

# Sex Workers in Asia

Asian Art >  
General

Last autumn, a titillating and controversial show opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: *The Photographs of Reagan Louie*, billed as 'an artist's candid and complex study of the contemporary Asian sex industry'. The exhibit of large, bright, full-colour, close-up shots of female sex workers staring vacantly, preening, and plying their trade was accompanied by a context show of 50 paintings and photographs by other artists that had been selected by Louie from the museum's permanent collection. Posted at the entrance of Louie's exhibit was a warning about the explicit sexual nature of the content. The warning set up an expectation for a shocking and graphic display, and that expectation was fulfilled.

By Namiko Kunimoto

The written warning, the accompanying context show, and extensive textual information from the artist suggested there was a need to account for the sometimes harsh and provocative photographs. A large amount of wall space was devoted to an introductory preface written by the artist. Rather than articulate his motivation, Louie's essay seemed to justify and defend his art. As if to excuse himself, or to emphasize that he was not seeking gratification of a sexual nature, the artist states in his exhibit and in the catalogue *Orientalia* that he is a family man. We are told by the museum that the artist is of Chinese descent, as though this equation makes the issues of an American male photographing Asian women less relevant. Louie claims in both the exhibition text and the catalogue that his art is in keeping with the tradition of depicting the female nude. The question of why the artist felt compelled to venerate this tradition was not addressed. Louie chose images from the museum's collection whose subject matter dealt with the nude female body, including *The Desmoiselles D'Avignon* by Picasso,

Manet's *Olympia*, and a piece from Willem de Kooning's *Woman series*. Postmodern, self-reflexive artists such as Cindy Sherman, and more frightening forays into the psyche by Hans Bellmer, were also on exhibit. Unfortunately, a lack of creative and thematic unity between the pieces superseded their relevance as a whole. Consequently, this discordant compilation simply showed that psychological, sexual, and moral battles for power have been waged across women's bodies for a long time.

Moreover, Louie's photographs are inconsistent with themes raised in the context show. Paintings like *Les Desmoiselles D'Avignon* reveal the potential distortion in the viewer's reality, exposing the strong currents of emotion that emerge in the sexual encounter. De Kooning's *Woman* paintings are similarly evocative through the deformation of figural form, and they seem to express the surreal experience at play between sublimation and gratification. In these works, the distorted images of woman reveal more about the subjectivity of the artist than that of the female subjects. While Picasso and De Kooning use the visual form of the female body to express an emotional state,

Image from the exhibition under review. The exhibition raises the question: How does an image of a nude woman's backside, bent over a male figure in a bathtub, even begin to raise the issues of 'real' identity and sexual politics that Louie claims to invoke?



Photo by Reagan Louie

Louie, in contrast, writes that his aim was to 'get at the truth of [the sex worker's] reality and experience.'<sup>1</sup> Is there one singular, true experience for sex workers in Asia? How could thousands of women of different ages, classes, and cultures who live in different countries, share such a 'true reality'; and, even imagining for a moment that they could, how is it that the photographs of one man could reveal it all to us? How

does an image of a nude woman's backside, bent over a male figure in a bathtub, even begin to raise the issues of 'real' identity and sexual politics that Louie claims to invoke?

Photography, since its inception, has attempted to capture and define the meaning of reality. But meaning has proved too slippery for film, and we find that we cannot approach anything but our own subjective responses through

the lens of the camera. Louie's images stir us: the overwhelming skin and detail in the gallery space is erotic and discomfiting. The range of expressions on the faces of the women, silent and staring, sleek and sexy, scared and pitiful, may move us, perhaps arouse us. At their best, Louie's photographs stir uneasy feelings about sexuality and power, and at other times, they simply recreate the glare and pulse of any red-light district. Revealing and even intimate as the photographs seem, the tempting urge to believe that we know these women, that they might 'step out of expectations and present themselves as people' as Louie suggests, is an idealized and problematic urge. It insists on a dichotomy between prostitute and person, and assumes that the lens of the camera can provide the key to the truth. *Photographs of Reagan Louie: Sex Work in Asia* is not about the role of the female body in an artistic 'tradition', nor is it about the exploitation of sex workers. In the end, it is about sex and not much else. <

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## Information >

*The Photographs of Reagan Louie: Sex Work in Asia*  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 4 September 2003 – 7 December 2003  
[www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)

## Note >

<sup>1</sup> Louie, Reagan, *Orientalia: Sex in Asia*, New York: Powerhouse Books (2003), p.183.