’Life doesn’t stop for me; life doesn’t stop for anybody.’

November 24, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Wyatt Tan, “Carved by Time”

Wyatt Tan finds the beauty in decay. He works in a number of mediums, including photography, drawing and pop-up “installations.” His photography explores the beauty of aging, the richness of the lived experience, and finding joy in spontaneous moments. Tan was accompanied by his husband, Mark Nomadiou, when he spoke with Visual AIDS intern Maia Paroginog about artistic integrity, resilience, and embracing all the strange turns in one’s life.

Follow Wyatt on Instagram and see his work on his website.

Wyatt, can you give me an overview of your artistic background and practice?

Wyatt Tan: I pick up whatever material is given to me, having limited resources, I make something out of it.

I was never really trained as an artist until I got a scholarship, came to the States, and pursued somewhat of an artistic program at Parson's. Although it was more of a writing than a design aspect, I was seeing and appreciating visual shapes and colors. That's also where I met my husband, Mark, who inspired me to sketch. So I thought, "Wow, I can do this even though I don't know how to draw."

My last show was part of the Open Studios at Peekskill Westchester. I pulled miracles out of no budget and no resources because I was asked to use an old restaurant, which was in shambles. They asked me to utilize that space to create a pop-up gallery.

I used scaffolding and beams and made something out of it. I thought it was brilliant. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. I used a space that was deemed a liability. And I always deliver on my promises.

What did the restaurant look like when you were done with it?
Tan: It looked like a steam punk-y, industrial carpenter's workstation, kind of like Frankenstein's lab. There were old candlelight fixtures, an installation out of paella pots, a Buddha I carved out of flatware, and an old stepladder to create a shrine. We pulled off some amazing stuff. We used a lot of found objects. The restaurant itself is a historical building from the mid-1700s. The wood is beautiful and they wanted me celebrate that space.

Mark Nomadiou: Wyatt created a space that was nostalgic. People thought, "wow I remember that!" Wyatt had used so much of the material from the building, like, the cash register.

Tan: There were objects that were heartbreakingly beautiful. This woman came up to me and told me, "I remember this cash register. I came here to eat and I remember that cash register specifically the day before I gave birth to my daughter." She was in tears.

Nomadiou: Wyatt was really creating community around this pop-up space. This was something Wyatt had never really done before. It was very effective, what he did. In terms of creativity, it's like who and what are you producing for? Your work can be hijacked. It inhibits your ability to create, because it's hard to proceed if you're being told what to do.

Tan: There was a functionality to it, me using that space. Some people definitely saw it as a piece of art.

That work you did with the restaurant really speaks to your Visual AIDS artist's statement. You talk about decay and aging. Can you elaborate on this?
Tan: I've always had a fascination with the grotesque. I see beauty in it. I like rainy days, I hate sunny days. When people complain about how they age, I see their story, the provenance, and everything rich coming from what they experienced. That's why I love things that have an age to

it. I love to take pictures of people when they least suspect it, especially my grandmother. There's a picture of her that I took that the day before I left for the States, and she passed four months later. It opened up a lot of conversations. People loved that her face was carved by time.

Sometimes I feel like I'm racing against time because I'm HIV positive. My health isn't at its peak stage. I'm dealing with a lot of pain. But I have that little shred of time where I can enjoy things and people who have experienced more--people who have long chapters in their lives. It makes me see my experience through their eyes.

I even see it in objects like old bottles and dead flowers. I watch all the beautiful dahlias flop over, and it saddens me that it's the first time I've watched the whole cycle of something grow, flower, and die. I have a grasp of those cycles, which makes it easier to go through life.

Nomadiou: You [Wyatt] were surprised at your artist's ability when you picked up a pencil. But you knew your abilities with the camera. I hated pictures of myself until Wyatt started taking them. When he uses the camera to see things that he cares about and loves, the pictures are amazing. He shot faces, our cat, flowers and birds. This is why I fell in love with him. It was when we first met; I couldn't reach him one day on the phone because he was out chasing squirrels in the backyard. I thought, "That's a guy who's got his priorities in order."

That shows in his pictures. I wanted to encourage Wyatt as an artist because there's so much affection in how he looks at things.

Tan: What scares me too is the flip side of that. I can see the beauty of things but also the grotesque parts. A lot of my new pieces are more violent--shards of glass, splashes of red. I don't know what that means because I don't want to celebrate violence as a part of me. I still want to find a medium where I can express those emotions that are not conveyed verbally.

How did learning you were HIV positive affect your practice and your life?
Tan: Finding out I was positive was the turning point. It was when all the artistic stuff kicked in because that was the time I was cut off from my family in Malaysia. I was on my own.

Not being able to go back to grad school and feeling lost, that was when I had too much time and had to do something about it. I fell into depression during my last few years of undergrad and my professor gave me a book. Every page had a circle, and you would meditate for five minutes. When you come back, you move your hands--write, draw, whatever. It was a process of catharsis. I picked up drawing after that too. I had a little notebook everywhere I went.

I went to FIT for some classes. And I went to the ALPHA workshops for some semi-formal training.

Not understanding most conventional, academic art practice helps me stay within the confinements of myself.

It was the whole pain of realizing there's an end to me, and that my life might not be as long as I

thought it would be. Realizing that I had a sentence.

I'm not saying it's a bad sentence. It gives me a timeline of purpose to do something in my life. I may sulk, but life doesn't stop for me, life doesn't stop for anybody. I had to pick myself up and move on, and I've been doing an OK job so far. It's helped me maneuver my life in a direction that I didn't know was possible.

I actually went to med school but I dropped out. I went to Taiwan to study language and linguistics--literature. I graduated first in my class, but I got so nervous that when I went up to accept the dean's award, I blurted out: "I have serious ADHD and I slept for four years of college." It was the most embarrassing thing ever!

When I lived in Taiwan, I was like a monk. That's when I started to pick up photography. I lived in a town that was so beautiful that it helped me calm myself down and appreciate what's around me. When I moved to the States it was an onslaught of sounds and people, but at the same time, having people who care about me and took care of me since the beginning. And then this whole HIV thing opened up a lot of doors. My friend used to work in the department of health for HIV and it has given me a platform to help others. I was also with the Metropolitan Community Church in New York. They have a gallery and I would help out, eventually becoming their stand-in curator. And Visual AIDS has been the first institution where I gained traction. I was surprised. It's just amazing that one of my photographs ("Strap," 2013) was picked for a web gallery. And the doctor that I'm working for owns the artist's print for it. There are people who appreciate my work now.

When you're so low in a hole there's no way to go but up. So I've had all these weird turns in my life. All these things helped shape who I am. I'm only 26 and sometimes I really do feel like someone who has seen it all. It's not easy but I know I'm resourceful and resilient.

Wyatt Tan is a multidisciplinary artist who likes to depart from conventional norms. Born in Malaysia, Wyatt moved to New York after being accepted to the Master's in Fashion Program at Parson's, but unfortunately was unable to complete his degree. Wyatt embraced photography, but his interests have expanded to several mediums, including assemblage art. Instead of a gallery, you are more likely to find Wyatt perusing thrift stores or flea markets looking for inspiration for his next project.

Maia Paroginog is an intern at Visual AIDS who is entering their final undergraduate year at Stanford with focuses in visual art-making, arts writing, and comparative studies in race and ethnicity. Their work employs several mediums and representations, which range from abstract sculpture to figurative painting. Their artwork and academic interests revolve around bodily dysphoria, queering interpersonal relationships, intersectional feminism, power/privilege, and the abject abstract. They use queer art to interrogate notions of "identity" and are interested in its uses in addressing collective trauma.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.