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# PERFORMA MAGAZINE

## Myth and Legacy in WILDNESS

By A.E.Zimmer



An aged beauty sits in front of the washed out ambers and reds of a nightclub revealed in daylight. With articulate hands she gestures with a finesse learned when one is practiced in transforming oneself. Chatty and light, she reflects on her past. She remembers why and when she first tried on women's clothing, and the Silver Platter, the downtown Los Angeles bar that encouraged her to do so. When discussing the Silver Platter's patrons, she brightens. She recalls the occasional comparisons and jealousies between the emigrant Hispanic transwomen who frequented there, as every Tuesday night, the historic gay bar housed an influx of young artists, musicians, and creatives. The mash-up caused not a little competition, forcing locals to rub up against what some understood as "blancos of every color".

Yet, for the beauty in the barstool, the ageist rivalries that arose from such intersection seemed to her, inevitable. Flanked by chipped paint and jewel tone streamers, she remembers the cattiness of those nights warmly, her voice without envy or reproach. She tilts her head and smiles, full of a dreamy nostalgia—"All of this?" she asks, and with a lightness motions over herself. "All of these ruins were once a monument".



Such is the tone of Wu Tsang's *Wildness*, the artist's newest work and second foray into narrative filmmaking and documentary. Screened at the Whitney Museum's 2012 Biennial, *Wildness* is a film kaleidoscopic in intent, exploring the class-gender overlap of a party (of the film's namesake) hosted by the bar—and engineered by Tsang and a crew of performers, DJ's and musicians— whilst also exploring the Silver Platter's iconic history and community within downtown L.A. *Wildness*, both the film and party that lends its name, is a dissection of what happens when the analytic minds of young intellectuals converge with the outstanding realities of emigrant urban and Hispanic communities. It is a film at once ecstatic and mournful in its memory of the now defunct party. Ecstatic for the bonds and community forged within the bar's walls, yet tinged with the trepid fear and danger risked by those who ventured outside.

The emigrant transwomen who face legal, social, and political ramification populate this film like powdered revolutionaries, their stories interwoven with equal parts nightlife and activism, scored by original music from Total Freedom, Nguzunguzu and others.

*Wildness* anticipates a hairsplitting of differences within race, class and gender , but does not try to confirm them. Instead, and like much of Tsang's past work, including his "Full Body Quotation", a performance shown in Performa 11, *Wildness* hinges on an interest and self-consciousness in understanding voice and representation, doing as much to include a wide breath of individuals as much as it to be self-aware of their exigent contrasts and contradictions.

On the last day of *Wildness*' screening at the Whitney, a conversation with Tsang and filmmaker Matt Wolf continued the dialogue of voice, narration, and representation raised by the film. Wolf, the director of *Wild Combination*, a documentary on Arthur Russell, and the forthcoming *Teenage*, initiated talk of auteur-ship and the limitations of narrative, especially within the context of queer and experimental filmmaking.

"I think that it's always a trade-off that I've come to terms with, that sometimes you sacrifice meaning and complexity in order to tell a good story, and sometimes there are reasons to want to do that" Tsang reflects. "All of that struggle that was apart of the process of putting together this story, I think, is the thing that the film has become. And that's what I could have hoped for."



In their discussion of Tsang's use of voice and voiceover, Tsang mentioned his anxiety in projecting a singular "trans-experience" to a wider audience. "I'm noticing this trend— it's not that the world doesn't want to see queer people of color, it's that they want to see a certain kind of representation. If you make something that pushes through that boundary...that can cause a lot of discomfort in wondering what is an authentic representation." In response, Wolf recites *Wildness*'s opening lines, spoken by the Silver Platter itself: "Time changes everything. What will become of me? Who will tell of my legacy?" These concepts, Wolf says, are big concepts. They are huge contemplations, largely unanswerable, and it is in the bar's lines that Tsang's representational worries are navigated.

Whimsy, when employed effectively, can to regulate a confrontation or problem in subject matter. The decision to give the Silver Platter a literal voice (played by artist Marianna Marrioquin) is inherently fantastic, and furthermore, can allow Tsang a kind of deflection. A tome worth exploring throughout the legacy of transcinema, the whimsy in *Wildness* allows an ease in exploring problematic subject matter, whilst also allowing Tsang a shirking or side-step



in becoming a kind of posterchild for a “transidentity” oft demanded from those who view a film like *Wildness* with expectation. Indeed, whimsy helps mitigate any of these ruffled feathers, or anyone who cites the inconsistencies of the cast’s levels of privilege, public voice, race, gender or class.

It’s *Wildness*’s very interest in scope that lends it a piecemeal quality, at its core a hybridist enterprise of ideas than anything else. The narratives and tropes of transcinema broken down or readjusted through Tsang’s conceptual lens are broad and ambitious, enveloping the cast of characters in the imagined future of an activist. The ghostly, magical remembrances of those Tuesday nights allow the memory of its patrons to exist in an unidentified post-Silver Platter utopia, where the women of Silver Platter are safe in Tsang’s deconstruction. Their bodies, unspecified as “other”, are liberated by any restraints that articulate transgender experience today. But these joys, in the end, are lyrical and mythic ruminations, hopefully imagined and speculative.



As such an envisioned utopia remains foggy in our mind’s eye, a feeling of unfinished-ness lingers in *Wildness*. This is perhaps its biggest draw and biggest detraction, attributed not just to its narrative ambitions but also to the film’s ongoing reconfiguring (a visit to the film’s blog candidly illuminates its many incarnations). Even Tsang’s denial of a committed interest in narrative filmmaking backs up the film’s haphazard, all-in-the-pot quality; but not without dealing with a care and sensitivity toward his subjects.

Ultimately, *Wildness*’s rough edges are as exact as anything, a portrait of the precise tears in community fabrics and identities that, unbeknownst to many, are always falling in and out of

fray. In this work, unfinished becomes unfettered, and after the film's end we can leave fantasizing of a carefree clumsiness and frailty in life that little few are ever offered in these times. So the memory of *Wildness* is wild—our imaginations dance with wild life.

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