

MATRIX 285
YOUNG JOON KWAK
RESISTANCE PLEASURE



The room is dim, but flickering neon signs illuminate the space. The walls are painted a dark purple. The floor is covered with reflective black vinyl. A slow soundtrack is playing. The room is a gallery in a museum, but it feels almost like a nightclub.

A ring of hands—reaching out for one another, sharing wrists and grazing fingers—acts as a portal into *MATRIX 285 / Young Joon Kwak: Resistance Pleasure*. The interior of this work, *Circle Dance for Divine Queer Futures* (2022), is painted a vibrant pink, a jarring contrast to its suggestion of the natural body. But the fine lines of knuckles and fingernails that appear as if etched into each piece of the sculpture suggest a human touch. This disembodied swarm of hands comes together in an infinite loop of embrace, welcoming us into the exhibition.

Hands are often a starting point for Young Joon Kwak. In art history, careful attention is paid to hands. For the subject of an artwork, hands might reveal a life of labor or a life of leisure. Their delicate poses might point to important symbols or move our eye around a composition. We might also look for the hand of the artist in an artwork, material evidence of their role in an object's making. In dance, especially voguing, hands often exaggerate everyday expressions, heightening the movements that might otherwise go unnoticed. Many of us talk with our hands, even if we are not speaking. A wave can get someone's attention, say hello, or say goodbye. An outstretched hand welcomes the hand of another—a handshake or high five. A raised fist conveys solidarity. A limp wrist suggests all kinds of things.

Aware of all this body talk, Kwak has developed a distinct sculptural language that resists the ways that our identities are often codified and mapped onto our bodies. Through their sculpture, the artist finds a new language for expressing how we inhabit our corporeal forms. Using malleable plastics like silicone and resin, Kwak asserts the expansive potential of our bodies to move, change, and exist in all kinds of ways. Their sculptures, which are made from silicone molds, appear like skins—thin remnants of the body, shells bearing the imprint of human presence. The interior of each fragment is layered with metallic powders and wax, burnished to shimmer in the light. The outside is encrusted with reflective materials like glitter, rhinestones, crystals, and mirrored glass.

These are bodies that seem to have turned to stone, organic matter that has been petrified. But these hardened forms are neither frozen solid nor still. Even as the sculptures themselves might not be moving, they evoke all kinds of bodily actions. These sparkling forms are at once solid and shifting. Their fragmented, translucent bodies come together in impossible configurations, reflecting and refracting the light around them. The body turned to stone is a celebration of our capacity for transformation.

A towering spiral of arms, legs, buttocks, and torso anchors the center of the gallery, hanging from above yet seemingly standing—just barely—on a platform on the ground. Like many of Kwak’s sculptures, *Divine Dance of Soft Revolt (Anna, Travis, Me)* (2024) is made of fragments cast from the artist’s own body, as well as from the bodies of their friends and collaborators. Though drawn from different individuals, this assemblage of sixteen parts suggests the hybridity and multiplicity possible for all bodies. By intermingling these discrete pieces into one sculptural body, the boundary of any fixed, singular self breaks down and is recomposed as a collective being.

Gazing at this sculpture, we might see a body coming apart, falling from above. Alternately, this figure might be spinning upward, ascending to an impossible height. Perhaps it is both at once—a moment suspended in time, in between states of becoming and unraveling. As we observe the possible movements intimated by the sculpture, we might consider our own body in a new light. Indeed, the disco ball surface of this work acts as a mirror, reflecting both our own fragmented image as well as beams of light around the room.

Further back in the gallery, *Veil (Anna)* (2024) consists of two outstretched arms covered in crystals, with strands of iridescent Swarovski crystal beads hanging between them. The luminous sculpture has a welcoming posture, as if it might hold us in its arms. So, too, might its expression appear imposing, as if signaling the motions of an impassioned speaker. The veil that hangs at the core of the work does more to reveal the body than it does to obscure it. Here the veil is not something to hide behind, but the materialization of movement, a crystalline trace of the arms’ gesture in space.

We can only perceive these sculptures in their totality by moving around them, glancing at them from across the room before examining them up close. Contemplating these bodies while cruising through the gallery becomes a kind of dance, bringing us closer to the experience of a nightclub. This choreography is complete with its own soundtrack, composed by Kwak and their partner Marvin Astorga, who have an ongoing music and performance collaboration as Xina Xurner. Produced for this exhibition, the music pulsing through the space sets a tone that emphasizes the importance of moving and looking with care and thoughtfulness. The score, which Kwak describes as “ambient, abstract, suggestive, and crucially explicit,” is slower than we might imagine amidst such a vibrant and glittering exhibition.

Like much of Kwak’s work, *Resistance Pleasure* proposes a kind of utopian world where those who are typically pushed to the margins can flourish, dancing under a neon glow. But as the exhibition’s title suggests, this world is erotic and political in equal measure. To reach this joyous world on the horizon requires changing the one we are in, taking action in times of struggle, and finding ways to heal. In two new works in neon, Kwak depicts hands flickering between two distinct signs. The raised fist of *Resistance Pleasure*

(2024) reveals two suggestively extended fingers, while the upright hand of *Erect Limp* (2024) has its palm facing out to indicate a stop before falling into an effeminate gesture proudly reclaimed by many queers. Together, these works fill the space with their warm light, conveying the porous boundary between resistance and pleasure, as each flashes between the two in an instant.

Exhibition Credit

MATRIX 285 / Young Joon Kwak: Resistance Pleasure is curated by Anthony Graham, Senior Curator.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing MATRIX series of contemporary art exhibitions. Founded in 1978, MATRIX provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work.

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Works in the Exhibition

Young Joon Kwak
b. 1984, Queens, New York

Circle Dance of Divine Queer Futures
2022
Urethane resin, copper tubing,
and glass rhinestones; steel armature

Phantom Bear
2022
Graphite on paper

Divine Dance of Soft Revolt
(Anna, Travis, Me)
2024
Urethane resin, glitter, wax pigment,
and mirrored glass; steel armature

Erect Limp
2024
Neon mounted on clear contour-cut acrylic, ed. 1 of 3 + 1 AP

Resistance Pleasure
2024
Neon mounted on clear contour-cut acrylic, ed. 1 of 3 + 1 AP

Veil (Anna)

2024

Urethane resin, glitter, wax pigment, glass rhinestones, and Swarovski crystal beads;
steel armature

Marvin Astorga and Young Joon Kwak

Soft Revolt Jamz

2024

2-channel audio; approx. 20 min.

Featuring: Johanna Hedva, Anna Luisa, Dorian Wood, and Xina Xurner

Cover: Young Joon Kwak: *Circle Dance of Divine Queer Futures* (detail), 2022;
courtesy of the artist. Photo by Paul Salveson.

All works courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.