

CLIFTON BENEVENTO

LOCATION: 515 BROADWAY NEW YORK NY 10012 PHONE: 212 431 6325 FAX: 212 334 4703
EMAIL: INFO@CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM WEBSITE: WWW.CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM

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Outfest: Wu Tsang's 'Wildness' documents the Silver Platter scene

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The bar talks in the documentary, named after the party night the former art student helped throw at the Silver Platter.



Wu Tsang, a Los Angeles filmmaker and performance artist, is photographed on a rooftop near MacArthur Park. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles...)

Wu Tsang was a 25-year-old art student when he and some friends decided to start a weekly club night at the Silver Platter, an immigrant gay bar near

MacArthur Park.

On most nights, dolled-up transgender Latinas swirled around a checkered dance floor, singing in Spanish and sipping \$4 glasses of champagne. But Wildness, as Tsang's Tuesday night party was called, drew a different crowd. Now each week, flocks of artists, queer punks and dance music junkies packed the bar for boundary-pushing performances and DJ sets.

The collision of the two undergrounds — and the unintended consequences of the party's growing popularity — is chronicled in a documentary by Tsang that plays at Outfest on Saturday, July 21. The Silver Platter, with its glittering drapes and sultry pink lights, is the unmistakable star of the film, also called "Wildness." Voiced by a transgender actress from Guatemala, the bar literally speaks, whispering about the generations of gays who have found sanctuary there, away "from the ignorance, the fear and hatred of the outside world."

"I kept them safe," the Silver Platter tells us, "like a silver bullet-proof vest."

Tsang, a transgender 30-year-old, is intrigued by the idea of "safe spaces" where people can build community and act freely without fear of discrimination.

The bar has inspired much of his recent work, including a video installation at this year's Whitney Biennial that caught the eye of New York Times art critic Roberta Smith, who praised the video's "heady combination of lush atmosphere, personal confession and social criticism." A separate video that took on the topic of rights for people with autism was featured at the New Museum's Ungovernables Triennial in New York this past spring. Some of that piece was also filmed at the bar.

Tsang is passionate about the Silver Platter, but he is wary of myth-making. The bar was never "'Cheers' for queers," he says: "It's not just some utopia." He goes to pains in his film to show that even safe spaces are contested, partly to challenge ideas about gay, lesbian and transgender community held by the

mainstream. And if that makes the film more complicated, well, that's precisely the point. "In my art and as a person, I just tend to be OK with contradiction," Tsang says.

With freckled cheeks, a shiny black bun and impeccable fashion sense (think high-waisted slacks and heels), Tsang is one of the most recognizable faces in a growing group of transgender performers and filmmakers mixing politics and art. Two of them, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, helped on his film.

He grew up outside of Boston to an Anglo mother and a Chinese immigrant father. He says he regrets never learning to speak Chinese, and he tells a story about the time as a young boy he put a dress on a toy dinosaur, but for the most part he doesn't linger on questions about his youth. "I came from a place where I never want to go back," he says.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, he hooked up with a group of queer artists who felt more like home. They started a warehouse space and in 2004 hosted a convergence of feminist artists from across the country for a weekend of collaborations producing television pilots. Few of the pilots actually came to fruition, but the experience taught Tsang something about what happens when people come together. "The end result," he says, "is usually very different than what you expected."

Tsang was working toward his MFA at UCLA and living in MacArthur Park when he discovered the Silver Platter with his friends Ashland Mines (a DJ known as Total Freedom) and Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda (who collaborate on a DJ project called NGUZUNGUZU). A rainbow flag flew near the front door, and a bronze cast penis hung behind the bar. Tsang thought it was marvelous. He had never seen so many transgender women in one place.

The Silver Platter, which opened in 1963, is the oldest gay bar in the MacArthur Park area. For years, the film tells us, it was a magnet for men in Tejano boots and big cowboy hats who had immigrated from Mexico and Central America. In

the early 1990s, after the original owner died of AIDS and left the bar to his brother, a few people started showing up in dresses. Soon, it was dozens, and the bar became known as a rare place where *vestidas*, as cross-dressers are called in Spanish, could gather.

To be transgender can be hard. To be transgender and immigrant in a tough neighborhood like MacArthur Park can be even harder. In the film, Morales, the director of the bar's weekend drag show, says he doesn't dare walk around the neighborhood in his blond wigs because "someone will walk by and they're going to break my mouth."

When Wildness was launched in 2008, some regulars felt upstaged by the crowds of college-educated hipsters. "They would say, 'That was the night for *los gringos*,'" said Mariana Marroquin, who worked as a translator on the film and who plays the voice of the bar.

But some embraced it, like Erika, an immigrant from Honduras who grew close to Tsang, even though they didn't speak the same language.

A community was forming. It was the kind where people didn't always know each other's phone numbers but knew they could find each other every Tuesday, dancing to cumbia-inspired beats until closing time. Tsang said it felt like a rare refuge in a city and in an age in which "it's harder and harder to have a sense of place."

Performances by artists like Ron Athey and Ryan Trecartin attracted art world buzz. But the hype came with a price. In 2008, LA Weekly named the Silver Platter "best tranny bar in Los Angeles." In a graphic review, the author referred to the bar-goers as prostitutes.

The article sparked an outcry in the Wildness crowd. Some sent hate mail, complaining that the party organizers had exposed the Silver Platter to unwanted attention. The word "Occupied" appeared in spray paint outside of the bar. Tsang

tried to understand their concerns. "For a moment it seemed that our party was actually posing a critical threat to the very notion of the Silver Platter as a safe space," he says.

The situation got worse when Gonzalo Ramirez, the owner of the bar, died in 2010. A dispute over ownership ensued between Ramirez's ex-boyfriend and his sister. When Tsang weighed in, taking the side of the ex-boyfriend, the sister stopped talking to Wu. She won the ownership fight, and she and Wu eventually repaired their relationship, but Wildness was done for.

It was around that time that Tsang was forced to close the transgender legal clinic he had helped establish next door to the bar because of a lack of money. In the film, the Silver Platter chides Wu for his mistakes.

Tsang and his co-writer, Roya Rastegar, decided to have the bar speak so it would be clear that the story was partly fiction. After all, Tsang says, there are so many truths. He says his next film project may be more of an invented story. The burden of representation, of telling stories about the lives real people, gives him anxiety. Among his planned projects for the coming months are a video for MOCA and a big exhibition in Korea.

But first, another party. There will be a fabulous one after "Wildness" screens at Outfest, at the Directors Guild of America theater complex in West Hollywood. For the last couple of weeks, Tsang has been handing out invitations around MacArthur Park. The ladies of the Silver Platter, who still love, laugh and live at the bar even though the art kids have moved on, are all invited.