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John Shen Conjures Singular Images by Capturing Multitudes

At Praise Shadows Art Gallery, John Shen riffs on historical photographic methods, creating a one-of-a-kind camera that pushes the form into the future.

Review by [Swagato Chakravorty](#)

Installation view, John Shen, “After Image,” Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 2025. Photo courtesy of the artist and Praise Shadows Art Gallery.



In *After Art*, the art historian David Joselit offered a concise—the book is a mere 136 pages—theory of art *after* art: conceptual propositions toward imagining art freed from well-worn conventions around artistic production and reception, nation-state origins, and medium specificity. An art history of the future, as it were. In “After Image,” John Shen’s solo debut at Brookline’s Praise Shadows Art Gallery, the artist accomplishes something similar. Across nine conceptually rigorous works spanning photography, installation, and time-based media, Shen imagines photography *after* photography, the modifier of the exhibition’s title gesturing—Januslike—toward Eurocentric histories of photography as technological and cultural practice, and speculations on image-making freed from photography’s emergence within imperial and colonial contexts.

Eight works in the show are from Shen’s *Straw Inscriptions* series, begun in 2020. Building on four years of research and six months of technical experimentation, Shen devised a lensless apparatus comprising 28,000 mass-produced black drinking straws

glued together by hand. The photographic portraits—collaborations with members of Shen’s familial and personal community—generated through this process are inscribed, so to speak, onto 20” x 16” direct positive gelatin silver paper, emerging simultaneously as image and unique object. Here, they are mounted on the walls, singly or in gridded arrays, at monumental scale. In their allover blur and their black, white, and gray tones, they appear distinctly “low-res,” a sharp refusal of the hi-res snapshots produced by any smartphone today. Up close, you begin to appreciate how textured these two-dimensional surfaces are. Minor imperfections and misalignments in the straw openings and groupings show up as irregular striations across paper. Shen tells me it takes roughly ten seconds to expose each portrait, with the multigrid works requiring up to twelve different exposures. You sense this accumulation of time across the images, perceptible as a slight wavering effect resulting from the sitters’ natural motions. The closer you get to the surface, the more clearly you see each individual straw opening—the unusual “pixels” or grain of these portraits.

The workings of Shen’s apparatus recall the historical *camera obscura*, as well as nineteenth-century histories of photography, in particular William Henry Fox Talbot’s “mousetrap” camera and the daguerreotype process developed by Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce. In this sense, and considering the laborious process by which Shen produces these portraits, these image-objects resist teleological narratives of photography in which technological advances correspond to heightened representations of reality and (in portraiture) notions of authenticity and presence. Rather than offer abundant clarity and detail, Shen’s images invite us to speculate, to linger with their imperfections and blurs and wavers. However, Shen’s reclamation of early photography and portraiture aims beyond fetishizing analog processes, seeking to reassert the interiority and agency of his sitters—his collaborators—through opacity.



John Shen, *Lovers (Zak & Gray)*, 2025. Silver gelatin direct positive photographs (selenium toned on fiber paper). 60 inches x 32 inches.

Born in Shaoxing, China, Shen was raised in Auckland, New Zealand, before moving to the US where he first attended the Rhode Island School of Design and is currently completing an MFA at Yale University. As he noted in conversation with me, histories of photography across the global South look very different. The European invention of photography originally spread across the Empire in the form of racist anthropology and colonial land surveys. “Subjects”—of white photographers as much as of the Empire—were photographed, classified, categorized. Shen is deeply conversant with these histories. In conversation with photographer and filmmaker Laurel Nakadate at the “After Image” opening and later with me, he touches on a vast range of critical references: Barthes, Bayard, Fontcuberta, Steyerl, among others. In practice and in dialogue, Shen evokes history and theory to destabilize the status of photography as a European invention and cultural practice forged within colonial and imperial contexts. The collaborations intrinsic to his practice dismantle historical inequities of power and agency between photographer and subject, drawing artist and sitter together into a shared process. Most portraits are named twice over: a general description (e.g. *Lovers* or *The Kiss*) followed by individual names in parentheses (*Zak & Gray* and *Häli and I*, respectively). Or take *The Artist and His Mother* (2024), which at 80” x 48” is the most monumentally-scaled of Shen’s gridded portraits on view. The title pays homage to Arshile Gorky’s painting of the same name, completed

between 1926 and 1936, based on a photograph taken in 1912. Shen's composition, presenting the artist and his mother at full scale with gazes directed straight toward the viewer, echoes the formal parameters of Chinese ancestor portraits. Yet the sense of distance and opacity in the image—the blur that never resolves—ensures that the figures in this image resist the viewer's gaze. As unique image-objects, these portraits are not for consumption or reproduction.



John Shen, (left to right) *Mother & Wife*, 2024. Silver gelatin direct positive photographs (selenium toned on fiber paper). 60 inches x 48 inches. *After Image (Timelapse)*, 2024. Single-channel video and audio. 3840 x 2160 pixel projection. 2:09:00 minutes. *The Artist and His Mother*, 2024. Silver gelatin direct positive photographs (selenium toned on fiber paper). 80 inches x 40 inches. Installation view, John Shen, "After Image," Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Praise Shadows Art Gallery.

After Image (Timelapse) (2024), a CRT-based installation, pulls together these strands of Shen's practice and suggests new directions. Over a span of three years, Shen burned a portrait of his mother onto the surface of an ordinary fourteen-inch monitor, creating what is clearly an intensely personal work. Any image—or stream of images—displayed on the monitor now discloses the subtle features of the artist's mother. On the opposite wall, Shen projects a year's worth of time-lapse footage, shot

in his studio, documenting the gradual burn-in of the image of his mother onto the monitor. An accompanying soundtrack includes his mother singing childhood lullabies. Here one finds, again, the entanglements of past and present, history and future, that characterize Shen's *Straw Inscriptions*. Unfolding in time-based media, *After Image* accentuates the force of small gestures, the accumulation of time necessary to produce an afterimage. New images may, in the future, burn in over the portrait of Shen's mother, recalling in this sense a palimpsest—memories transcribed onto a surface, erased, reinscribed. A history of traces.

Shen is yet to earn his MFA, but the conceptual force and historical sweep of his practice is formidable. I have preferred the construction “image-objects” here to acknowledge the distinctive way in which the images he produces also stand as autonomous objects. Shen is attentive to image-making as a mark-making or tactile practice, and *After Image*, with its burned-in portrait, perhaps makes this most explicit. But it is his attention to the social contexts of photography—in particular, those relations of power, intimacy, and agency that have shaped the history of this European invention as it transformed into a global cultural practice—that enables the portraits on view to challenge art historical categories. The *Straw Inscriptions* pieces reframe photography's early, formative period precisely in order to liberate its practitioners and participants today, suggesting that we are free to see ourselves unframed, unbounded, by photography's colonial and imperial origins. They are images that equally operate as objects. They refuse reproduction. They erase hierarchies between photographer and photographed. They are portraits that refuse our scrutiny. They are images after images.

One doesn't need to look far. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University holds 15 daguerreotypes, taken in South Carolina, of enslaved people of African descent. They were commissioned in 1850 by the Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz as evidence supporting his white supremacist theories. Less frequently noted is that the Peabody also holds some 200 images from 1865-66, when Agassiz traveled to Brazil to photograph Indigenous peoples, seeking to enlarge his visual archive of racial hierarchies.

“After Image” is on view through March 29, 2025, at Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 313A Harvard Street, Brookline, MA.