

Shadow – Deng Tai

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AUG *Deng Tai: Shadow* is the first U.S. solo exhibition of the work of late Chinese artist Deng Tai (1987-2012). Art Critic Barbara Pollack takes us with her on the dream-like journey of a young artist in search of his lost soul.

Since 1994,
Barbara
Pollack has
written on
contemporar

TEXT : Barbara Pollack

IMAGES : Courtesy of MoMA PS1



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/10._IMG_3683_-_Version_2.jpg)

"Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1"

A lone figure stands beneath an underpass in Beijing, lit only by the ambient yellow of traffic lights. Almost naked, this young man with a face made up like a Chinese opera star flings and dances with a swath of red satin. At times, the crimson cloth reads like a red flag. At other times, it turns into an Imperial robe.

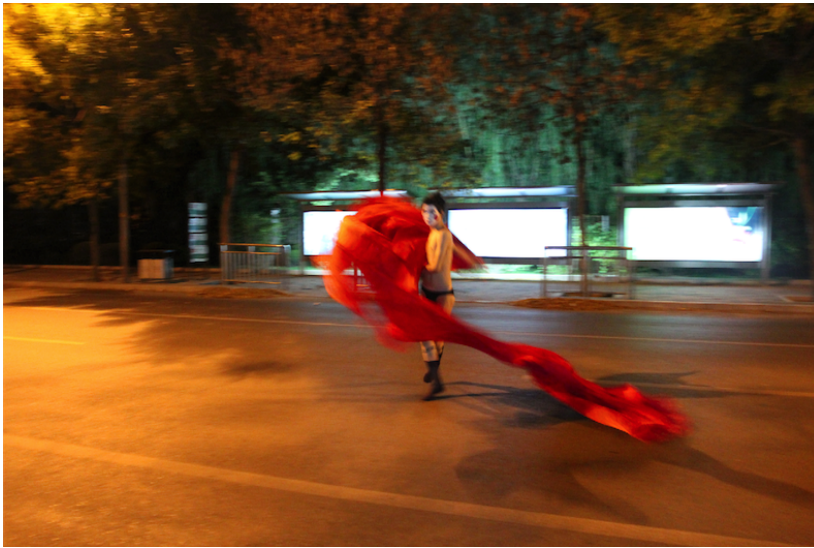
The contrast between this haunting performance and the harsh surroundings perfectly captures the sense of alienation this young artist experienced during his short time on this planet.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/00.jpg>)

"Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1"

These moments are captured in the photographs of Chinese artist Deng Tai, who took his life at the tender age of 25 in 2012. Born in Neijiang, Sichuan Province in 1987, with limited opportunities to enter art school, he studied Marketing in Chengdu, a choice he did not enjoy. He moved to Beijing in 2008 to try to see if he could develop a creative practice despite his lack of formal training. In four brief years, he assembled a startling body of work, rooted in photography and performance art. He did not live to see his success, but one can guess that he would be astounded and pleased to view the current exhibition of his photographs at the prestigious venue of MoMA PS1 in New York City.



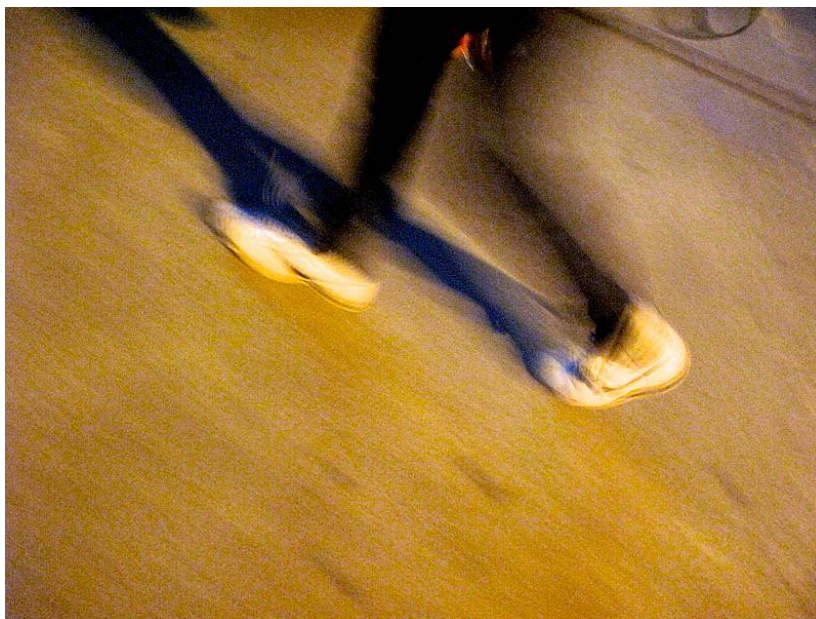
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"Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1"

This exhibition follows Deng Tai as he roams the empty streets of Beijing late at night with no spectators or traffic gnarls in sight. He himself often said that the red satin represented a stream of blood, flowing away from his body, or when bundled up beneath his arm, it could be his heart, beating with fear and excitement. Often turning the camera over to whoever was accompanying him that evening, the photographs capture the blurs and streaks resulting from low lighting conditions. The artist is often a blur of movement, simultaneously an exhibitionist and an invisible man, the center of activity and an outsider on the fringes of society. Rather than offering a critique of that society, these photographs evoke an innocence

and vulnerability, allowing viewers to empathize with this strange and tender character who seems to come from another world.

The fact that we know about Deng Tai at all is due to the relentless efforts of James Elaine, former curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, who moved to China to open Telescope, an alternative space in Beijing. Auspiciously, Elaine met Deng Tai on the night of the Sichuan Earthquake in Chengdu in 2008. The young marketing student had been hired to translate for the curator, an arrangement that was totally sidelined as they ran for shelter from the aftershocks. They spent the night talking about Deng Tai's dreams of becoming an artist and the possibility of pursuing a more creative life in Beijing. Soon after, Deng Tai moved to Beijing and (with Elaine's assistance) began meeting artists in the city and testing out different ways of making art. After his untimely death, Elaine gave Deng Tai two shows at Telescope and arranged his participation in the Changjiang International Photography and Video Biennale, Chongqing, allowing him to have a posthumous career.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/csm_17._IMG_8730_-_Version_2_ea99d787f4.jpg)

"Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1"

At MoMA PS1, Elaine's influence is most evident in the series, *Walking* (2008-2012), photographs of the artist's legs and feet in motion as they traipsed the city streets. Often mere blurs of a body in motion, the images were shot by Elaine as he followed Deng Tai on his nightly journeys. The museum offers a slim selection from the nearly two thousand pictures taken in this series but Elaine has compiled the rest of them into a haunting video, also titled *Walking*, made in 2015.

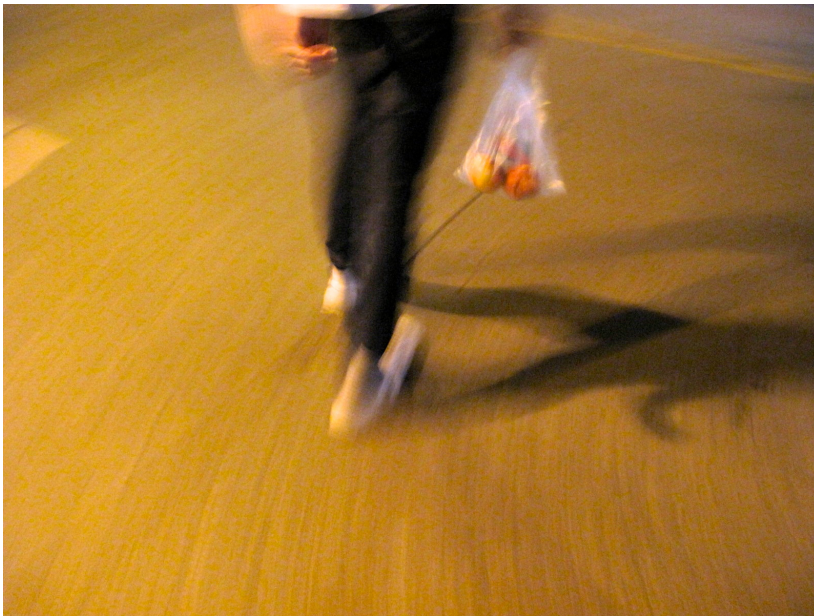
Deng Tai's artworks are surprisingly sophisticated for such a young artist, bringing in issues of gender bending and role play not often seen in the works of

Chinese artists. This experimentation with identity would seem to be a ripe topic for mainland artists, especially those who have lived through the whiplash of societal change of recent years. It is impossible to view these works without feeling a deep sadness for the loss of this artist with such evident potential. It may be too late to rescue him, but it is not too late to appreciate the artworks he left behind.

Deng Tai: Shadow

MoMA PS1

June 19–August 28, 2016



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/18._IMG_8751_-_Version_2.jpg)

"Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1"

About the Artist

Deng Tai (邓泰) (1987-2012)

Deng Tai's life and ambition is a lesson for us all and any young aspiring artist who thinks they cannot make it or do not have the finances to attend one the prominent art schools in China or abroad. Deng Tai was one of those young artists. From a marketing student in a small Chengdu university to realizing his dream on the stage of Beijing, he struggled to find a place for himself in the fast paced Chinese contemporary art world. By constantly observing his surroundings, trying every idea and creative avenue he could find, he finally realized through the camera that he was his art. Life was a performance for Deng Tai. Wherever he went and whatever he did held the possibility of transcendence and dream. He was fearless in his actions, forever pushing limits to discover and express his innermost longings, fears, and joys. Always a child and always a teacher he naturally instructed those around him in how to live life honestly and with abandon. His untimely death, 2012 July 5, is still a shock to all who knew him. His loss is great even at the young age of 24. It is with special gratitude to his life and honor for us that Telescope is able to exhibit for the first time the photos of a very deserving artist, Deng Tai.

About Barbara Pollack

Since 1994, Barbara Pollack has written on contemporary art for such publications as The New York Times, the Village Voice, Art in America, Vanity Fair and of course, Artnews, among many others. She is the author of the book, The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China and has written dozens of catalogue essays for a wide range of international artists. In addition to writing, Pollack is an independent curator who organized the exhibition, We Chat: A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art, currently at Asia Society Texas and she is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has been awarded two grants from the Asian Cultural Council as well as receiving the prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writer Grant.

#Barbara Pollack (<https://www.cobosocial.com/tag/barbara-pollack/>)

#Deng Tai (<https://www.cobosocial.com/tag/deng-tai/>)

#MoMA PS1 (<https://www.cobosocial.com/tag/moma-ps1/>)

#Shadow (<https://www.cobosocial.com/tag/shadow/>)

