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Closer: a Group Exhibition of Portrait Photography

Featured artists: Nobuyoshi Araki, Nadav Kander, Lai Lon Hin, Pixy Liao, Liu Zheng, Daido Moriyama, Ren Hang, Yau Leung, Zhang Haier

27 Mar 2021 – 8 May 2021

Opening Reception: 27 Mar 2021, Saturday, 4 – 6:30 pm

Venue: Blindspot Gallery (15/F, Po Chai Industrial Building, 28 Wong Chuk Hang Road, Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong)

Opening Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 10.30am to 6.30pm; closed on Sunday, Monday and public holidays

In an age of democratization of imaging technology, we are all at once photographer and subject. This is ever more so during a global pandemic endured with practices of social distancing, quarantine and isolation. On closeness, Robert Carpa famously said, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you didn’t get close enough.” The insistence on proximity is nonetheless qualified by “enough”, an intuitive call on the material space, relational dynamic and affective state of the situation. Centred around the play of distance, *Closer* is a group exhibition featuring nine living and late artists who work with an expanded field of portrait photography in different eras. Artists critically mediate their physical and psychological distance with subjects and sitters. For distance, now more than ever, is a gesture of care.



series (2014), the late **Ren Hang** asks his mother to work with the usual props that appear in his oeuvre, such as animals and daily objects. Ren’s direction behind the camera is at once filial and irreverent, his subject authentic and performative, their relationship loving and hierarchical.

Some portraits show intimate relationships that condense the corporeal and emotional distance between sitter and photographer. Eros and Thanatos undergo a tender transformation in **Nobuyoshi Araki’s** *Sentimental / Winter Journey* (1970-1990). This iconic series starts with the honeymoon journey of the photographer and his wife Yoko in 1970, and ends with Yoko’s struggle with ovarian cancer and eventual passing in 1990. The dual practice of self-portrait and depicting one’s partner as muse takes a playful union in **Pixy Liao’s** ongoing *Experimental Relationship* series (2010-present). Featuring the artist and her Japanese lover Moro, Liao stages themselves in domestic settings, performing an equal relationship between the photographer and the muse-subject. In *My Mum*

In other cases, distances between the photographer and portrait subjects are critical in preserving the objectivity in observing the Many. **Lai Lon Hin**'s expanded portraiture collapses the abject physical distance of the voyeur and the hysterical closeness of iPhone's digital zoom. In a newly commissioned slideshow *Bells and Whistles* (2021), the flaneur-photographer grifts and grafts fleeting shots of anonymous passers-by. The mosaic representation of a city congeals into the epic portrait of a nation in **Liu Zheng**'s *The Chinese* series (1994-2004). The photographer travels around the vast country and shoots unusual portraits of common people, such as transvestites, Shaolin monks, folk performers and laborers. The names of his subjects are not known, but identified in typologies and eccentricities. Contemporaneously, **Zhang Haier** takes many muses in many iterations, forms and genders. In his famed *Bad Girls* series (1980s-90s), the photographer roams the streets of Guangzhou, asking girls from all walks of life to pose for him. In another series, *les filles*, Zhang expands his representation of femininity by photographing transsexuals and transvestites in their intimate surroundings, further challenging the systemic oppression in the classification of genders.



Theatrical distance is often performed by the subject and activated by the photographer as a way to narrativize, publicize and politicize.

Daido Moriyama's *Japan, a Photo Theater* (1968) is the first photobook published by the prolific photographer, which established his fame and unique style of grainy, raw and gritty imagery. In the series, Moriyama records the lives of members of a travelling theater troupe. His focus is later augmented to include images of women in different rooms and settings, locating the eros of looking in different surfaces and beings. Contemporaneous to Moriyama, the late **Yau Leung** captures the seductive eros of the

1960s-70s in Hong Kong. Yau was once a staff photographer at the Cathay film studio and was commissioned to photograph promotional shots for actresses and actors in studio settings. Oriental bombshell, Suzie Wong, arabesque seductress, these starlets seem to acquire agency in the performativity of their confident individuality and sexuality. A famed portraitist for celebrities, **Nadav Kander**'s subjects include sitting presidents such as Barack Obama (2012) and Donald Trump (2016). Both images were featured on the cover of Time magazine's Person of the Year issues. In a time when the act of representing others or being represented comes with a series of polemics and responsibilities, these images are testament to the continued challenges and relevance of photographic portraiture. People in the world exist and reveal to us as portraits, and we are all players in this ontological exercise to stake claims to our collective and individual representation.

Image Captions:

Pixy Liao, *Photographer and Her Muse*, 2014, C-Print, 75 x 100 cm
(Image courtesy of artist and Blindspot Gallery)

Daido Moriyama, *Japan, A Photo Theatre*, 1968, Gelatin silver print, 50.8 x 61
(Image courtesy of artist and Blindspot Gallery)

About the Artists

Nobuyoshi Araki (b. 1940, Tokyo, Japan) is one of the most well-known Japanese photographers and contemporary artists in the world. He studied photography and film at Chiba University. In 1990, he received the Photographer of the Year Award from The Photographic Society of Japan. His debut museum solo exhibition titled “Sentimental photography, sentimental life” was held in 1999 at Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Japan. Araki currently lives and works in Tokyo, Japan.

Nadav Kander (b. 1961, Israel) moved to Johannesburg, South Africa, when he was three. He began photographing at an early age and moved to London in 1985. Kander is an internationally renowned portrait photographer, and a photographic artist who works in series. Combining biography, landscape, and history, his projects features diverse subject matters, including rivers in China and England, and radioactive ruins in Ukraine and Russia. His works often reflect the outer surroundings of a place, and more importantly the inner conditions of the people. Kander currently lives and works in London, UK.

Lai Lon Hin (b. 1982, Hong Kong) has been practising photography since the early 2000s, including a focus on the material of instant film, and is best known for his snapshot aesthetics. In 2013, he discontinued the use of professional cameras, turned his focus exclusively to the phone camera, and has since ceaselessly published his works on social media. Lai practises a mode of seeing through framing and zooming in, which forces his personal vision and perspective upon the viewer in a nearly hysterical manner. Lai currently lives and works in Hong Kong.

Pixy Liao (b. 1979, Shanghai, China) is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice covers photography, installation and performance. Liao is known for her staged photography, where she poses with her boyfriend-turned-muse, Moro. Her works challenge the traditional gender roles in heterosexual couples, humorously revealing the multitude of ways to be together. Liao currently lives and works in New York.

Liu Zheng (b.1969, Wuqiang, Hebei) graduated from the Beijing Technology Institute in China. From 1991 to 1997, Liu worked as a photojournalist at one of China’s most prominent newspapers *Worker’s Daily*. He also co-published *New Photo* magazine with fellow artist RongRong in 1996. Liu’s work is collected by major international institutions and collections, including Deutsche Bank Collection; Daimler Art Collection (Germany); Sigg Collection (Switzerland); The J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, USA); International Centre of Photography (New York, USA); The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, USA); Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles, USA); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, USA). Liu currently lives and works in Beijing, China.

Daido Moriyama (b. 1938, Osaka, Japan) was an assistant to photographers Takeji Iwamiya and Eikoh Hosoe before he started to work independently in 1964. He was awarded the New Artist Award in 1968 by the Japan Photo Critics Association. In 1968-1970, Moriyama was involved in *Provoke*, an experimental photography magazine, which promoted a style of photography regarded as “are, bure, boke” (grainy, blurry, out-of-focus) that came to define post-war Japanese photography. Moriyama currently lives and works in Tokyo, Japan.

Ren Hang (1987 - 2017, Changchun, Jilin province, China) used the photographic medium to depict scenes of spontaneity, where the young naked subjects are staged in explicit poses. Ren carefully choreographed the compositional arrangement, iconic make-up (e.g. red lips and red finger nails) and mise-en-scène, all of which straddle between meticulous intentionality and momentary inspiration. Despite the playful and colourful scenes filled with young and beautiful bodies, his images portray human conditions filled with loneliness and vulnerability. Ren died in Beijing, China in 2017.

Yau Leung (1941-1997, Hong Kong) is widely regarded as one of Hong Kong’s most significant and accomplished documentary photographers. During his lifetime, Yau was an acclaimed photography editor working for various organisations, periodicals and publications: from 1965 to 1970, he was a photographer at Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong); in 1971, he worked for Southern Screen of Shaw Brothers Studio; in 1973, he founded Photography Life; and in 1980, he became editor-in-chief of Photo Art.

Zhang Haier (b. 1957, Guangzhou, Guangdong province, China) graduated from Shanghai Theatre Academy in 1982. Zhang was among the earliest photographers to develop a distinct, independent and experimental approach to documentary photography in the late 1980s and early 1990s in China. In searching for new documentary subjects, he turned his lens towards the city, photographing the changing urban landscape and lifestyles of Guangzhou and other metropolises. In 1988, Zhang was one of the first-ever Chinese photographers to be exhibited internationally at les Rencontres d’Arles, a much-historicised moment that marked the beginning of global exposure and recognition of Chinese photography. Zhang currently lives and works in Guangzhou, China and Paris, France.

About Blindspot Gallery

Set up in 2010, Blindspot Gallery is a Hong Kong-based contemporary art gallery. The gallery began with a primary focus on contemporary photography and image-based art, and has evolved to include diverse media in contemporary art. The gallery represents both emerging and established artists, mainly from Hong Kong and the region but also beyond.

For enquiries and media interviews, please contact Ms. Holly Wong at 2517 6238 or by email info@blindspotgallery.com