

Tending to Queer Diaspora

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The dragon ushers in the Lunar New Year as the only mystical being of the Chinese zodiac. An exceptional outlier, the dragon is also a shapeshifter and illusionist. Zhang Zhidong's *Far Away, From Home* draws on this dragon to lend shape to queer diaspora. Diaspora concerns the ways immigrant communities preserve their ethnic way of life, demonstrative of their enduring attachments to their places of origin. However, for queer and trans emigrants of China, diaspora demands a more complex mediation of home.

Whereas the US might be preferable to China as a place of queer visibility, such conspicuousness also makes queer life more vulnerable to surveillance, legislative oversight, and hate-crimes. Meanwhile, the explicit censorship of queer life in China allows alternative networks of care to flourish. Queer diaspora emerges from the in-between space of wanting to be neither here nor there, caught in the push and pull between various sites of constraint and opportunity. Zhang's installation grasps at these multiple dualities through a set of baluster legs, a display shelf, laser etchings of traditional Chinese flower-and-bird paintings, and backlit photographs of latex balloons.

Dragons wrap around Zhang's latex balloons in an intimate embrace, representative of the shapeshifting demigod turned racial fetish common to tattoo art in the US. If the dragon can fluctuate as an elevated and debased expression of Chinese ancestry, so can latex regarding American freedom. As the primary ingredient of condoms, latex gestures to the possibilities of sexual liberation, both pleasurable and dangerous. As a symbol of safe and casual sex, the condom also cites the enduring impact of the AIDS/HIV epidemic and its toll on gay life. The latex balloons twist together these dynamics of ethnic pride, racial objectification, sexual pleasure and danger in its final form: plants and animals characteristic of traditional Chinese flower-and-bird paintings.

Enjoyed by the ruling classes across multiple Chinese dynasties, these paintings have become common features of Chinese homes as symbols of feminine beauty, modesty, and other like-virtues believed to express the divinity of human nature. Extending this ethos, flower-and-bird paintings might just as well uphold the "natural" virtues of procreative sex as much as latex condoms might defile that "nature." Despite their oppositional relation, the latex and flower-bird motif come together in Zhang's sculptures to highlight their tenuousness. Even as the balloons parody the flower-and-bird paintings, this mimicking also betrays a desire to preserve that which is being challenged. As such, the sculptures invite us to reimagine the boundaries between here and there, what is and is not natural, so that we can turn our deepest disappointments into objects of play.

Zhang's photographs risk flattening the multidimensional textures and shapes of the balloons, re-staging the way dragon tattoos reduce Chinese mythology into an orientalist aesthetic, but with a critical difference. They reproduce the two-dimensional image to create a "front" and "back" view of the balloons. The "back" displays irregular lines, rough edges, and pieces of tape forming a distorted collage of the "front." With these moves, Zhang cuts into their own efforts to condense and congeal queer diaspora into a single aesthetic expression. Zhang lays bare the delicate and perilous labor of living with contradictions, which often resists as much as compels desires to make sense.

Through shifting scales of perception, Zhang indulges in the comedic effects of turning flat. While reduced to images, the latex balloons fill the empty spaces of a shelving unit that brings Zhang's childhood home to life. It is as if these flat markers of sexual freedom were to fill the gaps of Zhang's wanting childhood, only to reveal the failures of sexual freedom to compensate for the pains of displacement—failures punctuated by the bird-and-flower motif, the dragon tattoo, and the remnants of tape. This tongue-in-cheek display signals the ceaseless way (two-dimensional) dreams lead to (three-dimensional) disappointments no matter one's point of origin or final destination. In this manner, the US and China turn flat and alike as enthralling sites of broken dreams that expose how attempts to ease one type of dissatisfaction often result in other letdowns. This revelation turns loss into a flat but more bearable experience as a permanent state of grief. To turn flat in this way is to turn something deep into something shallow, as if to lighten a heavy load. From that place of surrender, the depths of our accumulating losses might better signal the lengths we will go for the chance to dream at all.

The accompanying sculpture of balusters, unfinished to look askew, reveals Zhang's hope to dream new dreams through aesthetic play. The etymology of the term references the Italian and French word for the pomegranate flower as the bulbous form of its half-open blooms recalls the decorative shape of the baluster. Used as support rails to form stairways and porches, balusters serve as guides along a path, distinguishing desirable and undesirable places to be. However, the balusters here are notable for marking a place that leads nowhere. If anything, the balusters clumped together (each leg different from the others) look more like a fence than a support rail. A dominant architectural feature of Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, the baluster now stands as an impediment to forward movement. Zhang highlights the limits of aesthetic conventions that seek to actualize various ideals of an era, positioning the balusters in relation to the Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. In their place, Zhang seems to question what dreams might emerge from an aesthetic that revels in failure and the precarity that follows.

Zhang deviates from the flower-and-bird motif of their latex sculptures in a single image. In this one square on the shelf, the latex balloons take on the shape of a chair in a direct reference to the balusters, except, instead of elevating an ideal of an era or place, the chair seems to sit with the

limits of sexual freedom and ethnic/racial belonging to relieve the disappointments of childhood and the pains of displacement. The chair defies its conventional use in its precarious and off-kilter form, which seems to magnify the vivacity of its yellow-golden hue—hinting at the radical possibilities for play when tending to queer diaspora.

Sunhay You is a transnational feminist scholar who examines the political and ethical implications of Asian/American cultural formations and phenomena, especially as they articulate erotic desires and pleasures in the aftermath of colonial-imperial violence. She is currently working on a monograph tentatively titled *The Uses of Revenge*, which examines how representations of vengeful Asian/American women track unexpected interethnic and interracial intimacies in the aftermath of US imperial interventions in Asia. Her work has been published in *American Literature* and *Post45 Contemporaries*.