

WASSAIC PROJECT



<https://www.wassaicproject.org/artists/artist-profiles/list/tanya-gayer>

TANYA GAYER
Artist-in-Residence

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Tanya Gayer is a curator and writer based in Oakland, CA. Her curatorial projects and research examine history-making processes embedded in archives, databases, governmental assimilation efforts, and algorithmic categorizations. She studies the records and stories involved with these institutions to realize the impact they have in forming identity and culture. Gayer received her dual masters degree in Curatorial Practice and Visual + Critical Studies from California College of the Arts and her BFA from University of Nevada, Reno.

Her curatorial projects have been exhibited at Root Division, San Francisco, CA; Hubbell Street Galleries, San Francisco, CA; Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, Sonoma, CA; The Internet Archive, San Francisco, CA; Gray Area, San Francisco, CA; CTRL + SHFT, Oakland, CA; Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, CA; Pro

Arts Gallery, Oakland, CA; Hayes Valley Art Works, San Francisco, CA; Embark Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Some Thing Spacious, Oakland, CA; and Adobe Books Backroom Gallery, San Francisco, CA. She has been in residence at Wassaic Project, Wassaic, NY; Picture Berlin, Berlin, Germany; and Signal Culture, Owego, NY. Her writing has been published in Daily Serving, in exhibition catalogs associated with CULT Exhibitions, San Francisco, CA; Holland Project, Reno, NV; Pro Arts, Oakland, CA; Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, CA; and co-produced a one-off audio podcast for a Living Room Light Exchange publication. Gayer has lectured at UC Santa Barbara, UC San Diego, California College of the Arts, and at the CODAME Art + Tech Festival #ARTOBOT. She is currently an Exhibition Coordinator at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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[2019 Summer Residency](#)

INTERVIEW

with Joe Brommel, July 2019

Can you talk a little bit about your transition from being a photographer into being an independent curator?

In my last year of undergrad there was a credit that I needed to fulfill, and I decided to take a curating 101-type class. Through this first introduction and subsequently interning in a couple different galleries I think I realized that I liked talking, writing, and organizing around art more than making art. The interesting aspect about curating is that you're seeing ideas in and with other people. And I really liked that sort of collaboration and friendship that evolves while curating.

I eventually moved to the Bay Area to have more opportunities with internships and jobs, and to also see if curating was the life I wanted to enter into. And then I kept running into the great problem of, "You need a master's degree in order to apply for this job." [Laughs.]

"Great" is a word for it, yes.

So I went to grad school for curatorial practice and visual and critical studies. And I just kept working in the field from there.

What have you been working on in Wassaic, then?

I started out wanting to do a lot of writing, but I'm engaging with a somewhat new subject matter for my practice, yet also something I've been thinking about my whole life. I am working on an exhibition proposal specifically looking at racial impostor syndrome from a Mexican American perspective.

Say more?

In the past, I've researched, written, and organized exhibitions about the theory of the archive. Thinking about how we're categorized in certain ways: how one knows history in a certain way because of historical bias within the archive, and in turn being limited in terms of how you see yourself, how you know culture — how you know your family even.

At Wassaic I'm looking at a couple of historical factors that touch on this, in particular when Mexico was annexed in the late 1800s — the assimilation factors that followed for Mexicans, and what that has meant for subsequent generations. My grandmother was a Mexican immigrant, and she assimilated by way of not teaching my mother Spanish because she wanted her and her family to become “American.” She later developed schizophrenia, and her ability to communicate about her life in Mexico and journey to the US was sort of lost to the nature of the condition. I've had conversations with my mom only very recently about this past and how she navigates it. And because my grandfather was white there's an inbetweenness of living for her and for me, on top of the assimilation factors, that causes multiple intersections of our past to explore. My mother and I recently talked about what sorts of boxes she checks when filling out forms on race and ethnicity and she had so much to say about the limited options she has to choose from — was venting almost! I had never seen her like that, and it dawned on me that this is what racial impostor syndrome does — there are mechanisms in place that disallow us from seeing ourselves as more than one thing, more than one marker of identity, and we don't talk about it because it is uncomfortable and undefinable.

In short, I've really been considering what gets passed on over time. I think a lot of the conversation about racial impostor syndrome is centered on the Black identity right now, so a lot of my research here has been trying to sift through that and seeing it more from a Chicax perspective.

Can you expand a little bit on what's unique about the Chicax perspective on racial impostor syndrome?

Well, racial impostor syndrome is a relatively new term, however what has been grounding for me in related subject matter are Chicax scholars, like Jacqueline M.

Martinez, who talk about recognizing and accepting history and cultural heritage as irrecoverable because of assimilation. Martinez emphasizes moving forward from this concession in order to seek liberatory efforts and combat further erasures. This mindset is not so different from much race or ethnicity-related scholarship. Chicana scholarship embraces multiple kinds of experiences, or family dynamics, and seeks not to compare experiences of who is more Chicana or Mexican or Mexican American, etc., but rather to question the conditions that have established who we are now as the individual and why. This interest in holding many points of view in your hands and accepting what I cannot know is what I'm embracing at the moment as I look at establishing a sort of confidence in oneself when important aspects of cultural heritage are seemingly lost.

So we've been talking about how you are thinking through these things, but how are the artists that you're curating working with them?

One artist in particular, Claudio Dicochea, references casta paintings, which were paintings made in colonial Mexico depicting families of mixed backgrounds — basically to then take back to Europe and show the Spanish a way of categorizing people who were light-skinned or dark-skinned, and what family structure looked like at the time. Really, it was a way for them to show their dominance over this population. And so Dicochea paints families in the same sort of casta style, but uses a lot of cartoons and humor instead. Pictures of Darth Vader or John Wayne who are father figures, and the alien from Alien as the child, just to show how there are a multitude of influences that make up how we know the structure of the family, how we define race, and how we see ourselves as well.

Another artist I'm looking at, Enrico Gomez, comments on the David Hockney-ideal-Californian landscape and way of living. Gomez will reference a Hockney painting, and then paint in the brown bodies who are often involved in cleaning the pool or washing windows — to point towards a history of people who are also involved in the formation of California, and what David Hockney unsurprisingly overlooked in his work. Gomez' work brings in this historical element that I'm interested in, that we are told one narrative of history to inform us of who we are, but there are so many untold acts of labor and allegiance to land that also make up the formation of identity — it is just a matter of recognition.

Another artist, Libby Paloma, has been really meaningful to me in terms of how she sees herself as a white-passing Chicana woman, fourth generation Mexican. I think a lot has shifted for her being located now in the Hudson Valley, away from San Francisco, where she grew up. She uses images of her family and kitsch objects in her

work to think about storytelling, stereotypes, and nurturing our self image. I hope to be able to talk to her about the influence of place, language, and immediate environment. Many of the artists I'm looking at are negotiating issues of constructs and how you place yourself within them and without them.

I sent along some questions before this interview, and you mentioned some strange things you've had to do for exhibitions, including ordering dried moss. I have to know that story.

This story comes from working with the artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. She's an installation-based artist who uses a lot of plants and personal objects within her work. For one of her sculptures she required an order of five different types of moss to surround a sculpture on the floor. An entire day of install was dedicated to laying down the dried moss and I was just like, This is so funny I'm getting paid to do this. This type of experience definitely outlines what I enjoy about curating. It's not just working in a cubicle with my headphones on all day. It's getting to know the artist through working with them on their installation, and seeing the concepts come out in real time as I engage with the work away from a website or press release.

And that's why I really try to do a lot of my independent work alongside my nine-to-five museum job. Because the independent work involves exhibitions that I want to be working on or writing about, and working with artists who I want to be working with. I hope that someday it turns into my full time practice, but even so, my practice as it is now is keeping me going. It is keeping those important conversations in my life.



