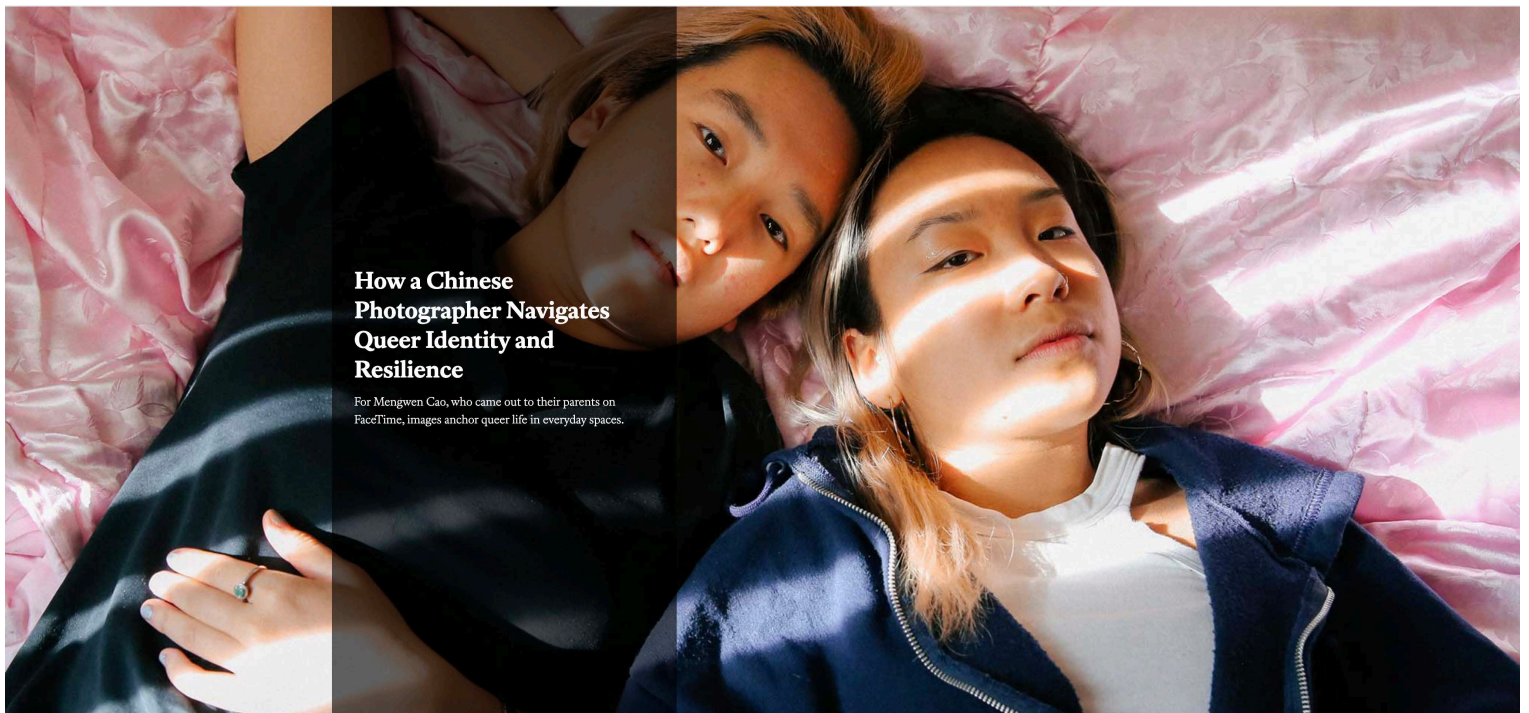


# How a Chinese Photographer Navigates Queer Identity and Resilience

For Mengwen Cao, who came out to their parents on FaceTime, images anchor queer life in everyday spaces.



Mengwen Cao, *Leslie and Caroline*, 2018

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Mengwen Cao doesn't want to drift. When the Chinese-born, New York-based photographer speaks about their life, they like to place themselves in metaphors of natural forces. "Some people swim far into the ocean. Others try to ride the waves," Cao says. "But I realize my favorite is to see the wave, and right before it comes, I jump in."

Cao's work tackles the forces that have, at times, unmoored their life. Their first project to receive wide recognition, *Here We Are* (2016), includes a recording of the FaceTime conversation in which Cao looked on as their parents viewed a video-letter they had made to come out as queer. "Twenty-two to twenty-five seems to be my belated adolescence, yet I try to follow my heart in everything I do," Cao recites in the video, as their mother leans her head onto her husband's shoulder, glancing at Cao, who is nervously covering their face on the other side of the screen.

Using the website design and UX skills they had acquired while studying education technology at the University of Texas at Austin, Cao created a digital portal (<http://mengwencao.com/hereweare/>) where their video could be shared alongside the stories of other Chinese LGBTQ people in New York City. *Here We Are* was widely circulated and landed two features in the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/learning/film-club-here-i-am.html>).

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Mengwen Cao, *Yellow Jackets Collective*, 2019

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After several years in the United States, Cao's experience of their shifting identity as a Chinese person inspired a digital project, *I Stand Between*

(<https://aperture.org/art/>) (<http://istandbetween.mengwencao.com/>) (2017–18). Turning their attention to the ambiguities and tensions of diasporic identity, Cao combined photography and audio interviews to build a digital platform about the experiences of transracial and transnational Asian American adoptees.

“I was trying to research alternative family structures, and wanted to talk about more nuanced forms of racism. Everyone I interviewed had very different experiences within loving families, but that doesn't mean that they didn't have problems,” Cao says. “So, how do you navigate the situation where someone who loves you still hurts you in ways that they might not even recognize? And how do you heal from that?”

In the interviews, Cao makes sure to include the touching pauses and reiterations in the voices of the people they spoke with—carefully tending to the gentle ambivalence of their subjects' accounts as they make sense of the discrimination and imperfect modes of caring wound into their upbringings.

The questions of how to navigate family, acknowledge pain, and seek healing are persistently probed by Cao's work. But with time, these are questions that Cao has learned to explore in collective settings, as they have become part of a community of queer, New York-based artists/activists enmeshed through the rhizomatic networks of Yellow Jackets Collective, Authority Collective, and BUFU.

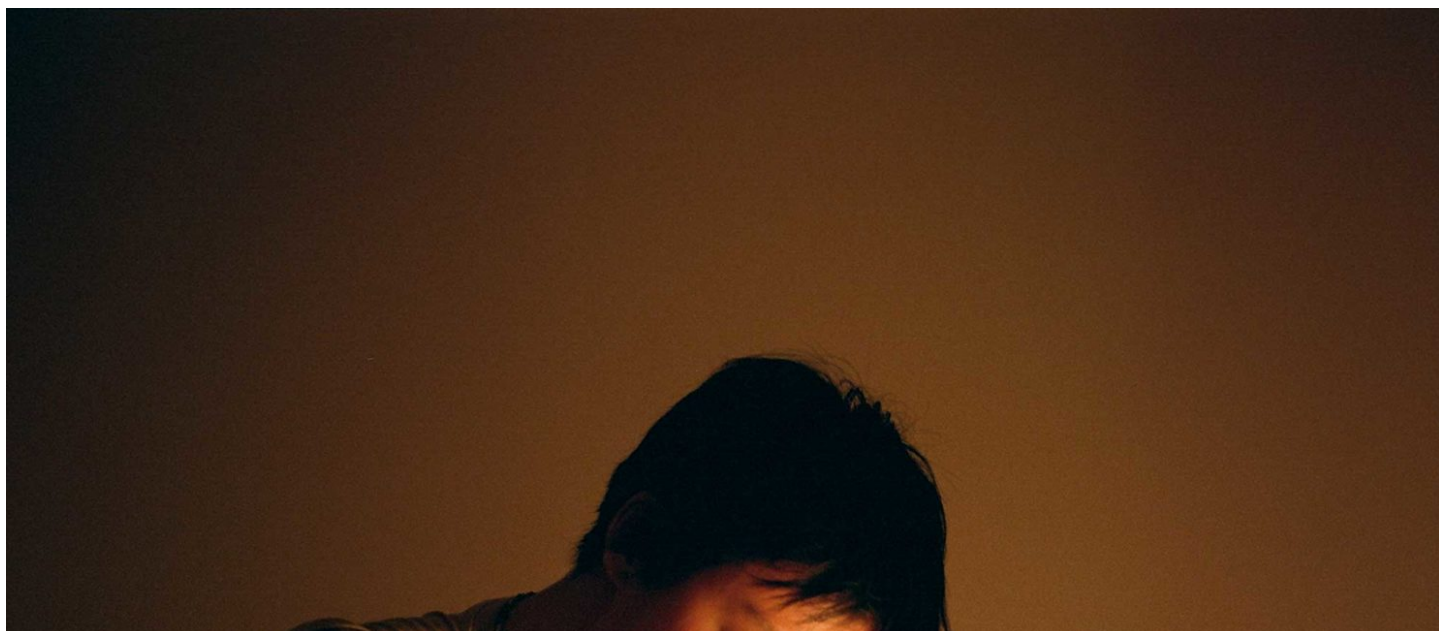


Mengwen Cao, *Sueann*, 2019

aperture groups://aperture.org Cao's most photographic series, *Liminal Space* (2017–ongoing), documents the queer friends/chosen family in their life that have been part of this process. Made over the course of the past three years, <https://aperture.org/cao/> Cao's disidentification from the world of images that gamify queer life into spectacularized visions of violence and/or glamour. Instead, the photographs in this series linger on the privacies and agencies that are perhaps too soft and silent to draw the eye of anyone other than a devoted friend—scenes that Cao refers to as “quiet moments.”

Reflecting on what “quiet moments” might mean, Cao describes a meditation technique that they've recently learned: listening “for the three layers of a song” and finding “the silence in between.” There is a kinship between this exercise and the way Cao has opted to capture queer life in *Liminal Space*. By documenting friends relaxing, cooking, or seeking out moments of privacy, *Liminal Space* enshrines the reprieves where queer people rest and make room for ecologies that better support their needs: the silence that structures queer noise/music/life. Choosing to work with natural light, Cao is skilled in capturing the glimmers, streaks, and shades that illuminate the rich inner landscapes tucked behind the quotidian intimacy of their portraits.

By anchoring queer life in everyday spaces, Cao's work refuses to see exploitation as the driving force of queer survival, and instead acknowledges the interior and exterior worlds that queer people have continually built to protect themselves and each other: “When I say I am marginalized, I don't actually believe it anymore. For me, this is my world. I'm gradually cultivating this community that I call family and friends. And we are the majority.”





Mengwen Cao, *Grace*, 2019



Mengwen Cao, *Sonia*, 2017



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Mengwen Cao, *Luke*, 2018

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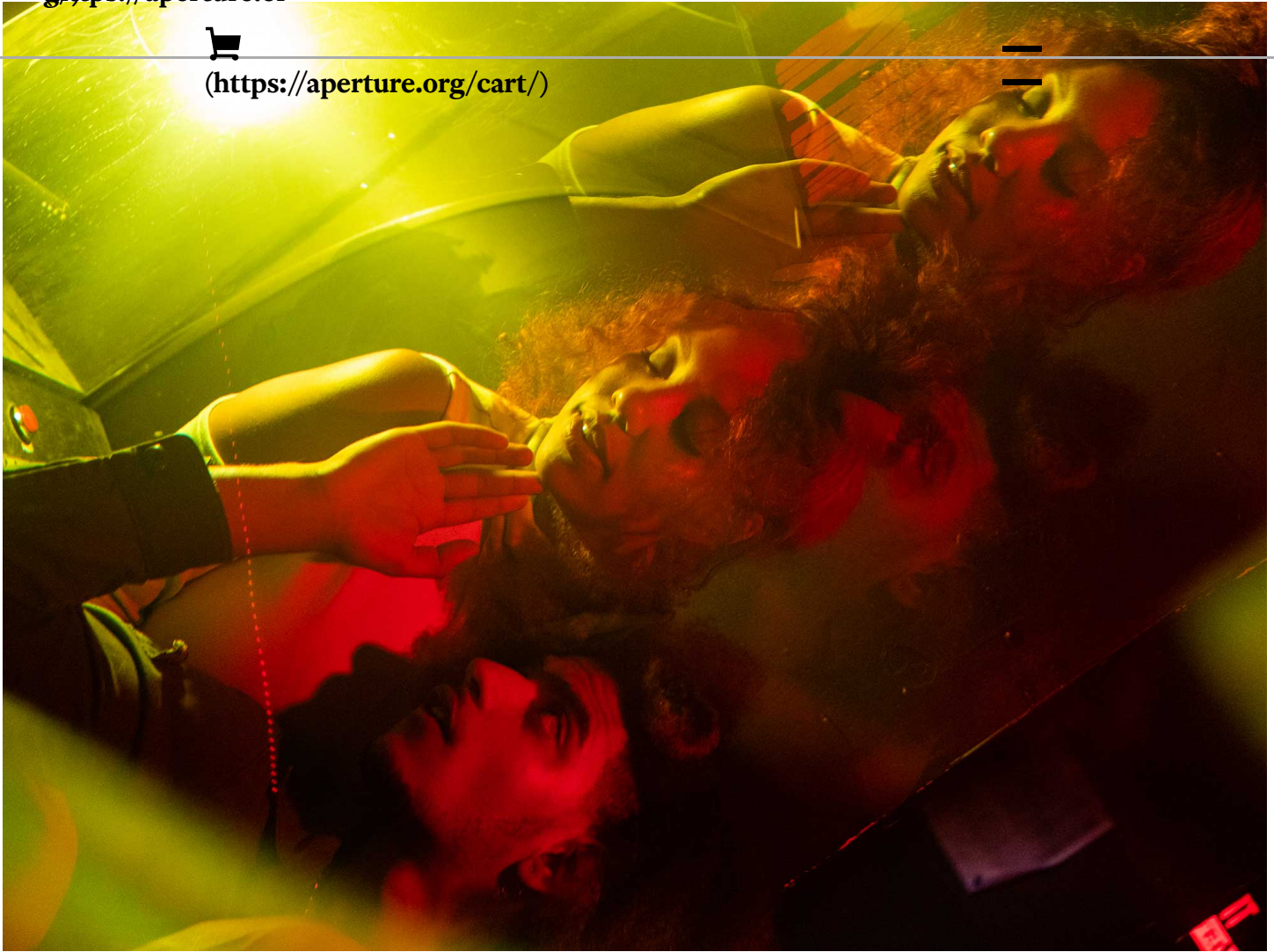


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Mengwen Cao, *Sandy*, 2018**aperture**  
https://aperture.org[\(https://aperture.org/cart/\)](https://aperture.org/cart/)Mengwen Cao, *Jazmin and Yeelen*, 2018

All photographs courtesy the artist

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*A previous version of this article misstated the title and scope of Mengwen Cao’s project *Here We Are* (2016). The original headline misidentified Cao as Chinese American; they are Chinese, not American. We apologize for the errors.*

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