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Wu Tsang

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In spite of its defiant title, “Not in my language,” mutinously followed up by an electric-blue neon sign reminding entering visitors that **THE FIST IS STILL UP** (a work ironically titled *Safe Space*, 2014), Wu Tsang’s European institutional debut was an accessible best-of sampler. The exhibition encompassed his portrayals of race, sexual identity, and emerging forms of life, ranging from LA’s latest queer/transgender subset to Berlin’s clubby-organic everyday along the Berghain-Kreuzberg-Schöneberg axis. In other words: It was quite a stretch.



Wu Tsang, *DAMELO TODO // ODOT OLEMAD* (Gimme Everything // Gnihtyreve Emmig), 2010/2014, production still from the 25-minute color video (with sound) component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising wood, mirrors, carpet, and a bench.

Once upon a time, there was the Silver Platter, a bar in LA’s MacArthur Park area that catered to a predominantly Latino transgender and gay community. There, Tsang hosted a weekly “Wildness” party, an occasional social mixer at which the city’s MFA set encountered the bar’s literally more colorful patrons. In the video *DAMELO TODO // ODOT OLEMAD* (Gimme Everything // Gnihtyreve Emmig), 2010/2014, the Silver Platter represents a shielded microcosm allowing for the iridescent implementation of the Dream Act in various forms by a clientele often contending with being queer and undocumented.

Tsang especially focuses on character development via the power of style to engender an emancipatory visibility that could well be called conventional owing to its roots in makeover-TV formats. Hardworking bodies get concealed, augmented, and heavily made up in all the right places, although in this aesthetic enclave, such normatively coded optimizations are subject to redistribution. Thus, those previously deemed “alien minors”—or simply expelled as faggy have-nots—reemerge as majesties commanding their own glittering, if transient, stage, enacting a sovereignty otherwise largely denied them.

Context is not everything, but the exhibition’s Berlin-themed segment made it clear that the stakes of one cultural milieu do not easily transfer to another—or altogether exist there. While Tsang’s latest work, *A day in the life of bliss*, 2014, skirts this by purporting to draw on science fiction, this rather mundane video diary sees the artist’s sidekick-*cum*-muse—the performance-artist boychild here playing the near-identical character BLIS—mostly partying, texting, and working out. All these activities add up to one and the same thing, as it turns out, when kabuki-Zumba adaptations are refined during the day in the requisite precariat-chic fin-de-siècle apartment, to be later performed at the club and likely simultaneously hyped on social media. Later in the video, BLIS and her friends are rounded up by an imaginary POLITZ€ squad at a club, implying a threat to this lifestyle by some neoliberal-fascist power—part gestapo, part European Central Bank. In the face of Putin’s dire vision for Moscow, such a scene might possess real urgency (or even in LA, where a warehouse party could still be raided by the notoriously corrupt LAPD). In the video’s Berlin, it felt out of place, the city still being touted as the capital of affordable debauchery in the *New York Times* Travel section.

The increasing supersession of drag by fashion in Tsang’s meditation on the polysexual creative class, meanwhile, makes for some of the most candid and entertaining scenes in *A day*. Getting ready for a night out is itself a work of art, as BLIS’s tongue gets painted blue and endless headgear is contemplated, resulting in looks labeled “a condom with . . . pores” and “fresh prince of hell,” all viable inspirations, one imagines, for Raf Simons’s and Givenchy’s coming seasons.

“I want to be a professional model, behind cameras, in the high-fashion world,” states a cast member in the film *For how we perceived a life* (Take 3), 2012, Tsang’s self-reflexive reenactment of fragments drawn from the legendary 1990 drag documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Now that such aspirations have successfully been actualized—cue boychild’s previous modeling runway gig for the so-far-still-trending New York label Hood By Air—where will Tsang’s assured update of formerly outcast desires and aesthetics surge next?

—Daniel Horn