

FRIEZE

Who Gets to Tell a Love Story?

'Love Songs' at International Center of Photography, New York, suggests that queer art is inherently allergic to telling a representational story of intimacy

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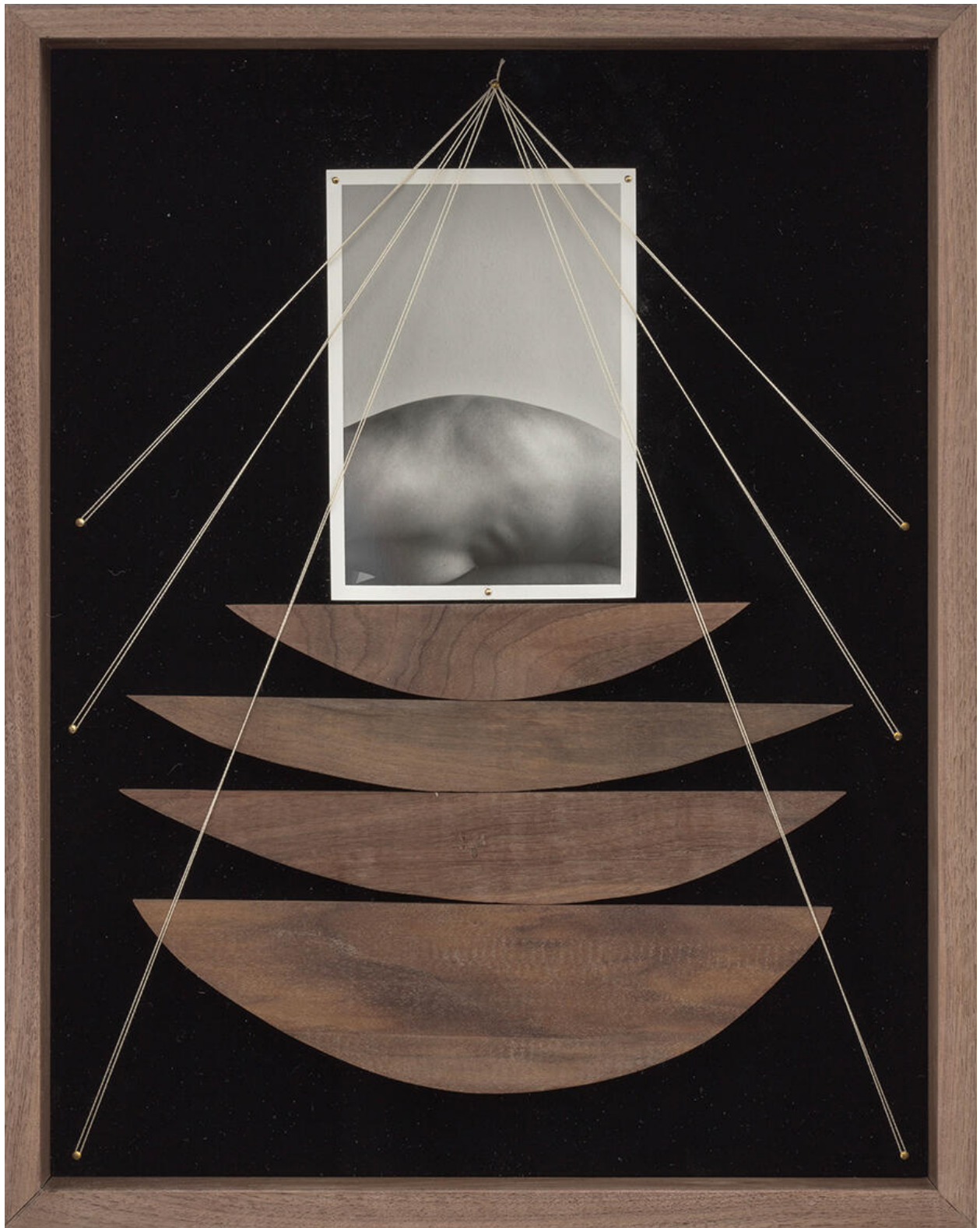


'Love Songs: Photography and Intimacy' deserves another name: love stories. The romance-focused group show at the International Center for Photography (ICP) includes work by Nobuyoshi Araki, Nan Goldin, Hervé Guibert, Sally Mann and 12 other photographers. It calls itself a 'mixtape', to quote the exhibition text. But, really, 'Love Songs' is more like a literary reading. Most of the photographic series are narrative. Some use large blocks of text as part of the artworks themselves. The photographs depict break-ups, illnesses, separations and death, each series with a distinct beginning, middle and end, or a sophisticated sense of the unresolvable. Meanwhile, works by queer artists hang in the background, a loose accompaniment to relentless tales of straight affairs.



René Groebli, 'The Eye of Love', 1952. Courtesy: © René Groebli and Galerie Esther Woerdehoff

Wall texts rarely tell us how the pieces in 'Love Songs' were made, about technical accomplishment or innovation. They disregard the rocky history of confessional and erotic photography, the art world's reluctance to take these genres seriously. Biographical detail and emotional poignance become sinew. The curation encourages us to look at what happened and how it might have made an artist feel, but compositional feats assert themselves, anyway. Karla Hiraldo Voleau's 'Another Love Story' (2021) recounts a painful discovery that her boyfriend was leading a double life with another partner. She intersperses staged snapshots, laid out like evidence boards on the wall, with pages of scenes written in screenplay format. René Groebli's 'L'oeil de l'amour' (1952), a series of silver gelatin prints, logs the photographer's honeymoon with warmth and surprising, subtle sexuality. Working at a similar scale, using the same ubiquitous chemicals, Araki's phenomenal 'Sentimental Journey' (1971) is another honeymoon chronicle. The artist's 'Winter Journey' (1989–90), positioned on the opposite wall, provides a crushing epilogue, documenting his wife's death from cancer. Queer photographers such as Clifford Prince King, Lin Zhipeng and Collier Schorr linger at these love stories' edges, singing in soft tones about far less plotted experiences of romance.



Sheree Hovsepian, *Euclidean Space*, 2022. Courtesy: © Sheree Hovsepian and Rachel Uffner Gallery

Queer artists are hardly free from grief, disease, deceit or marriage. Heterosexuals, of course, are not necessarily normative. Araki's most famous photographs portray

women subdued in Kinbaku-bi, or rope bondage, yet the curators chose work for this exhibition that examines vanilla, conjugal life, an apparent value judgment about what constitutes intimacy. Meanwhile, the art of queer people serves as a trick-mirror alternative to crystal clear reflections of marriage and dating. Some might say this queer work is more avant-garde – but that's not exactly right. Nan Goldin's iconic slideshow 'The Ballad of Sexual Dependency' (1973–86) and Clifford Prince King's larger-sized tableaus and portraits made in 2018 and 2019 are no less figurative than the show's most conservative inclusions. The difference is that they depict found communities, and that they feel anonymous to a spectator, the subjects slinking away from the show's lazy contextualizing grasp. Writer, theorist and photographer Hervé Guibert's images of his partner, Thierry Jouno, are fabulously composed, but the curatorial framework makes them seem pat, like tokenized erect penises in a building full of semi-naked females rendered in a male gaze.



Leigh Ledare, diptych from the series 'Double Bind', 2010. Courtesy: © Leigh Ledare

Still, 'Love Songs' respects queerness as an alternative, not something to be assimilated. Goldin, Guibert and Prince King's art does not ask to be understood as part of a straightforward narrative or a 'major life event'. None of the artists are going on a honeymoon. The wall labels inform us that Prince King photographed gay black men in his apartment soon after he moved to Los Angeles, and that Goldin's photographs are diaristic about her 'surrogate family' of friends. The contents of this diary are never divulged. These images are allowed to be fragmentary, occluded – they aren't frames in an endless biopic about monogamy.



Clifford Prince King, *Lovers in a Field*, 2019. Courtesy: © Clifford Prince King and STARS, Los Angeles

Amid all the halcyon monologues about straight artists coupling and committing, queer creators shake like teenagers, lonely and socially awkward, at a party they wished they were not obligated to attend. This binary provokes a question: is queer art inherently circumspect and mysterious, allergic to narrative, to telling a frank, representational story about infatuation and tenderness?

Certainly, there were pressing reasons for queer artists to disguise their lust, love and liaisons in the past, namely the criminalization of homosexuality and of so-called 'cross-dressing'. Often, symbolism served as a shroud. Painter Marsden Hartley, in his classic canvas *Painting, Number 5* (1914–15), employs flags and

medals to covertly explore his attraction to a German officer during World War I. Times changed and furtiveness transformed. Discretion remained a must for many, but surreptitiousness also developed a more reflexive aesthetic history. London artists Gilbert & George have been an item since the two fell in love as art students in 1967. They're hardly closeted in life. Appearing together in photo-based collages, installations and performances, their blank, pliable personas intercede on behalf of their relationship. Viewers can project what they wish on to their white visages, usually ideas about Britishness, bad taste and the status quo.

Among younger artists today, Jennifer Packer paints friends and potential lovers while referencing an array of bygone masters, in part as a means of concealing her subjects and her relationships with them. She paints flowers frequently – are these symbols of female sexuality? Gestures of mourning for dead Black people, as she says in interviews? Acknowledgements of a lineage of oppressed women artists? Her ambiguous meldings reject attempts to read her art easily. Formalism becomes a

shield she holds over her biography: Hiding in plain sight is how the work determines its final shape, and so secrecy begets form.

South Africa-born photographer Gary Schneider frequently shoots his partner, the dancer and actor John Erdman. For Schneider, too, form's scrim is inextricable from his method: he often uses long exposures to capture his subject, which means that the portraits are altered when his significant other squirms under the lens. Sometimes, he draws on his lover with a penlight. The involuntary dance of the photographic process, the reality of a living, breathing person who can't help but move ever so slightly, distorts its result. Intimacy, camouflage and form whirl around, accommodating one another just as the penlight traces the contours of a body.

Schneider's practice is not included in 'Love Songs'. The exhibition overlooks the marriage of form and content, and the ways in which queerness obliges artists to reimagine this union. (The show seems to believe that the word song will cover for

everything it didn't intend.) The ICP gets technical only once: Sally Mann, in her brilliant 'Proud Flesh' (2003–09), photographs her husband as he is debilitated by late-onset muscular dystrophy. A wall text unpacks her use of an antique camera that requires a 19th century collodion wet plate process, which blemishes and blots out his figure.



Collier Schorr, *Angel Zinovieff (Felt, Fingers, Socks)*, 2021. Courtesy: © Collier Schorr and 303 Gallery, New York

Form obscures, but it can also illuminate. In 'Sentimental Journey', Araki seems to tell the same story as Groebli in 'L'oeil de l'amour'. Yet their choices are different, their boldness individual. Groebli's sultry shadowplay, and Araki's candid use of daylight, are divergent decisions about how to render the sensual that pushed boundaries in their eras,



Sally Mann, *Hephaestus*, 2008. Courtesy: © Sally Mann and Gagolian

however much this courage was enabled by their status as men in heterosexual marriages.

Similarly, the brazen pictures of classic lesbian photographers such as Laura Aguilar, Joan E. Biren and Catherine Opie, and more recently the impish, sex positive videos and xeroxes of Brontez Purnell, suggest how wide the spectrum of possibility can be for the art of the outright. These very different gay artists think narratively. Their

impact is blunt. None of them, though, is shown in 'Love Songs', their desire and affection unsung in a group exhibition that claims to speak for the lovers of the world.

'Love Songs: Photography and Intimacy' is on view at the International Center of Photography, New York, until 11 September