

EMPYREAL

INTERVIEWED IN: SINGAPORE /

PHOTOS SHOT IN: SINGAPORE

“I don’t want to know what’s going to happen. As frightening as that is in real life, it’s a crucial aspect in creativity. Being predictable is boring, and it’s also disheartening and uninspiring.”

— Carrie Brownstein, Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl

It’s convenient to associate live visuals with a blurry face. After all, prominent credits are an uncommon sight for visual artists—how and where exactly are you supposed to place the name without taking attention off the performing act? It takes a discerning and familiar viewer to be able to recognise a piece of work, especially while bobbing and dancing to the music with hundreds of other partygoers.

Yet for **AMANDA TAN** who single-handedly helms Empyreal (the name of a visual art and film company that eventually morphed into her identity), that doesn’t seem to be as heavy a concern as compared to making her visuals emotionally stimulating for the audience. For her, the visual artist side of Empyreal is one that connects her passion for music with her unique form of art. Constantly seeking for more to challenge her artistry, she possesses the grit and tenacity that reminds us of Carrie Brownstein—who, in the 90s, trudged the road of success—faced with having to agree to things that would presumably lead her to her goals—while keeping her mind on creating good art.



AMANDA TAN (Empyreal), Visual Artist & Film Director

“I’ve been asked whether I think a VJ should be more prominent—my answer to that is, it would be nice if the visuals were. It sure feels good when people from the audience can point a piece of work to its artist... At the end of the day, it’s important that it’s not just me doing whatever I want without consideration for the artist that I’m creating for.”

Was there a moment that sparked your career in visual art?

Oh there was definitely a moment. I mean, I watched visuals for shows that [people and groups like] Syndicate does, things like that. At that point of time I was observing visuals by Brandon Tay [of Syndicate] as well. Once, I spoke to him and told him, ‘*you know, I’m not an animator and I don’t do 3D graphics*’. After that, he showed me some references of visual artists who incorporated film images in their works. That’s when I realised I could apply what I’ve been doing to a different art form.

I think it also began because I was hungry for something new. Boredom would be too banal a reason—it was more of me wanting to see how I could tell a story with great visual impact without [necessarily] having a script. Also, I used to be a dancer so I kind of miss performing. I see my visuals as a way to fuel my need to be part of a live performance.

With visuals, you don’t have to understand them exactly for them to be what they are. The beauty lies in the process when you know the artist is giving someone something to think about.

How do you manage to create something so personal out of music that isn’t yours to begin with?

It helps a lot when I get to talk to the musician. For example, when I worked with TOMGIRL for their debut show in 2016, we conceptualised the performance together. Ted (from TOMGIRL) was awesome because he suggested a bunch of films for me to get inspired from.

Of course, such opportunities are hard to come by especially when I’m creating for an overseas act or when I’m hired by festivals to create visuals for sets. I don’t usually get to talk to the musicians before conceptualising the visuals—in such cases, I get into the music and think about what the complementing imagery would be.

With some works, I do draw from personal moments from my life. I would adapt these emotions and messages and come up with something that people can still enjoy the music and party to. At the end of the day, it’s important that it’s not just me doing whatever I want without consideration for the artist that I’m creating for. Other times, I draw from imagery that I’m keen on executing.

Would you say there’s a certain style to your works?

With visuals, I film my own footage. I’m not a 3D animator or motion graphics artist. There are certain animations involved but the base will always be original footage—things that I capture with my eyes. There are other visual artists who do that too but I think this style is less common than works that are completely computer generated.

On the other hand, filmmaking has been my bread and butter for the past few years. I produce and direct for advertising and corporate clients. I haven’t done my own short films in a few years but this year, I’m planning on making a few music videos to come back to it.

I’m not sure when my next proper film will come to fruition but what I do know is that I want to work with an all-female crew. I feel like it has been done in other parts of the world but not really in Singapore, where film and visual making is primarily still a male-dominated industry. Besides, it would be interesting to see what would the output look like. At the end of the day, I just want to bring people together.

That being said, I do know that I don’t want to sell the typical heartlander story—a narrative that’s important for educating people about the culture in Singapore but I don’t come from that world and so it’s not a story I know how to tell. It would be nice to come up with something that’s more relevant to the people around me and myself.

That’s true. A lot of stories told here are based on the living room or HDB perspective.

I think with *Crazy Rich Asians* being filmed here, we get to see another side of Singapore in a movie. It may not necessarily be the best side but it’s a different one.

Do you feel that the typical stories are somewhat glamourised?

Yeah, and a little poeticised. How do I put it? It’s [always] made to be more heart-warming or depressing. But I want to make a film that brings out a different set of emotions and without the need to present a sob story all the time.



Video stills — Live Visuals for Ryan Hemsworth (2016) by Empyreal

Visual installations are most often seen as abstract to an outsider; some have said that it's a beautiful yet foreign concept. In your opinion, what is visual creation all about?

In terms of how it relates to people's understanding? I think it depends on what you're trying to tell. If it were a music concert or gig, I would want the visuals to be immersive and hypnotising for people. I don't think people need to feel like there's an underlying message all the time.

When I did the human silhouette visual for Ryan Hemsworth, my approach was to try and tell a vulnerable story. At that point of time, I was going through losing someone special to me and I thought, *I'm going to play this visual at a party but I don't feel very fun*. Thankfully, Ryan Hemsworth has some emotional music and it worked out eventually. I also added colours and textures to make the visual look more exciting. It's always a balance between placing your own ideas and emotions into your work, and taking whom it's meant for into consideration.

Certain installations are different from others but I think at this point in time, most works I'm focusing on are more aesthetic based. Of course, I would love to go deeper than that, eventually building a gallery show where meaningful stories are told.

What's the best thing that could come out of your career—especially when you're not pushing yourself to a certain specialisation?

Recently I've been feeling like writing more because I've been doing so many visuals and non-literary stuff. That's the new world we are living in—we're coming into this era in which perhaps it's not a bad thing to be able to do a few things at a time.

A lot of people believe in specialising in one thing and mastering that particular craft but I think that's an old way of thinking. Why limit yourself to one thing? I'd rather work twice as hard to be good at a few different things. In fact, mastering visuals made me a better film director. It's good to have multiple roles and in fact, that's the future we've created because opportunities come and go very easily.



EMPYREAL

When faced with low budgets, companies wouldn't want to invest in commercials or films and if that happens, what am I going to do if I were merely a filmmaker? I think the way we work now fits me better because I like working on different things to inspire myself. That's my ultimate career goal—to be constantly stimulated creatively.

You met Meryl Streep at Berlin International Film Festival in 2016 – how was that encounter?

It was such a cool experience. Meryl Streep was one of the judges who saw the winning film—*A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*—which I was one of the EPs for. We had arrived earlier at the Berlinale than other people. Of course, people were talking to her but once they removed themselves we approached her and mentioned that we were on the team for the film, to which she replied that she really enjoyed it. I mean, it was fun meeting her and can you believe I actually had a conversation with Meryl Streep on filmmaking for about two minutes?

What was your experience like being part of that project?

For that film, I was part of the finance and local distribution side. I remember that job to be particularly

challenging because it was an eight-hour film and no cinemas in Singapore were keen on taking it up.

That role pulled me away from the producing seat that I'm often used to being on. For that project, I knew wanted to be involved in something bigger than me. Lav Diaz is such an amazing and talented filmmaker. I wanted to, for once, observe what's it like outside my world.

What are you most motivated by?

Beyond a filmmaker or an artist, I'm really trying to find a voice and my place. I'm also trying to be comfortable with what I'm trying to say. It's not something that's easy for everyone to admit (even though that's something a lot of artists face) but I might as well say it—I always feel like I'm trying to be good enough for something but I think at the end of the day, what I'm searching for is to be good enough for myself.

Whatever that I do is motivated by achieving that inner balance and peace. I want to be part of something that's spiritual and wholesome. I just wish people were more conscious and in tuned with life than putting all their focus on earning money.

How about try being a real person? Having thoughts and ideas, sharing them with people. Like Picasso said, *every child is an artist*. Society just chooses to mess it up and convince people that they are not. Look at how artists, writers and philosophers sit at the bottom of the ‘list of things we should become’ whereas in the past, these people were seen as the elites—that’s a fine reflection of how we view creative work now and I think that’s a little sad.

Serious conversations aside, sometimes it’s totally okay to relax and enjoy your process. Like Bukowski said, *Great art is horseshit, buy tacos*. In modern terms it would mean, *fuck art, eat tacos!*

What is ATTAGIRL to you?

ATTAGIRL gave me my first opportunity to create visuals. They were one of the first groups who gave me a stage to explore even though I was terrified—it worked out in the end. To me, they are my pals, my friends, my girls. And obviously, people know ATTAGIRL as an all-female collective, which is a great thing for music and DJs and VJs here.

I don’t believe that our craft is too technical for any gender. It’s surprising that I don’t see a woman behind that often.

Also, I’ve noticed that more good-looking DJs get hired these days. I wish that wasn’t the case. I feel that looks shouldn’t be the reason why someone is up there. I’ve also been asked whether I think a VJ should be more prominent—my answer to that is, it would be nice if the visuals were. It sure feels good when people from the audience can point a piece of work to its artist.

Where does the power lie in being part of a collective?

It’s nice to have a team to fall back on. If we were performing at a gig, we’re in it together. Knowing that when they need a VJ, I’m the first person they would call. Or when I need a DJ (which actually doesn’t happen as often), they would obviously be the first people I think of.

I like having a bit of both in terms of expressing individuality and being part of collaborations. Sometimes I create visuals on my own, other times it’s with them. They make it better too when they suggest things I might not have observed or thought of.

Having that second voice or opinion helps me better my craft.

Did writing for PSYMBIOSIS help you find yourself?

It helped me in getting my frustrations out and just telling it like it is. I’m not trying to inspire anyone with my writing. *I’m just conveying my experience and how mental health can be hilarious and ugly all at once.*

When I shared those stories, people started coming up to me and telling me that they felt the same way—‘*you know, I’ve always felt like that but never really got help*’. People are used to thinking, *it’s not that bad*—that’s what I told myself too. At a certain point in my life, I had a doctor tell me, ‘*you should get some help before the situation spirals. Why wait?*’

We take care of our bodies and go to the doctor when we’re sick. We watch a lot of Netflix when we need an escape. So what’s the harm in talking to someone when you’re not feeling right? If you’re considering therapy, go there knowing that your therapist is not going to fix your problems.

Instead, it’s a space for you to discover tools to regulate certain emotions and experiences from your life—and you’re going to do all the work to make yourself feel better. Honestly, do I really want to be thinking about my past? But I have to do so to gain a deeper understanding of myself and why I’m feeling off.

What do you think fear and uncertainty is fuelled by and how do you get past that?

What is fear fuelled by? I don’t know. But I do know that you don’t get past it—you just keep going anyway. I face a lot of fears everyday. It’s like, *I see you there, but we’ll just keep going!* You can’t just stand there and scream for it to go away. To me, fear isn’t something that disappears. It stays there and you just keep going. My fears stem from my personal insecurities. I don’t love saying it but that’s the truth and it’s the same for a lot of people.

Were there moments when you felt like your career was falling apart?

Yes but I never wanted to stop. I don’t really think I’m good at anything else. What would I be? *(laughs)*

SAND

There were definitely moments—I owned a film company for three years and when that ended, I didn't know what I was going to do next. That felt scary. I needed something new to break out of my comfort zone. This is something I find myself constantly questioning the younger artists (who I'm close friends with)—*are you hungry? If you're hungry, go and get it.*

There's no shame in that and it doesn't stop. As long as you're an artist, you'll always have to put yourself out there. Of course, there are times when I don't feel as ready—that's when I decide that it's just not my day to socialise, I'm going to drink and relax. I burn out too. There are times when I don't feel like doing any jobs but ultimately, the hunger drives me to pick myself up again.

Ultimately, what fuels you?

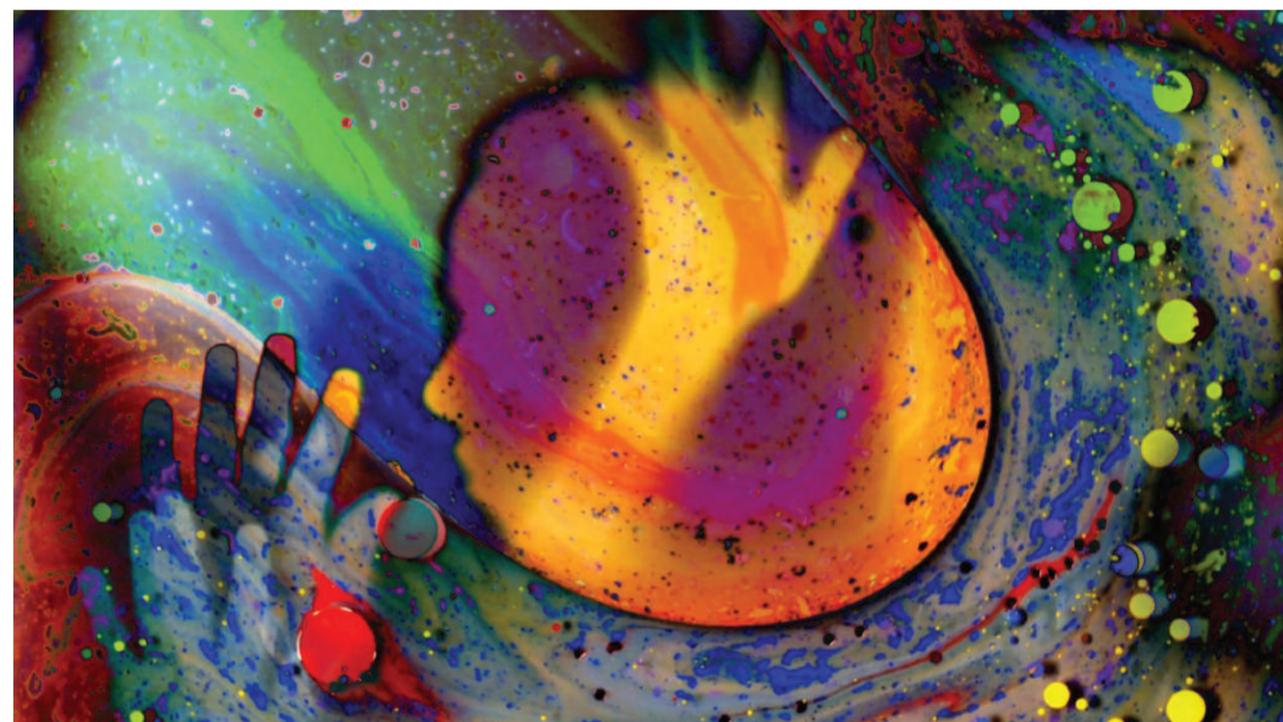
Knowing that I'm good at doing this and feeling like it's my duty to do it since I went through education for it. I would love to reach a certain level of success but I think at the end of the day, being human is more important than being a famous artist. I would like to get to the point where I'm so confident and happy with my progress and all the things I've done that I'm able to not take up on jobs

without feeling like I'm missing out—I would have the freedom from within to dedicate myself solely to jobs that I want to do and not because I have to.

Right now, I still say yes to a lot of things. I'm always thinking, *is this going to drive me forward in my career? Is this going to make me enough money? Am I going to lose out on other jobs?* And maybe I'll never get there. Perhaps the point is not to get there but to just constantly work towards that satisfaction. Sometimes I feel like a dog chasing the carrot and I do enjoy the chase. Someone (who happens to be a pretty successful art director) once told me, *'I'm done chasing the carrot. I'm good.'*

Well, I'd love to get there one day and maybe it comes with age too. I've also questioned, *what if it's never enough and what if the goal is to never be satisfied?*

EMPYREAL



Video stills of live visuals by [Empyreal](#)