

Grand Union

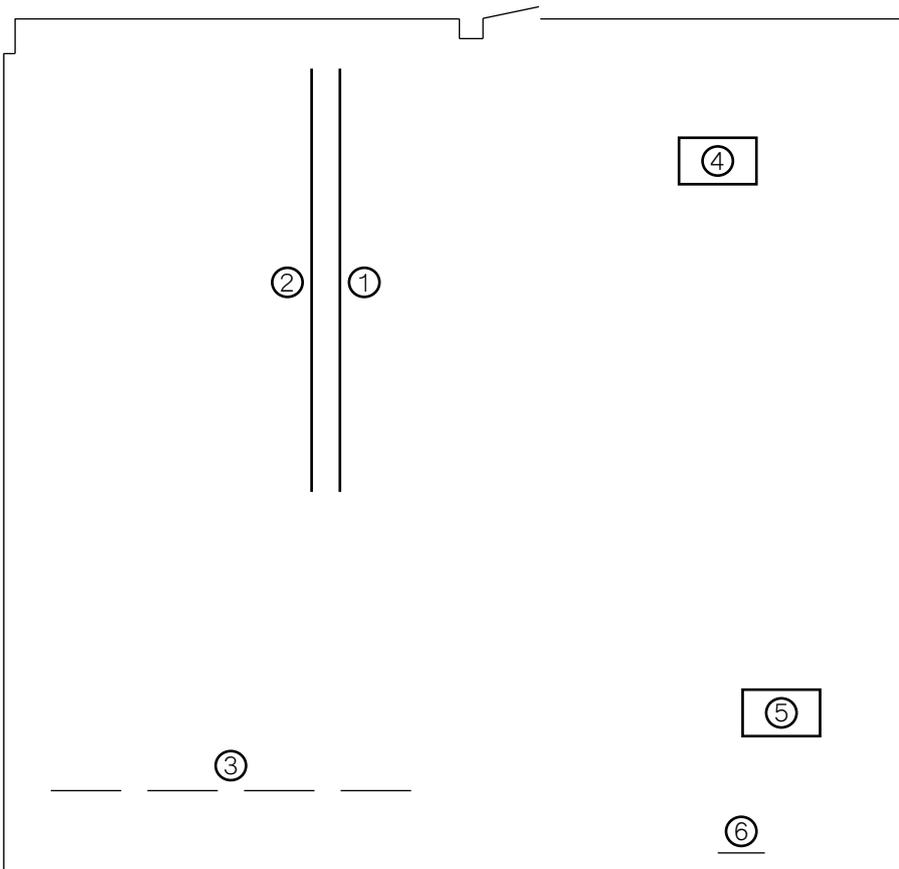
Phyllis Christopher *Heads and Tails*

19 Minerva Works
Fazeley Street
Birmingham
B5 5RS

24 September 2021 – 4 March 2022
Wednesday – Saturday, 12–5pm

0121 643 9079
grand-union.org.uk
info@grand-union.org.uk

Grand Union is delighted to be working with Phyllis Christopher on a solo exhibition of her work. Drawing from the surrounding queer community and her personal connections, her photographs depict the hot, raw, vulnerability and power of lesbian, queer, and dyke expressions. *Heads and Tails* displays Christopher's experience of San Francisco during 1988 - 2007. They feature explorations of pleasure, through sex, kink performance, comradeship, and protest. The show blurs the lines of her personal collection and commercial shooting, showcasing queer joy in all of its forms.



- ① *Skin*
1988–90, San Francisco,
Super8mm film digitised.
- ② *Kiss-In*
1990, San Francisco,
Super8mm film digitised.
- ③ *Heads and Tails proof sheets*
2003, San Francisco
1999–2001, San Francisco
1994–2000, San Francisco
1997, San Francisco
Digital prints.
- ④ *Test Strips*
1988–2003, San Francisco,
printed on silver gelatin
photographic paper.
- ⑤ *Bits floating at the bottom of the box*
1988–2003, San Francisco,
Black and White 35mm film;
Super8mm film.
- ⑥ *Kiss-In Chinatown*
1990, San Francisco,
printed on silver gelatin
photographic paper.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

BALTIC



Christopher was a photo editor of *On Our Backs*, the first lesbian erotica magazine made by and for lesbians, from 1991–1994. During this time she tenderly documented a queer visual language and helped propel queer imagery to public platforms. Through depicting a vast array of expressions of gender and sexuality, Christopher's work captures the vitality of queer expressions, of sex and desire during the AIDS epidemic; alongside moments of protest and queer intimacy in the face of violence, censorship, and extreme homophobia at the time. While in so many ways gay, queer, and trans people were pathologised, alienated, made to feel abject, inhuman and undesirable, these images place these people in a world in which they are loved; and in which their bodies are able to engage in expressions of pleasure, love, empowerment, and solidarity.

The exhibition at Grand Union includes a range of archival film work, new photographic prints, an audio interview and photographic negatives. Designed by MJM Bespoke (Birmingham), the gallery space has been transformed into a dark environment, echoing the feeling of a photographic dark room and the manual and tactile process of hand-developing black and white analogue film.

For the first time, Christopher is showing two archival video works. Transferred from super-8mm film and digitally projected, these videos touch back to back and show intimate portraits of women kissing and caressing. After attending film school in Buffalo, NY, in the 1980s, the focus of her work was conceptual and experimental. Moving to San Francisco in the early 1990s, Christopher's work developed further into photography, revelling in and capturing the mood of protest and confrontation with pleasure. These films mark the transitional time, working between photography and film, and depicting highly erotic queer connections, which can be seen in this footage. At this time Queer Nation were organising 'Kiss Ins', where mass groups of queer people were gathering for large-scale public kissing sessions as protest, and *Kiss-In* captures the mood of that time and a real political need to be visible. The second film, *Skin* 1988-90 focuses on the idea of pulling away and casting off an old restrictive skin, and is a metaphor for Christopher's coming into her sexual nature in an openly queer community in the Bay Area.

While exploring her archive for the exhibition at Grand Union, Christopher became interested in the 'heads and tails' of her film rolls, looking to the ephemeral, intimate and vulnerable aspects of

her photography practice. While making both commercial and personal work, the images captured on the first few negatives (while loading on the camera) and the last few negatives (while finishing off the roll) are often discarded as tests.

Heads and Tails, a series of four A1 prints brings these ideas together. Images were captured in the process of loading and unloading film, their spontaneous, and fleeting nature offers a glimpse of the vast expanse of the queer world that Christopher photographed. From blurry domestic scenes of bedroom ceilings, kitchen counters, and phone cords; to half exposed images that capture her working life taking light readings, pictures of her camera bags, or of her friends and colleagues in their studio. There are also strips of film taken at various *On Our Backs* shoots, capturing moments between shots; details like a pair of white heels, leopard print upholstery, or boot straps. Some of these photographs are over-exposed, leaving only fragments of the images, creating the opportunity to imagine what may have been there and to extend the frame.

On a light box in the space, you will find actual heads and tails negatives from the archive. You are invited to lean into these images and interact with them using the magnifier. As Christopher's photography engages with the body, so does this exhibition, encouraging visitors to become active participants and interact with the artwork.

Bringing an extra layer of tactility to the show, Christopher wants you to touch the work. On a table at the back of the room you will encounter two boxes of black and white 'test strips'. During the process of hand exposing photographs, Christopher focusses the images and tests out various light levels and paper stock. These 'test strips' of paper are usually discarded, but the artist has lovingly kept many of these, leaving traces of previous experiments. Visitors are invited to peruse these test strips, exploring the different textures and sensations these images may evoke.

This exhibition coincides with Christopher's solo exhibition *Contacts* at BALTIC in Gateshead, and together they represent the artist's first major retrospective. The exhibition at BALTIC opens on 23 October 2021, and is curated by Laura Guy.

Dark Room: San Francisco Sex and Protest, 1988–2003, is published by Book Works in October 2021. Phyllis Christopher's fearless and tender photographs fuse lesbian sex and queer protest against the backdrop of a city in flux. Relocating to San Francisco from her hometown Buffalo in the late-1980s, Christopher began to collaborate with her subjects to make images in which documentary and performance converge. *Dark Room* brings together fifteen years of Christopher's work, negotiating street, club, and studio, with camera in hand, to compose a portrait of a community simultaneously defining radical articulations of queer lesbian sexuality and defending its bodily autonomy in the face of right-wing politics, the AIDS crisis and urban gentrification. Reproducing photographs of startling intensity and sensuality alongside new writing by Susie Bright, Laura Guy, Michelle Tea and an interview with Shar Rednour, *Dark Room* is a heartfelt record of Christopher's devotion to an analogue tradition, to the pleasures of photographs and the community that made them.

Dark Room has been made possible with the support of a Develop Your Creative Practice Arts Council England Grant, and the generous support of individuals through Kickstarter.

Artist Biography

Phyllis Christopher was born in Buffalo, NY; lived and worked extensively in San Francisco and the Bay Area before moving to the North of England, Gateshead, where she now lives and works.

Phyllis Christopher is a photographer whose work documenting LGBTQ sexuality and protest in San Francisco has been published widely in anthologies such as *Nothing But The Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image* (Susie Bright and Jill Posener, 1996), *Photo Sex: Fine Art Sexual Photography Comes of Age* (David Steinberg, 2003), *Art & Queer Culture* (Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, 2013) as well as magazines such as *DIVA*, *Aperture* and *Art Monthly*. Between 1991 and 1994 Christopher was the photo editor of the groundbreaking lesbian erotica magazine *On Our Backs*. She has featured on HBO's 'Sexbytes', Canadian television's 'Sex TV' and the documentary film, *Erotica – A Journey into Female Sexuality*. Recently, her photographs have been included in various exhibitions including *On Our Backs: An Archive* (The NewBridge Project, Newcastle, 2016) and *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* (Nottingham Contemporary, De La Warr Pavilion and Arnolfini, Bristol, 2019). She is a 2020 finalist of the Queer|Art Robert Giard Grant for Emerging LGBTQ+ Photographers.

Special thanks to:

Irene Aristizábal, Harry Blackett, Gavin Overall, Laura Guy, Lucy Hammond, Lizzie Homersham, Robin Kirkham, Andrew Lacon, Matthew Moore, Glen Powis, Log Roper, Paul Sammut, Tamar Schlaim, Tom Skeens, Kate Sweeney, Joe Welden.

Extra special thanks to everyone at Grand Union, who have worked tirelessly on this project, and have done so with love.

Events Programme

Exhibition Launch

Friday 24 September
6–8pm

Join us for the opening of the solo exhibition by Phyllis Christopher at Grand Union Gallery. We will be launching with celebratory drinks and a chance to explore the show for the very first opening to the public.

Use the hashtag *#headsandtails* on our social media.

Breakfast Launch

Thursday 30 September
8.30–10.30am
(Food and refreshments included)

We are hosting a breakfast opening of Phyllis Christopher's exhibition on Thursday 30th September, 8.30 – 10.30am. This is an opportunity to see the show within a relaxed atmosphere over tea and coffee.

Eastside Projects will also be open 8.30–10.30am for a breakfast opening of their new exhibition LOOP, allowing you to see both exhibitions in one morning. For both events, no booking is necessary, however to maintain access for all, there will be a restricted capacity within the gallery and we are encouraging all staff, volunteers and our visitors to maintain social-distancing.

Digbeth First Fridays

1 October, 5 November, 3 December, 4 February
6–8pm

Digbeth comes alive on the first Friday of each month with exhibitions, late-night openings, special events, culture in unexpected spaces, live music and more. At Grand Union we will be opening late for you to see the Phyllis Christopher show.

Digbeth First Friday runs from 6pm 'til late and event times vary. We recommend you check the listings in advance so you can make the most of your evening. Maps are available online a few days before the event and at participating venues on the day.

Follow on twitter @digbethfirstfri and join in the conversation using *#digbethfirstfriday*

Photography workshop with Phyllis Christopher

February 2022
Open to LGBTIQ+ folks (10 maximum)

Join us at Grand Union in a photography workshop led by the artist Phyllis Christopher. This is an opportunity to talk about the nature of taking pictures, how we document our lives and how we represent ourselves. This is open to LGBTIQ+ folks.

To register your interest, please email kim@grand-union.org.uk.

Further Reading

BOOKS

Duggan, Lisa and Nan D. Hunter (2006), *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, New York: Routledge.

Feinberg, Leslie, (2002) *Stone Butch Blues*. Ann Arbor, Michigan; Firebrand Books.

Goldberg, Ariel. (2016) *The Estrangement Principle*, New York, USA: Nightboat Books.

Lawlor, Andrea. (2017) *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*. Chicago, USA:Rescue Press.

Schulman, Sarah. (2012) *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. Berkeley, California:University of California Press.

Samois (1987), *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, Boston, MA: Alyson Publications.

ARTICLES/ESSAYS

Butler, Judith (1984), 'Desire and Dread: The Meanings of What We Do', *Gay Community News Book Review*, September, 3–7.

Guy, Laura. (2017) *Sex Wars Revisited*, Aperture.

Bright, Deborah. (1999) 'Mirrors and Windowshoppers: Lesbians, Photography, and the Politics of Visibility', in Carol Squiers (ed.), *OverExposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, New York: New Press, pp.24–47.

Grover, Jan Zita (1989), 'Dykes in Context: Some Problems with Minority Representation', in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 163–202.

FILMS AND VIDEOS

BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and Sadoomasochism, (1995), Michelle Handelman dir.

The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire, Too, (1993), Janet Baus, Su Friedrich dir.

Rebel Dykes, (2021), Harri Shanahan, Siân A. Williams dir.

Framing Lesbian Fashion, (1992), Karen Everett dir.