

Art

ALEX BURCHMORE

Peeking into desires hidden in plain sight

The fine line between identification and voyeurism is an underlying theme of White Rabbit Gallery's new show.

Tenderness and camaraderie are difficult to find these days. Conflict and prejudice predominate, directed especially at those whose sheer existence seems unacceptable to certain regimes. Rights and protections hard-won through decades of collective action have been overturned at a single stroke of a permanent marker, institutional obligations and responsibilities ignored, and critical voices silenced. As in the not-so-distant past, many of those voices are now forced to speak in code, creating subcultures of mutual recognition and support to avoid censorship and persecution.

Tender Comrade, a thematically tight yet conceptually rich display of recent Chinese works at White Rabbit Gallery until November 16, is a timely invitation to enter some of these cultures and communities. The fine line between identification and voyeurism is an underlying theme across the exhibition's four floors, positioning the visitor alternately as tourist, confidante, or something in between. Images of hidden or unspoken desires, masquerade and performance, coded messages and conscious artifice recur throughout, both in the works and in the nested composition of the display itself.

The show is billed as an insight into LGBTQ communities in China but primarily foregrounds gay and transgender identities. This is clear immediately on entering the ground-floor space, dominated by a larger-than-life pair of inflatable legs, anatomically complete to the smallest detail. A low opening cut into the partition at the entrance gives the option to brush past this detail, though most visitors instead ducked discreetly under a raised knee.

The legs are one component of several mixed-media works by Xia Han that draw attention to the gender fluidity inherent in fantasy role-playing games. These are paired with Shang Liang's *Boxing Man No. 4* and *No. 7*, specimens of inflated hypermasculinity that make skilful use of their oil medium to suggest a visceral, pulsating fleshiness.

Moving to the first floor, a series of video works are projected on screens that resemble the ornamented reverse of ancient bronze mirrors in a passage-like space. Conflicting soundtracks bleed together, with the high-pitched tones of Jiū Society's satirical rendering of a viral North Korean hit *Jiu Bobo* demanding attention. This and other works by Jiū Society member Fang Di, ink painter Liu Yi, documentary filmmaker Qiu Jiongiong, Wang Haiyang, and Magdalen Wong cover a range of subjects but are united by a focus on fluid metamorphosis.

Zheng Bo's lingering meditations on "ecoqueer" desire in *Pteridophyllia 3* and *4* are given a wall of their own in the next space, facing a series of vivid landscapes in



acrylics on canvas by Zhu Zi. The probing branches and coral-like growths of the latter take on phallic connotations when paired with Zheng's sexualised ferns, writhing and pulsing to a soundtrack of quickened breath and rustling leaves in an unearthly paradise of unrestrained pleasures. In Daoist mythology, such realms are the retreat of the Immortals – humans who have ascended beyond the limits of the mundane.

References to the past continue in the next section, where dividing curtains and the brightly coloured face paint in Sin Wai Kin's paired videos *The Breaking Story* and *It's Always You* echo the mannered artifice of Peking Opera. Between these, the inclusion of Lin Zhipeng's candid photographs of nude young men smoking and posing in an ambiguous space enclosed by red drapes introduces a suggestion of voyeuristic scrutiny. Similar themes resurface in the coded homoeroticism of Wang Jun-Jieh's *Passion*, a sultry narrative of delayed gratification punctuated by telescoping lenses and spurting guns against an explicitly phallic pier.

These subtle allusions to the classical past are the clearest statement of another key objective of *Tender Comrade*, which seeks not only to represent contemporary LGBTQ communities but to reveal hidden or erased moments of queerness throughout Chinese history. The display can be read as a "queering" of the canon of Chinese art history, rejecting a conventional focus on large-scale and overtly political works in favour of a subtler and more transgressive artistic vocabulary. Most of the artists included are relatively young or not yet as well-known as their more established peers, either conspicuously absent or unobtrusively set to one side. Works by Ren Hang and Pixy Liao, for example, two of the

biggest names, are tactfully displayed on the first-floor landings.

On the third floor, the confection of Shih Yung-Chun's paintings of miniaturised interiors sets the scene for a parallel queering of the domestic. Walls in pastel shades and arched doorways frame works that share a focus on images of home, childhood, and therapeutic environments. This is clearest in the symmetry of Han Duyi's embroidered silk-upholstered *Ordinance of the Subconscious Treatment*, a symmetrical display of "neuroaesthetic" furniture intended to ease mind and body. Samson Young's *Risers* in the adjoining space likewise invites visitors to relax, remove their shoes, and regress to the nursery melody of *Oh! Susanna*, overheard from Xie Yuxin's *Being is Always the Being of a Being* in the next room.

Yet, all is not as it seems in these apparently benign spaces. Another work by Shih Yung-Chun, *Private Hotel*, obscured behind a plywood divider and visible only through a pair of peepholes at a child's eye level, again sets the scene. Lulled into a false sense of security by the "oxytocin cabinets" and "dopamine lamps" of Han Duiyin's installation opposite, the viewer is compelled to acknowledge their voyeuristic intrusion into this private world. A mirrored wall immediately opposite the divider suggests a glimpse not only into Shih's cryptic interiors but the depths of our own subconscious.

From the exaggerated fantasies and veiled desires of the first two floors, through the uncanny ambiguities of the third, the ascent to the final and fourth floor of *Tender Comrade* provides the most potent statement of the exhibition's primary theme. Here, Isaac Chong Wai's multiscreen video installation *Falling Reversely* immerses the viewer in a narrative of collective pain and mutual support. Building to a crescendo of rhythmic sound and motion, this reflection on racially motivated violence concludes the exhibition's exploration of tenderness and intimacy with a testament to the power of communal bonds in resisting prejudice.

Tender Comrade is at the White Rabbit Gallery until November 16. Dr Alex Burchmore is an art historian specialising in the study of Chinese art.

Zheng Bo's *Pteridophyllia 4*, 2019, video (above); and Lin Zhipeng (aka No. 223), *Layers*, 2018 (left).