

DEC 19 (IN)DIRECTIONS: QUEERNESS IN CHINESE CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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Zhang Zhidong, *Lumination*, 2022. Archival pigment print, 28 x 35 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Zhang Zhidong

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Queerness is at once the subject, object, and action of a new expansive, collage-esque photography exhibition at the Eli Klein Gallery in New York. Curated by Phil Zheng Cai and Douglas Ray and composed of works by 21 artists, *(In)directions: Queerness in Chinese Contemporary Photography* subverts categorical perceptions of sexuality and gender, what it means to be Chinese, the experience of temporality, and the photographic medium itself. The exhibition is on view until January 31.

(In)directions does not define queerness. Rather, the exhibition positions it as a fluid, active way of being and mode of experience. Drawing from queer thinkers like Eve Sedgwick and Jose Antonio Muñoz, Cai and Ray capture queerness through the language of futurity and possibility. Often, it is used subversively, aiming to delimit the scope of socially, politically, and culturally preordained identifications. In *(In)directions*, queerness acts as a panoply of epistemological, aesthetic, ontological, and phenomenological thought, being, and action.



Lin Zhipeng (No.223), *When The Chemistry Is Simplified*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 39 3/8 x 26 3/8 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Lin Zhipeng (No.223)

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The exhibition's commentary focuses on the manifold ways in which the body can represent and enact queerness. Some images like Lin Zhipeng's *When The Chemistry Is Simplified* and William Zou's *Papaya* uses archetypal motifs of fruit to complicate traditional conceptions of the gendered and sexed body, desire, and sexuality. Each artist juxtaposes fruit traditionally associated with the feminine against portraits of men.

In Zhipeng's image, a quarter of a peeled orange balances on the groin of a man; only a pair of white underwear separates skin from skin. In the background is a shadow of the man's face, stoic and calm. It's hard to ascertain what thoughts the man is projecting onto the naked orange, if he is at all, or if the projections lie on the side of the viewer. The queerness of the image then might lie in how the viewer approaches the image: with preconceptions or openness.



William Zou, *Papaya*, 2022. Giclee print on hahnemuhle photo rag baryta, 9 5/8 x 11 inches. Edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © William Zou

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In William Zou's *Papaya*, we see an image of a young man taped to an almost scientific look at the innards of a papaya, its flesh pink with web-like mucus germinating throughout. The pink and yellow background of the papaya reflects the color palette of the man's portrait, perhaps suggesting a continuity of life between the fruit and the man; the papaya seeds become fully bloomed flowers on the man's tie. But the image doesn't try to mend the gaps in the fragmented temporality. Like the tape holding the photograph of the man to the papaya, this image connotes a tenuous connection between the past, present, and future, but accepts that one took part in the others, ordered or not. Time is illogical.



Tseng Kwong Chi, *Tseng Kwong Chi with mannequins*, 1980. From the "Costumes at the Met" series. Silver gelatin print, Image: 7 x 7 inches, Sheet: 10 x 8 inches. Edition of 25. © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc.

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Some artists like Tseng Kwong Chi, Pixy Liao, and Jiaming Liao find queer expression through playfulness, experimentation, and irony. In *Tseng Kwong Chi with mannequins*, a playful take on a self-portrait, Tseng Kwong Chi imposes himself in the center of a Met exhibit of women's ceremonial robes in 18th and 19th century China. It looks as though the mannequins, clad in their best gowns, all stare at him, a queer man. It's as if to say queerness has existed for at least the same amount of time as heterosexual society.



Pixy Liao, *Long Sausage*, 2016. Digital C-print, 20 x 15 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist, Eli Klein Gallery, and Chambers Fine Art © Pixy Liao

Play and experimentation are hallmark features of queer aesthetics, allowing the artist to reorganize elements of traditional thought into something new. Pixy Liao plays with traditional conceptions of gender roles through prosthetics. In *Long Sausage*, the male figure appears to be making a phone call through the female

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figure's campy, elongated proxy of a stereotypical male phallus. The female looks assured and vindicated, while the male looks defeated and subordinated. Here, we see queerness both taking advantage of and subverting traditional gender roles, as if to say that any categorization of what phalluses should do or should be is reductive. In a meta-fashion, this image plays and experiments with conventional ideas of sexed and gendered bodies.



Liao Jiaming, *The One [hongkong, 0000000-3876000]*, 2023. Inkjet print on laminated paper, 3 3/8 x 2 1/2 inches. Edition of 30. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Liao Jiaming

In a more satirical vein, Jiaming Liao's image, *The One [hongkong, 0000000-3876000]*, pokes fun at the 'headless profiles' often found on queer dating apps like Grindr. AI-enhanced biceps belonging to anonymized bodies work to make light of the ubiquitous, often objectifying cultural rituals of gay dating sites, while also encouraging thought towards debilitating body issues prevalent in the community and safety and privacy risks for many queer people around the world.

Other artists find queerness in other human bodies or in nature, challenging ideas that queerness is adverse to natural order. In doing so these images queer the boundaries of the body, one falling into another, creating a larger existence. For example, Alec Dai's *My Jet Black Hair* features one model hugging another from behind, their back bare to the camera, and the jet black waves of hair on the back of each of their heads combing into each other. The intimacy is palpable, somatic, and chemical, making the first model's back appear to have two heads. In some

ways, this image challenges the idea that only heterosexual love allows for true unity. For Dai, queer love blurs the distinctions between bodies, two becoming more one than before.

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Alec Dai, *My Jet Black Hair*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 inches. Edition of 8. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Alec Dai

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But the body is not incomplete on its own. Although the body for Dai facilitates spiritual unity with another, the queer body for another artist acts as a vehicle for transcendence, a complete presence of self that is beyond the physical. One of the most profound images in the exhibition, Shen Wei's self-portrait *Daisies* is a sublime statement on being and becoming. In it, he is lying down in a bed of white daisies, the stems of the flowers curving to his weight. A kind of reverse *Ophelia*, Wei's *Daisies* figures him as if he were born of the earth, beautiful and innocent, untouched by the corporeality of time or myopia of thought. The image is arrestingly still, not only in movement but in temporality and ontology as well. As the tall daisies cradle Wei's cherubic, sleeping body, he becomes ageless; as his body is borne naturally and seamlessly by them, his queerness becomes of itself, begotten outside of time, eternal and intrinsic. In doing so, the image motivates a reconsideration of how one thinks of the relationship between being and body. The first time I saw this image, I became undone. *Daisies* is a triumph of queer imagination.



Shen Wei, *Daisies*, 2022. Archival pigment print, 30 x 45 inches. Edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist, Eli Klein Gallery, and Flowers Gallery © Shen Wei

(In)directions is a phenomenological observation of the creative possibilities of gender, sexuality, temporality, and photography. It considers what is pictured and what is not and lives in that undefined space. It asks us to discard monolithic thinking and to hold the contradictions, excesses and emptiness, and gaps in

understanding together at the same time without forcing them into a certain logic.
 It sees the present as both ephemeral and as the vector of history, but most importantly as an opportunity to create. *(In)directions* moves us to go forward and
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