



Ren Hang Fights Censorship and Taboos with Edenic Nude Photography

by Sola Agustsson

A photograph is rarely seen as an act of rebellion these days. Hundreds of billions of images are taken and circulated around the world each year. But under China's censorship laws, Ren Hang's outdoor nudes are radicalized. *What We Do is Secret*, Hang's new exhibition now on view at MAMA, features striking photos the artist had to risk his reputation to take.

Hang sometimes has to run from police when shooting. The Beijing-born artist, who usually photographs his friends naked has been arrested before for violating obscenity laws. People report his photographs to authorities, his exhibitions in China continually get cancelled, and his website has been shut down twice. He told VICE in a recent interview, "I've had photos come back from exhibits with phlegm on them." But Hang doesn't let China's government limit him—in fact, he says it makes him want to stay, to break down the taboos about sex and nudity in his country.

Hang questions what society thinks is so shameful about the human form, and his photographs respond to this taboo aesthetically—with unflinchingly gorgeous images. Public representations of the nude body are generally sexualized, but Hang captures the bare naked moments that are hardly ever publicized: those in which the body is nonsexual. Bodies are transformed into classically composed sculptures; limbs are intertwined, becoming indistinguishable; the stark naked models are twisted and shaped in different positions, evoking vulnerability, strength, and calm.

In believing that the unclothed body reflects humanity's most natural state, it is fitting that Hang usually stages his photographs in forests, lakes, and rock formations. *What We Do is Secret* features models mostly indoors, but the same Edenic sensibility is created. Social norms may impose bodily shame on humanity, but his subjects exist in spaces of uninhibited liberation. Explicit the photographs may be, but none are traditionally erotic. There is an element of purity in all of them, a sense of humans being removed from the world of sexual shame.

The imagery itself is not political—"My pictures' politics have nothing to do with China. It's Chinese politics that wants to interfere with my art," the artist has said—and the work strays from making any statements about gender or sexuality. Nevertheless, the very act of creating them has become its own defiant statement.

The artist's new series transfigures human bodies into mountain ranges, totem-poles, and other wonderfully contorted designs. The body should be cherished, whether it be submerged in a fish tank or splayed out on the sand. Despite the images' staged surrealism, a rawness emanates from Hang's work. The group nudes are especially striking, as a unique intimacy emerges when models are stacked on top of each other, blending into each other's skin. It's a bodily closeness rarely seen outside of a sexual relationship.

The title of this exhibition references an album from Los Angeles-based punk band The Germs, which "aligns with the provocative spirit of the artist's images." "What we do is secret" references the artist's need to conceal from authorities the fact that he is photographing his naked friends. It also offers an ironic contradiction: the idea that documenting nude models outdoors could ever be considered clandestine, and that nudity itself is a secret. Humankind's most natural state is kept hidden from others underneath thin layers of clothing. By disrobing his subjects, Hang reveals that the most innate, universal secret, is hardly a secret at all.

—Sola Agustsson

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