

San Mei Gallery

Press Release

Sanctuary

Sam Ashby

27 September – 16 November 2024

PV: Thursday 26 Sept, 6–8pm

Image credit:

Sam Ashby, *Sanctuary* (still), 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.



San Mei Gallery presents *Sanctuary*, a solo exhibition by London-based artist-filmmaker Sam Ashby. Ashby's practice turns to queer narratives from history, animating forgotten, hidden, and otherwise marginal lives through film, writing and publications. This exhibition features a new film commission, *Sanctuary*, exploring queer spirituality and utopian sexualities through the figure of Peter Purusha Androgyne Larkin (1934–1988).

Larkin was a North-American Catholic monk who became a notable early gay filmmaker before moving to San Diego to establish himself as a cosmic-erotic mystic.¹ Shot on 16mm, *Sanctuary* offers a portrait of Larkin in absentia, weaving together the voices of his friends, lovers and those who have found inspiration in his work, evoking the life of a complex man who seems at once ahead of his time and yet inextricable from it.

In 1981, Larkin wrote and published *The Divine Androgyne According to Purusha*, which introduced his distinctive form of queer spirituality and functioned as a guidebook to achieve cosmic-erotic consciousness. Larkin's theories drew inspiration from the Gay Liberation and the Human Potential/New Age Consciousness movements, as well as Buddhism, Tantra, and Jungian psychology. In his book, Larkin prophesied a new tribe of erotically enlightened humans – 'Androgynes' – who were free from the repressions that society and organised religion placed upon them. According to Larkin, Androgynes were 'liberated and creative enough to go beyond the greatest taboo of our civilization: the fusion of sexual ecstasy and religious spirituality.' Emerging from a context in which religion had long had a violently prohibitive relationship to homosexuality, Larkin attempted to cultivate a culture of religious practice on queerness' own terms.

Housed within a purpose-built pentagonal structure based on a building designed by Larkin in the 1970s as his desert sanctuary, the film documents the complex and varied legacies of Larkin's ideas, including his attempt to build an intentional community around the 'sacred activity' of fisting. The chorus of disparate and distinct voices Ashby assembles hints at the possibility of a community of 'Divine Androgynes' that Larkin's bold work intended to manifest but which, as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, never came to be. Contemporary interpretations of queerness frequently position it within the framework of progressive liberalism, with its associated values of non-religiousness and tolerance. In *Sanctuary*, Ashby muses on an alternative and more confronting queer history steeped just as much in esotericism as eroticism, part of broader research by the artist into queer spiritual traditions with roots in late nineteenth-century Europe, particularly among theosophists, utopian socialists, and other dreamers.

Ashby's camera tenderly observes the environments Larkin once inhabited – the palm-lined shores and desert mountains of San Diego – allthwhile tracing Larkin's diffuse influence within the suburban homes of the West Coast and the arid landscapes of New Mexico. *Sanctuary* documents its subjects' everyday activities of leisure, sex, gardening and personal archiving, emphasising the practices of care and cultivation with which queer people have secured community within an all-too-hostile culture. In a cultural moment marked by queer assimilation, Ashby foregrounds the necessity of refuge, spaces for intimacy, vulnerability, and sex that can function as shelters for social imagination, until, as Larkin himself laments, "such time as the entire planet is recognised as a sanctuary."

¹ A Very Natural Thing, 1974, made under the name Christopher Larkin, was one of the first films about gay relationships intended for mainstream, commercial distribution.

Artist Biography

Sam Ashby (b. 1981) is a British artist based in London. Sam's archival, research-led practice is concerned with uncovering marginal narratives and activating them through film, writing and publishing. From 2010–2021 he edited, designed and published Little Joe, a journal for the discussion of film around subjects of sexuality and gender within a queer historical context. His first film, The Colour of His Hair (2017) premiered at International Film Festival Rotterdam and won the Best Documentary prize at London Short Film Festival 2018. His last, La Licorne (2022), was commissioned by Villa Noailles for the 90th anniversary of Île du Levant, a naturist colony in the South of France. He was an artist in residence at the Fire Island Artist Residency (FIAR, 2014), is a recipient of the Van Abbemuseum's Deviant Practice research grant (2018–2019), and is a MacDowell Colony Fellow (2016, 2019). Most recently, he has edited an anthology of Little Joe for SPBH Editions/MACK, and was an artist in residence at the Tom of Finland Foundation (2024).

Content Warning

This exhibition contains nudity and explicit descriptions of sex. Parental and viewer discretion is advised. If you have questions please contact us at info@sanmeigallery.co.uk.

Notes to editors

For further information and high-resolution images, please contact eleanor@sanmeigallery.co.uk.

San Mei Gallery is an independent non-profit space for contemporary art in South London, committed to research-led, educational and collaborative exchanges. Operating with an artist-led approach, we support artists and curators to experiment with new ideas.

San Mei Gallery
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Weds – Sat, 11 am to 6pm

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Support

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