

Jon Davies Talks Wu Tsang Exhibition and Queer Curation

by Joseph Henry 13/11/13



(Wu Tsang and Alex Segade, "Mishima in Mexico" [2012]. Courtesy of Michael Benevento.)

Toronto has long offered a rich environment for queer artists, critics, and curators to practice their crafts, and its current generation owes something to **Jon Davies** for its ongoing progress. Originally from Montreal, Davies has gained traction in the gallery and on the page, from assistant curator at the **Power Plant** (2008-2012) to his current role as **Oakville Galleries'** associate curator, and with myriad freelance projects along the way. Davies has further developed a sizeable career as critic, building on his primary interest of queer film and video and focusing on figures ranging from **Andy Warhol** to **Ryan Trecartin**.

Adding to this moving-image lineage, Davies recently organized at **Gallery TPW** a short showing of **Wu Tsang**, the LA-based performer and filmmaker who has galvanized queer and trans art through high-profile presentations like the **Whitney Biennial** and the **New Museum Triennial**. Davies's exhibition, titled "Show's Over," centers on Tsang's "MISHIMA IN MEXICO" (2012), a collaboration with video artist and performer **Alex Segade** that sees the pair dramatize **Yukio Mishima's** 1950 novel about an illicit relationship between a wealthy woman and her young gardener. Tsang and Segade play and alternate both roles, while intermittently breaking the frame to chat, gossip, complain, and further plan the reenactment in a Mexico City hotel room. **BLOUIN ARTINFO Canada** spoke with Davies on his exhibition's tricky play on

identity, and touched on issues pertaining to the status of queer art now and Toronto's diverse curatorial culture.

As someone who has worked with specifically queer film and video practices, what drew you to Tsang's work?

Tsang first stood out to me as a performer in the work of other artists, like that of **Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz** and **Andrea Geyer**. I remember regularly checking out his website to see what he was up to — for a long time it was his documentary feature “Wildness” (which ended up showing here in Toronto at **Hot Docs** in 2012), which I found out about in salient bits and pieces. I made contact with Tsang soon after, while I was working on my exhibition “Coming After” at the Power Plant, and I have been dazzled by the number of strong works he has produced particularly in the time since his 2011 residency at the **New Museum**. The slate of public programs he organized, with the wonderful title “We Remember Stories, Not Facts,” resonated with me, especially as it circulated around the history of trans and queer cinemas and **Jennie Livingston**'s contentious classic “Paris Is Burning” in particular.

In general, I see Tsang's work as bringing a range of queer emotions and insights to bear on salient questions that have emerged around identity and collectivity, and performance and desire. I'm also excited that his practice draws on [themes like] conceptualism, theatricality, and activism.

Building on this, why these works in your show? I read in “MISHIMA IN MEXICO” an ambiguous casting of identity: Tsang and Segade portray themselves and alternatively the two characters in the novel in a way that feels unstable and self-reflexive.

I see “MISHIMA IN MEXICO” as a conceptual melodrama. Identity is shaped by emotion, and its fluidity is taken for granted here, so instead there is more of a focus on how one's position at any specific moment exists in tension with others and with social forces and the weight of history. Tsang and Segade's constant shifting between being behind-the-scenes and on-stage, between the creators and their characters, is one way of keeping themselves always in flux and expanding the narrative of the Mishima novel they are working from and refusing any essentialism around race, class, gender, and sexuality: [they engage] in a play of desire and power instead. I love the idea of the hotel room, two artists and a book in “lockdown,” where all the research and development, production and reception happen at once.

These works have been shown in a number of venues before, including a high-profile presentation of “MISHIMA IN MEXICO” at LA MOCA and the Whitney Museum's “Blues for Smoke” exhibition. How do you locate Tsang and his work within a current climate of queer art and artists?

I like to think that there has been increased, in-depth attention paid not just to queer and trans artists' practices, but a shift from looking at how those identities and histories reflect on the themes of an artist's work to how they function as sensibilities, styles, theories, and critical frameworks. Tsang's work is so seductive and so self-reflexive at once, that I feel like it is creating

and deconstructing itself at every moment, in addition to the rich legacies of queer and trans representation, which are perhaps more visible in domains like the cinema.

I don't tend to pay a lot of attention as to where work has previously presented before I exhibit it in Toronto or at Oakville Galleries. I first saw "MISHIMA IN MEXICO," for example, when Segade excerpted it in a panel discussion at the New Museum on expanded forms of reenactment in queer performance, during a residency by the **NEA Four**, so it was initially contextualized for me by the Culture Wars, and also by figures like **Emily Roysdon**, **Malik Gaines**, and **Cynthia Carr**.

To what extent should we consider queerness as the primary entry point to Tsang's work here: are we being too reductive?

Tsang's work is very specifically engaged with queer and trans lines of inquiry and representation — and of course that is not the sum total of the work — but I don't think there is any shame in artists' or curators' practices orienting themselves around those points. These histories are so vast and complex, constantly expanding, being revisited and revised. They are at the center, not the periphery. As a political and cultural project, I'm interested in setting new defaults for how we think of ourselves and the world, even if just as a thought experiment. Like, what would it mean to start assuming that every child born was going to be queer rather than heterosexual, or for queer cultural legacies to be accepted as the backbones of art history?

You've worked in a number of Toronto institutions, and of course done your own freelance curating and criticism. How do you find Toronto as an art community in terms of curation, within and beyond queer circles?

I think there is a lot of interesting curating happening in Toronto both in large institutions with staff curators and in artist-run organizations and scrappier initiatives. In terms of queer curating, I think of the field very broadly, so ranging from the many thematic group exhibitions and solo shows that someone like **Philip Monk** has organized over his career, to the beautiful group exhibitions that **Luis Jacob** curated for the Blackwood and Justina M. Barnicke galleries at the University of Toronto. The Power Plant has brought a number of queer projects to Toronto over the years, particularly during **Helena Reckitt**'s tenure. Then there are the initiatives of completely DIY spaces like the **Feminist Art Gallery** in **Allyson Mitchell** and **Deirdre Logue**'s Parkdale backyard, and **Videofag** in Jordan Tannahill and **William Ellis**'s Kensington Market flat; media arts exhibitors like **Pleasure Dome**, the **Images Festival** and **Vtape**, which have always been very queer in their programming; and the queer interests of younger curators like **Johnson Ngo**, **Julia Paoli**, and **Erin Silver**. Last but not least, I continue to think a lot about **Tejpal Singh Ajji**'s dazzling 2007 exhibition "Rightfully Yours" at the Barnicke Gallery as key for thinking about queer practices, particularly as it was more broadly about cultural and political trespass and boundary-crossing.

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