



## An artists queer take on ‘Moby-Dick’

24.02.2023 • The New York Times / International Edition

Top, Wu Tsang in London in February. Above, “Moby Dick; or; The Whale” premiered with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra last year ZURICH Wu Tsang has mined the classic novel to create provocative spectacles BY THOMAS ROGERS Until a few years ago, the American artist Wu Tsang never had much interest in “Moby-Dick,” Herman Melville’s classic 1851 novel. Its subject — an obsessed mariner’s quest for a mythical white whale — was far removed from her previous work, which includes video and performance pieces about migration and nightlife, as well as abstract dance. But when a friend suggested that she take a closer look at the book’s complex and often loaded treatment of capitalism and social hierarchy, she became excited. “There are these passages where they are squeezing the whale blubber that are so perverse,” she said recently in Zurich, where she lives.

“It was so juicy.” Tsang, 41, was so moved by the novel that she created two large-scale video pieces inspired by it: a digital work mostly depicting undersea life, “Of Whales,” and a silent, feature-length film adaptation, accompanied by a live orchestra. The film, called “Moby Dick; or, The Whale,” casts two of the novel’s main characters, Ishmael and Queequeg, as lovers and the ship’s crew as a community that has partly transcended gender and race. It features queer sex, costumes codesigned by Telfar Clemens and, of course, sailors grasping gelatinous blubber. Both works premiered to widespread acclaim last year — “Of Whales” at the Venice Biennale, and “Moby Dick” in Zurich.

As of Tuesday, they are being shown in Madrid, with “Of Whales” presented at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum and “Moby Dick” in screenings held concurrent to the exhibition. (“Moby Dick” will also be shown in Los Angeles in April, with future dates planned for Chicago; London; and Helsinki, Finland.) “This space of mistranslation and misrecognition is very intuitive to me, because it comes from my own immigrant experience.” Much like Tsang’s previous work, “Moby Dick” has drawn praise for its ability to combine disparate genres and forms, including dance and poetry, into an aesthetically striking artwork that explores lofty ideas about connection and identity.

But it has also established Tsang as an artist capable of crafting ambitious, provocative spectacles on a cinematic scale. Tsang, who is soft-spoken and often deadpan in conversation, said that she aimed, through her art, to find ways of bringing together people who might not otherwise see one another as worthy of interaction. “Beauty and pleasure are tools for us to create an atmosphere” and to “bridge the gap between humanity,” she said. After a pause, she laughed and added, “Humanity is such a horrible word.” As well as winning a MacArthur “genius” grant in 2018, Tsang has had a recent high-profile solo exhibition at the Gropius Bau in Berlin and shown her work at the Whitney Museum in New York and at Tate Modern in London.

As part of a foray into theater, she is currently a guest director at the Schauspielhaus Zurich, one of the most important playhouses in the German-speaking world. In 2021, Tsang installed a monumental sound and video work, “Anthem,” in the rotunda of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in which the transgender

singer and activist Beverly Glenn-Copeland performed spirituals. Writing in *The New York Times*, the critic Holland Cotter described it as “one of the most emotionally moving things I had seen in this space.” Many of her works, including her film and performance series “Duilian,” which depicts a lesbian relationship between two historical Chinese figures, have touched on the slipperiness of language, while others have focused on alternative forms of communication, including bodily movement.

Her 2017 video “We hold where study,” which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, features four dancers using their sense of touch to improvise choreography over a looping saxophone soundtrack. Growing up in Worcester, Mass., with a white mother and Chinese father, Tsang said that she was acutely aware of language’s ambiguities. “My father’s mother tongue was Chinese, but he never taught it to me,” she said, which meant that she couldn’t understand much of what her extended family said. “This space of mistranslation and misrecognition is very intuitive to me, because it comes from my own immigrant experience.

” After studying at the Art Institute of Chicago, Tsang garnered attention for her 2012 film “Wildness,” a surrealist documentary about a performance and nightlife event that Tsang co-organized in a Los Angeles bar called the Silver» Platter. The film, which was narrated in Spanish by a voice portending to be the Latin-owned bar itself, was praised as a nuanced and moving exploration of gentrification, migration and transgender identity. (Tsang is trans.) Since then, she has made much of her work with a small group of longtime collaborators, including the performer Tosh Basco and the poet and theorist Fred Moten. Tsang said that the boundaries between her work and that of the rest of the group, collectively known as Moved by the Motion, are often muddled.

In an interview, Moten said that Tsang’s choice of narrator in “Wildness” — a talking bar — was emblematic of her approach to art. “One of the key things that runs through her work is that Wu hears the voices of things that people otherwise think of as voiceless,” he said. “Wu is a sound system through which others speak.” Since 2019, Tsang has been a director in residence at the Schauspielhaus Zurich, part of an attempt to update the venerable theater’s program and bring in a younger, more diverse audience. The position’s resources allowed her to tackle ambitious projects, including “Moby Dick,” which required a cast of 25 and a complicated production setup including rear projections, a ship set on wheels and video game software to simulate a nautical backdrop.

In recent months, however, the Schauspielhaus’s support for nontraditional works, including “Moby Dick” and Tsang’s unconventional stagings of “Orpheus” and “Pinocchio,” has drawn pushback, with some Swiss commentators arguing that the institution has strayed too far under the leadership of its co-directors, Nicolas Stemann and Benjamin von Blomberg, from the traditions of state-funded theater. Although the duo’s leadership has received largely positive reviews from theater critics, an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Switzerland’s newspaper of record, argued in November that the leadership was focused on heaping blame on white men and asked whether the Schauspielhaus was pushing “woke insanity.” In early February, the directors announced that the theater’s board had decided not to renew their contract past the 2023-24 Season. Tsang, who said that she planned to leave at the same time as the directors, explained that she was “disappointed by the decision,” adding that the backlash was “part of a broader conservative campaign to target Swiss cultural institutions who attempt to diversify their programs and audience.” She said that she was “disturbed by how swift and effective the campaign was.

” In recent years at the theater, she said, she had drawn satisfaction from speaking to audiences that would otherwise have never encountered her work. “What I really love is telling stories and reaching lots of people,” she said. “Your perception of what is human shapes so many things. In making art, I want to open up those categories.” Above, in 'bang's work “Anthem,” which appeared at the Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum in 2021, footage of the singer and activist Beverly Glenn-Copeland was project' ed onto an 84-foot pleated curtain. Below, Tosh Basco as Queequeg in “Moby Dick; or, The Whale.” Tsang’s film casts the shipmates Ishmael and Queequeg as lovers. CREGAMGWERD.