

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Meet the NYC Art Community: Kenneth Tam on Scrutinizing Masculinity

An interview series spotlighting New York's creative community. Hear directly from artists, curators, and art workers about their current projects and personal quirks.

By Dessane Lopez Cassell, May 25, 2020



Artist Kenneth Tam (all images courtesy the artist)

Welcome to the fourth edition of our ongoing interview series *Meet the NYC Art Community*. This week I spoke with artist Kenneth Tam, a fellow born-and-raised New Yorker (from Queens), whose humorous yet incisive video works pick apart the performative nature of the everyday with a fine toothed comb.

Now based in Brooklyn, Tam received his BFA from the Cooper Union and his MFA from the University of Southern California. He was part of the 2016 edition of *Made in LA*, for which he produced a major new work, *Breakfast in Bed* (streaming here). He has also completed residencies at the 18th Street Arts Center (Santa Monica), through LMCC's Workspace program, and was a 2015–2017 Core Fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Tam has received grants from Art Matters and the California Community Foundation, among others, and his work has been exhibited at the MIT List Center for

Visual Arts, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, SculptureCenter, and Commonwealth and Council. He's been awarded a residency at the Kitchen to produce a new performance later this year and is scheduled to have a solo show at the Queens Museum in 2021.

We chatted about deconstructing masculinity, his anti-racist organizing work with the group StopDiscriminAsian, and the particular "strain of absurdity and awkward humor" that runs throughout his work.

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Kenneth Tam, "All of M" (2019) installation view at SculptureCenter as part of *In Practice – Other Objects*, curated by Gee Wesley, 2019 (photo by Phoebe d'Heurle)

### **Where do you consider home?**

I live in Brooklyn, where I've been for the past three years. Previously I was living in Houston, TX doing an artist's residency, and before that I was living in Los Angeles for seven years.

### **What brought you to New York/what has made you stay?**

I'm originally from New York. I grew up in a suburban part of northeastern Queens that borders Long Island. The neighborhood was largely unremarkable, populated mostly by elderly retirees and newly arrived Asian immigrant families drawn to the area because it was in a good school district. I went to college in the city as well, and after graduating and pretending to be an artist for a few years, I knew I wanted to leave New York and experience something different. I ended up getting my MFA in LA and stayed afterwards, but my partner and I not-so-secretly looked for ways to come back. LA is great, but it lacked the *sturm und drang* of being an artist in NY. When I became a Fellow at the Core Program in Houston, returning east became a realistic possibility. Despite all the challenges of life in NY, we missed the dynamism of its creative communities, and the closeness of the relationships people built here. Everyone's insatiable desire to commune with art continues to be really inspiring and nurturing.

**Tell me about your first memory of art.**

I was into art from a young age, thought I can't quite recall how that happened and there aren't many specific images I can point to. I drew a lot as a child, and remember going to the Met for class field trips. Comic books played a role as well, friends and I would copy things and pass them off as original works, for a time that was a very cool thing to do. Eventually I began taking art lessons at the back of a Jerry's Artarama not far from my home, and I kept up with them throughout high school, largely because I went to one of the specialized math/science schools and that offered few creative outlets for me. I made a lot of embarrassing oil paintings during this period, but I worked really hard on them and enjoyed it. Making art was special because it felt like a secret activity that I really didn't need to share with anyone else. That led to a number of indelible experiences, like going to PS1 and the Noguchi Museum for the first time, and it all went downhill from there.

**How would you describe your practice?**

Much of what I do now is project-based, and mostly takes the form of video installations. For the past few years, I've been making videos that look at all-male social behavior and rituals, often trying to re-stage them in some way that prioritizes vulnerability and intimacy. A certain strain of absurdity and awkward humor runs through the work, which I feel is a very honest reflection of my own sensibilities. The people I work with are usually non-actors who I meet through internet postings. Almost nothing we do on camera is scripted or rehearsed. I believe as individuals we are constantly performing, and my work tries to unsettle the roles my participants have been cast in, particularly against the backdrop of gender and race.

**What are you working on currently?**

I was in the middle of production on a new video when everything shut down. The project looks at Asian-American masculinity, in particular the way it's been denigrated in the West for not living up to certain hegemonic standards. The figure of the cowboy acts as a kind of foil to push back against this misreading of the Asian male body, but I'm also trying to subvert and re-invest this character through their portrayal by my Asian participants. The project is a new commission for the Queens Museum, now delayed to open next spring. Another project is set to open at the Kitchen later this year, and will take its inspiration from initiation rituals used by Asian-American fraternities. It's a residency that originally would culminate in a live performance piece, but now it might have to be streamed online instead.

**Creatively speaking, what keeps you up at night and what makes you get out of bed in the morning?**

Similar to most people, the overall uncertainty around just about everything is beyond anything I've ever experienced before. So many people are suffering and the concerns of art can seem so insignificant. That probably explains why I've gotten so little done around my own work in this period. A lot of my energies have been spent working with a group of art workers on an anti-racism campaign called StopDiscriminAsian (SDA). It's a response to the wave of anti-Asian racism that's been exacerbated by the pandemic, but we also want to address the larger interlocking forces that are affecting all communities of color at this time. It's been a humbling experience to work with such a committed and multi-talented group of people, but the sense of emergency is real and we're trying our best to draw attention to the issue while still in lockdown.

### What are you reading currently?

Like a number of people I'm working with in SDA, I've been reading Ibram Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*. This feels like it should be required reading for everybody. I've also been reading texts on Daoism for project research, which feels apt for our current moment because it embraces change and being constantly adaptable to larger forces.



Kenneth Tam, "The Glass Ceiling" (2020), dimensions variable, urethane resin, polyethylene beverage buckets, men's belts, cologne bottles, plastic sheeting (photo by Jared Buckheister)

### What is your favorite way of experiencing art?

Definitely not through an online viewing room haha! In all seriousness though, if we are going to be forced to look at exhibitions virtually for the foreseeable future, we need to come up with better solutions beyond just merely replicating the white cube online, its really not cutting it. I feel everyone has taken a very status quo approach when whats needed is probably something more unorthodox and radical. How can we present an artwork that doesn't just get deadened by a screen, how can it really OWN the online platform? I want people to be asking these questions before they migrate yet another exhibition online.

### Favorite exhibition you've seen in the last year?

I hurriedly tried to see as much art as I could on a weekend in early March, in my gut I knew I wouldn't be gallery hopping for quite some time and that proved to be a prescient feeling. The highlights of that run were the [*Making, Knowing*] *Craft in Art* and [*Vida Americana*] shows at the Whitney, which had so much life and vitality within them. One show I regret not seeing that day was Kevin Jerome Everson's at Andrew Kreps. A Sarah Sze show at Tanya Bonakdar from way back in October still stands out in my mind.

**In the creative circles you're part of, what questions do you want to see more people asking?**

Now that physical spaces are shuttered, everyone is trying to keep peoples' inboxes filled with new updated content, and Instagram Live streams fill the void of our now empty social calendars. Much of this filler material is being hastily generated on the backs of artists with little to no compensation, and I fear this is quickly being normalized. This is sadly nothing new, and as the pandemic continues to expose all the gross inequities between different types of workers, we must ask what we can do to treat all art workers more fairly. Artists cannot be treated like makeshift content generators. How can we collectively protect them, and ensure that all precarious workers survive this period?