

# BULLETT

**A CURSORY** Google search reveals the official term for the way Wu Tsang wears his hair: chonmage. Samurai in Edo-era Japan popularized the style, a glossy topknot and shaved pate that made it easier to affix a helmet to the skull. But Tsang's work as a performance artist isn't about intimidation or armor. He wants people to let down their guard.

When he calls from Los Angeles, where he's lived since 2005, it's easy to understand how Tsang has made a name for himself in the art world by planning parties. Even over the phone, he's excitable and generous with verbal reassurances. Within minutes, it's obvious what a welcome relief he'd be in a crowded room. He'd probably clutch your shoulder, compliment your outfit, and confess something intimate, which doesn't mean Tsang's work is at all frivolous. While he might be the life of the party, his exploration of identity politics is anything but safe. As a transgender-identified second-generation Chinese artist, he's concerned—maybe even a little obsessed—with facilitating improbable interactions, ones whose friction is rife, always and inevitably, with the possibility for conflict.

For months now, Tsang has been promoting *Wildness*, a documentary he made while co-hosting a weekly dance party of the same name at the Silver Platter from 2008 to 2010, a storied L.A. bar that's served as a debauched safehouse for the Hispanic and LGBT communities since it opened in 1963. The film, which screened earlier this year to enthusiastic acclaim at both SXSW and the Whitney Biennial after making its world premiere at the New York Museum of Modern Art's Documentary Fortnight, is structurally conventional. Though it includes footage of performances by *Wildness* co-founders DJs NGUZUNGUZU and Total Freedom, along with improvised choreography by party guests, viewers are left with a familiar understanding both of the bar and its characters. The story has a definite narrative, its pacing is chronological, and its subjects are frank. First and foremost, Tsang wanted the film to be entertaining and accessible.

"The challenge was trying to find that balance between taking risks and letting people do things they don't usually have space to do in regular life," Tsang says. The party, which drew gay youth to a bar previously favored by an older clientele, eventually included less marginalized groups of people—artists and hipsters, many of them straight and white. The weekly party became a study in urban gentrification and, needless to say, met its fair share of dissent from some of the older patrons.

Tsang says he understands the desire to protect the privacy of a place like the Silver Platter, but that doesn't mean he agrees with the

xenophobic instincts of his critics. "I feel like the solution to that problem is never about separating," he says. "It's never like, 'Oh, we need to get out of here.' Because that's just segregation, that's weird reverse isolationism or something." *Wildness*, says Tsang, was about "the uncomfortability of what it means to share space."

A party, as Tsang well knows, begins long before the dancing does. *Wildness* was as much a social experiment as it was a performance. Tsang's systemic question—"What goes into creating an environment?"—addressed not only the real-time happenings of the night but also the managing of the guests' perception and anticipation of the night. Once he's there, the issues become more loaded: Who are these spaces for? Who do they include? Who do they exclude?

Though he's been thinking about hosting-as-art for years, Tsang is quick to admit there's a "kind of creepy" meaning to the word "host." Free-associating is easy: parasites, spirit-channeling. "It kind of gets to the edges of what it means to be a person," he says, which is also the intent of so much of his work. Nowhere are those

edges more blurred than on the dance floor, where music drowns out heartbeats and strobe lights spangle both friends and enemies into uniform anonymity.

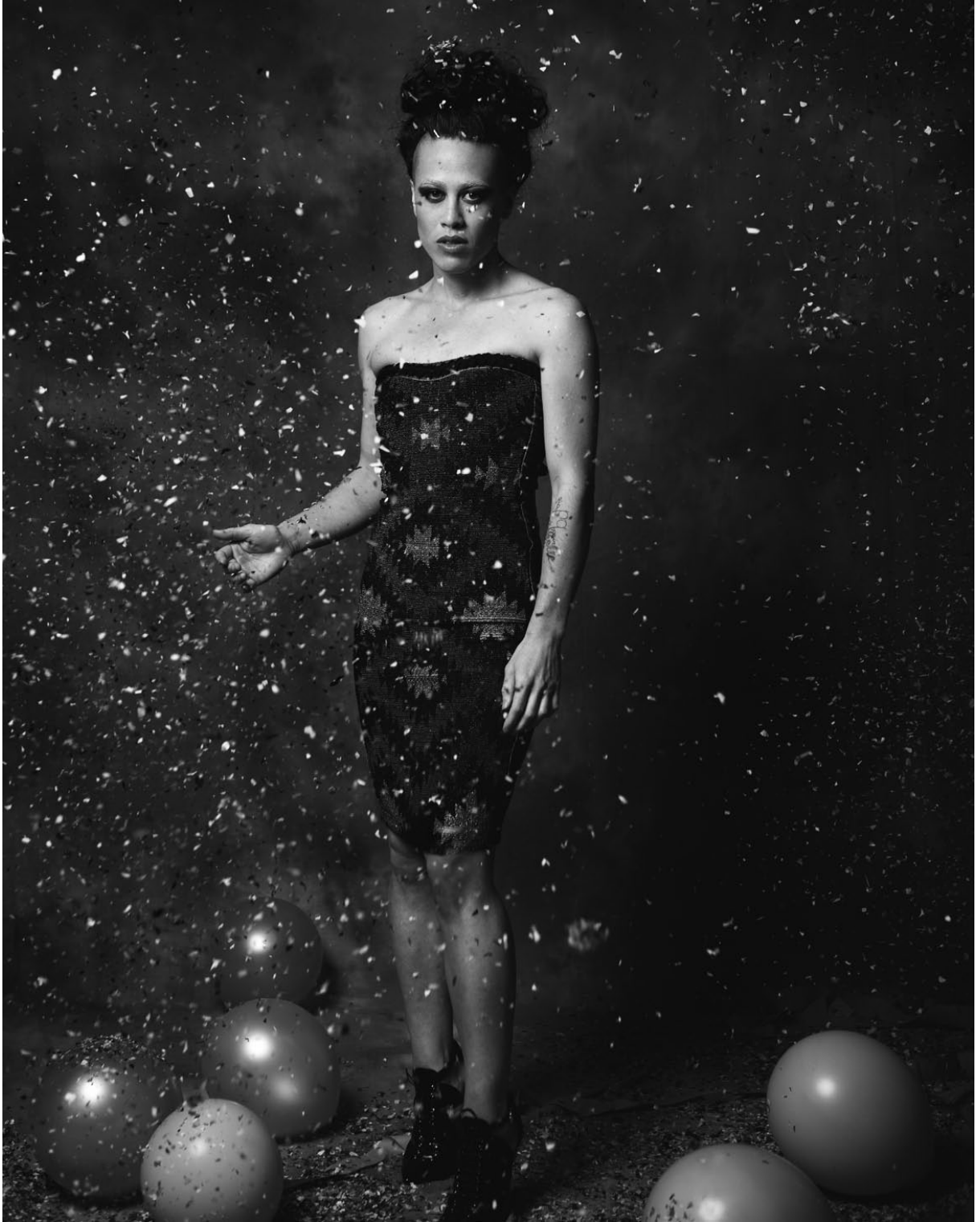
Tsang has been busy since *Wildness*, the party, ended in 2010. This year alone he's gained more mainstream attention than ever before. *Green Room*, his installation for the Whitney Biennial, purposefully obfuscates the differences between private and public spaces. Tsang created a dressing room, complete with furniture, carpeting, mirrors, and Christmas lights, that's only open to museumgoers when fellow Biennial performers aren't using it as an actual dressing room. He also had two videos in "The Ungovernables," the New Museum's triennial, which this year was themed around the disintegration of Western colonialism. In *Shape of the Right Statement*, a five-minute loop, Tsang eerily restages a manifesto by the autism-rights activist Amanda Baggs. The analogies between trans rights and autism rights aren't hard to parse—in both cases, Tsang says, society decides what parts of you are healthy and acceptable.

"Being a person is this really wobbly thing," he says. "You're only legible or recognized as such if you're able to communicate in certain ways. And if you don't communicate in those ways, then people think you're crazy." But it's Tsang's creative insanity that makes his art so hard to ignore. And his goal—to reveal the inner sameness of people—really couldn't be clearer. ☼

## TWIST OF FÊTE

by Alice Gregory  
photography by Lauren Ward  
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Performance artist Wu Tsang knows how to throw a killer party. But there's more to his revelry than meets the eye.



Alice Gregory, Bullet Magazine, June 2012, p. 218-219.