. That's the type of artist I love and cannot say no to.

Webson: Thank you for sharing these thoughts. Any fun facts or behind-the-scenes moments from the residency that you'd like to share?

Phil: One afternoon during the residency, Tianyi decided to screen her unpublished film (still under edits) to Clare, Shaan, and everyone from the gallery team. So she put her laptop on Clare's loom stool, and we all sat on Clare's moving blanket and gave Tianyi a cold read on the film. That's a coming together moment for the residency.



Behind-the-scenes moments, Photo courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery

About the Gallery

Eli Klein Gallery is a leading New York-based gallery specializing in contemporary Asian and Asian diasporic art. Founded in 2007, the gallery has played a pivotal role in shaping the institutional landscape for these artists in the West, serving as a vital cultural bridge between Asia and the international art world. Over nearly two decades, the gallery has facilitated loans and acquisitions for 100+ museum exhibitions worldwide, organized 100+ exhibitions, and published 50+ scholarly monographs and catalogues—reflecting a sustained commitment to curatorial rigor and long-term artist development. Eli Klein Gallery holds a singular position in the American art world as the longest continuously operating gallery outside of Greater China dedicated to Chinese contemporary art. Building on this foundation, it has evolved to represent a rigorously curated global roster of leading Asian and diasporic voices, introducing numerous now internationally recognized artists through their first U.S. solo exhibitions.

About the Curator

Phil Zheng Cai (American, b. Shanghai) is a New York-based curator and writer, and is a partner at Eli Klein Gallery. His research focuses on systematic critique, extending institutional critique through recontextualization, focusing on the inseparability of framework and context. His curated exhibitions have received recognition from Hyperallergic, The Brooklyn Rail, AMP Magazine, and others. His writing has appeared in IMPULSE Magazine, T Magazine China, WhiteHot Magazine, and many others. He has served as a panelist and visiting critic at institutions including Asia Society Museum, Columbia University, Parsons, School of Visual Arts, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, and NARS.

About the Writer

Webson Ji is a New York-based cultural producer, nonprofit arts leader, and curator. As the Editorial Director of Asian Art Contemporary™ and Founder and Director of Li Tang Community, he focuses on contemporary Asian art, Asian diaspora cultural ecosystems, nonprofit and institutional development, public programming, and the evolving relationships between artists, institutions, and communities.

(Photo courtesy of the artists and Eli Klein Gallery)

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