

Amuse

Who is Ren Hang?

Everything you need to know about the controversial Chinese artist

Written by BJ PANDA BEAR

Over the past few years Ren Hang has challenged notions of Chinese sexuality with provocative images, many of which are considered pornographic in China and some even deemed worthy of criminal offence. But the West has fully embraced Hang, and he's used it as a platform to voice ideas and represent a new generation of artists coming out of China.

Though his work is controversial—often dealing with subjects such as nudity, gender and homosexuality—his work yields no political context, and yet the Chinese government still hold him to the same kind of rules that Ai Weiwei and Cheng Li have been subjected to.

Hang says there's no meaning or concept beyond the visual in his work. In his images he transforms the human form into abstract, surreal shapes. Beyond the nudity, his work combines beautiful body with bizarre props like flowers, cherries and taxidermy. Hang recently worked on commercial projects for the likes of Gucci, and Maison Kitsune's "Reishiki" capsule collection.

Ahead of his first show on the West coast at L.A.'s zeitgeist-y MAMA Gallery, this is everything you need to know about Ren Hang.

Hometown...

Ren comes from Beijing, which is also home to his contemporary, the political artist Ai Weiwei, who he ended up working with when they curated a group show entitled Fuck Off 2 at the Groningen Museum in the Netherlands.

Government censorship...

His connection to Weiwei doesn't end there. His relationship with the government has been a rocky one, pitted with issues around censorships. Hang stated in a Phaidon interview on his La Chine a NUE show in Paris, "I am pleased to present my work in France as it is difficult to exhibit my pictures in China." And shooting in his homeland has come with its consequences, "I've been arrested while shooting photos outside before." He said in a VICE interview in 2013.

His models...

Hang also told VICE that the people in his photos were "mostly friends." Adding, "I take photos of them hanging out in their daily settings and just having fun naked. I like shooting my friends because they trust me, which makes me feel more relaxed... being with total strangers makes me nervous."

Spontaneity defines him...

Though his carefully crafted composition speaks of a meditative conceptualism, his work processes are never actually planned out and are produced as they go, often using spur-of-the-moment props that include anything in the general space of shooting to live animals. The colour red...

The colour red is a consistent trademark of his work, from the models that are all dosed with red lips and nails to the subtle red details in the props and backgrounds. His friend and frequent model Yanyan Huang says, "He likes the colour red for its visual strength, he's not that hard, he is super spontaneous and very child like."

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Liquid is a common theme...

Though Hang has always stated that there is no thought behind the presence of liquid in his work, streams of urine are often present – the earliest being in his Photography 2008 series. Water in the form of rivers and baths also frequently appear. Some of his earliest photos presented still lives of people encased in glass boxes filled with water, propped on top of a bed in his Photography 2013 series.

Ren Hang: What We Do is Secret opens Saturday to 23 July at MAMA Gallery, Los Angeles.
mama.gallery