

Creative Conversations

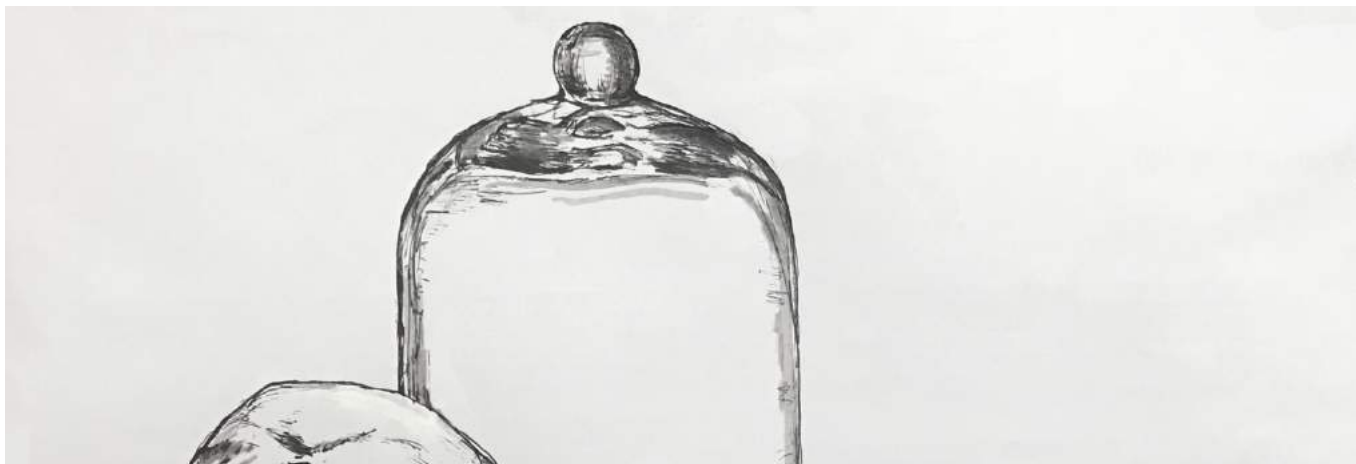
AMANDA TAN (EMPYREAL) ON BEING AUTHENTIC, FEMALE REPRESENTATION, AND THE ALLURE OF FILM MAKING

This is the last instalment in our series, where we speak with the artists who were a part of [The Deepest Blue](#).

[Amanda Tan \(Empyreal\)](#) is a filmmaker, director, visual designer, writer and artist. Her music videos and short films have been screened and nominated for awards at various film festivals, including the NYC Indie Film Awards, Salento International Film Festival and Singapore Short Film Awards. As an artist, she strives to make work that speaks to the state of human emotion through the medium of experimental video.

We meet over a cup of tea across the road from where the exhibition is held to talk about how things varying from literature, images and music have influenced Amanda's film making, and what her ideal project looks like.

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Skulls, Bell Jar and Broken Glass
Drawing by [Nicolette Teo](#)

You've chosen three things that are not really objects per se. They're more of images that you've been drawn to. Could you speak a bit more about why you were drawn to choosing them for this interview?

It was hard for me to pick objects that I'm drawn to because it felt like I didn't really have any.

The bell jar is an obvious one. I've been a Sylvia Plath fan for a few years now and read her book. I also have a tattoo of the bell jar. I liked how it was a symbol for her, an image that she used to describe what it feels like to be unable to breathe when you're trapped inside something like a jar. I was also interested in how the air streams in as soon as the jar is lifted as well. I just thought it was a really interesting image, so I've been drawn to the image ever since. I have it in my piece at *The Deepest Blue*, and I also have the bell jars used in [*The .Wavs*] left over. I'm going to bring them to my new home, just because.

Skulls are more like a punk rock thing. It's just a representation of rebellion for me. I collect animal skulls, and I have memorabilia in the shape of skulls, like candles and glass vodka bottles. I also bought a painted skull from a voodoo shop in New Orleans. It's just an object that I collect, although the human versions I have are not made of real bone. The animal skulls I have, though, are made of real bone.

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sense of fragility in it.



The .Wavs, Amanda Tan (Empyrean)
2018, Film Still

Images are really important to how you approach your work, and that really struck me about what you chose here. Obviously physicality is important because you collect things like skulls, but the image contains so much potential. There are some connecting factors between the few images you've chosen here.

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Yeah — do you find yourself drawn to exploring particular images in your work?

I feel like the female image is something I return to, but that's not an object so I never really brought it up. I've included skulls in my work because I like the way they look. They have a history in being used in design and visuals. Other images, such as liquids — they look good when you play around with them. So I guess yeah, but definitely not consciously.

When you mention images as complex as the female body, do you find yourself constantly returning to it because there's something there — an essence — that you're hoping to probe more or distill?

“I've always loved dance. I've noticed that that's shown up a lot in my work. I like seeing how movement looks like on camera as well.”

In many ways, it's a self portrait. It doesn't have to look like me or be me, but I used to be a dancer.

What kind of dancer?

Hip-hop. Not the arty kind, but I've always loved dance. I've noticed that that's shown up a lot in my work. I like seeing how movement looks like on camera as well. Over time I've realised that although I am a story teller and a narrative film maker, I'm not the sort that does films that go like: Girl A wakes up in the morning, looks at her clock, and meets this boy on the street. I'm more expressive. I think that I'm definitely drawn to movement. dance. liquids. and using things that are graphic.

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***The .Wavs* and your tattoo. Do you find yourself drawing on literary works, and having a strong relationship with that?**

Yeah, definitely. I don't think that they necessarily correlate to my work in a direct sense, but books and reading have always been important to me. I don't read as much as I wish I did, but I take my time with reading one book, and it becomes special to me. It's a big part of who I am. Not necessarily in the works that I make, but to relate to another artist, who is, in this case, a writer, is just another way of feeling connected with the universe. As an artist, part of what we want is to feel heard.

How did you find the process of responding to Virginia Woolf for *The Deepest Blue*?

Oh, it was great. She's such a visual poet. She includes so much imagery into her words, and these images are so accessible as well. From things like clouds, to water, to the eyes, and even the universe — responding as a film maker really came like second nature. Some of my interpretations have been quite literal, but I do feel like because I work in a different medium altogether, it manages to not feel like a purely derivative piece. Or, I hope it doesn't.

It was great responding to her, and I really like the way she writes. I do wonder how she would be like if she were alive in this day and age. Obviously things are so different between the time she lived in and our contemporary present. I wonder what she would have been like.



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The .Wavs, Amanda Tan (Empyrean)
2018, Installation View

I wonder what Woolf would have said if she had seen your film. If, say, she came by the exhibition and saw what you made.

Maybe she'll hate it. She might think to herself, "Oh my god, is that what my writing is like?"

One thing that really struck me was when the artist, [Kheyton Lim](#), described your work during one of our events. He took away something from your work that was so immediate and sensorial. The music in your work really helps to set a steady pace and to draw the viewer in as well. Could you tell us more about how important music is to, not just your work, but to you as a person?

It's so important in my work, because I feel like I kind of am constantly making music videos. It's really

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I think music is a representation of one growing up, the subculture you might have been involved in, or maybe the mainstream culture even. It's such a big part of dance and movement. It informs movement, it informs the pace if you're editing your video. It could definitely go the other way round as well, in which case, it takes on a different way of being that is just as interesting.

But music is important because it's like a memory capsule. It brings you back to a time. It could be a time that's close to the present moment, or it could be a time that's further back in one's past, but if you're listening to *Creep* by Radiohead, there's this feeling that you get. You can't get that feeling just by sitting around. Literature and words are powerful, but it is the melody of *Creep* that makes you realise that, hey, it really isn't fucking weird to feel like an outsider. That's the beauty of that song, and that's just one example of how powerful music can be.

How is the process like when you're making a music video, and how do you insert yourself into the process as a film maker?

It depends. With *The .Wavs*, I would consider it a music-driven art video. In this case, it was about the message I was trying to get across to the viewer. But when I work with musicians on their music videos, I do talk to them about how they want to be represented, and how they want their music to be represented. So it's half art, and half catering to a client. Especially in the context of Singapore, where a majority of the music scene here is indie — we are, for the most part, collaborating. When I talk to or work with a musician, I kind of know what they're about. You see their repertoire, and you kind of know what you're getting yourself into. It helps with proposing things that would suit them and suit you at the same time.

I would say that it's a mix of finding your own voice and representing the musician accurately. You can't just do your own shit if it's a real music video for a real musician. Although you definitely could if that's what they

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this feeling that you get. [...] Literature and words are powerful, but it is the melody of Creep that makes you realise that, hey, it really isn't fucking weird to feel like an outsider.”

and you're part of a collective, [AI TAGIKL](#), yourself as well. Are collaborations a place you draw a lot of energy and inspiration from for your own practice?

I think as a film maker, you can't not collaborate.

It's very difficult to work alone. I mean, it is possible to create a film by yourself. But if you're making something, especially something that has to be commercially viable, you kind of almost need to work in a team. There are a lot of moving parts in a film. I can't be, you know, lighting and writing music and doing camera work and directing and acting. I mean, you could, but if you want to make it in a normal way, you need to collaborate.

Collaborations are interesting because sometimes I do find energy from them, but other times they can be tiring as well. But that's kind of like life anyway. It's never going to be perfect. Interacting with people is both a beauty and a challenge. Sometimes when I'm talking to my D.O.P. (Director of Photography), I get a lot of energy. But there are times when I don't always agree with what he or she says and I have to think about why I don't agree, what does it mean to me, and how can this feedback make me better. The whole process isn't really negative or positive — it just is what it is.

I found that collaborating with [Niko Kenton](#), in particular, was incredibly value adding for me. He got to see a side of himself that, perhaps, he wouldn't have seen without this project. I felt like seeing that unfold was kinda awesome. Quite a few people in the audience came up to him that day and told him that they loved the music, and he didn't really know what to say. He's a successful DJ, and he has original material that he's going to release, but I kind of forced him into doing this right now. Seeing him succeed in this area was just very nice for me, and I knew he would.

I do find myself having to remind myself that yes, although collaboration is important, sometimes its

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Still trying to figure that out.

In order to create a work that balances both who you are as a film maker and who your collaborator is as an artist, do you find a prior personal relationship an important contributing factor?

I think it doesn't necessarily have to be an intense relationship, but I think we need to get along. There needs to be a positive dynamic. Not all of my collaborative partners are incredibly close friends. But it's really important for me that I vibe with the person, and I feel like you kind of know if you vibe with the person the first time you meet with them. I don't have to come away feeling like — wow, your vibe is amazing! But it has to lean towards the positive.

It's definitely easier if you have a relationship, but I don't always have that luxury, though. Sometimes I do have to work with new people immediately, and then you just find a way to do it. It's great to have a relationship! But sometimes the people that I'm used to working with are not always available. Because of that, I meet new people and form new relationships. For example with *The . Wavs*, the producer that I approached for this project told me that there was a chance that she might have to make an overseas work trip midway and hence not be able to see the project through. It turned out that she did have to go on this trip, so she got someone else to replace her. I didn't know this new producer, [Pearlyn](#), at all, but we're now really good friends and she came down for the exhibition's opening. I'd definitely work with her again. Yes, it was definitely a risk not really knowing, but I had to take that chance and go with it.





The .Wavs, Amanda Tan (Empyreal)
2018, Film Still

I wanted to talk about the piece that you've made for *The Deepest Blue* as well. The piece is incredibly well produced, and so many viewers have come in commenting on that.

It definitely wasn't a one man show.

Yeah. You've mentioned this in passing before, but I wanted to hear from you again — why was it so important for you to bring in an entire production team to create this piece? As you said earlier, it's not impossible for someone to do it alone.

If I did it myself, first of all, it would have taken a lot more time. Secondly, and to put it simply, the production value of the film would have been so much lower. For this film, I had a lighting team and an amazing D.O.P., [Adrian \[Tan\]](#), who has years of experience. They put their eyes and their feel into it too. It wasn't so much that I didn't know how to use a camera or I didn't know how to light, but it's incredibly

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If I had done it by myself, yeah I could have managed all of that, but it would be difficult for me to carry all of those activities out. There were so many tiny details, like the actress' hair not working out right down to the light having to be shifted just 10 centimetres from where it was. If you're just one person dealing with all of this, your brain just can't deal with all of the fifteen thousand things that are going on on set. It's just not possible.

It really was about the little things as well. I remember being on the set with you guys, and you pointed out how the contact lens on the actress was a little off centre.

You put so much effort and concentration into creating this piece, and I was wondering if there was a particular emotion or concept that you wanted to get across to the viewers?

With regards to emotion, definitely. In a way, it was an expression of how my brain ticks. The layering, the post production, and the speed changes make the viewer feel like that looking at quite a few things all at once. Some people have commented on how hard it is to focus, and that I could have made the image simpler. When I hear that I'm like yeah, maybe it could, but maybe it shouldn't be because that's precisely what I'm trying to say here. The emotional chaos of the mind was what I was trying to express. But at the same time, it's not just blind chaos. There is, or I hope, still an accessibility about my film.

Sometimes I have a hard time gauging my own work. I could look at my piece and think that it's pretty mainstream, but the next person beside me would just be like, are you nuts? But it could be the other way around for a really extreme video art person who comes from a place of making an hour long silent film. He or she would probably think the piece is mainstream. For me, I think *The .Wavs* is accessible.

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are just staring into the camera, no one is speaking, and I'm just sat there wondering what's going on.

trying to express. But at the same time, it's not just blind chaos."

I know. I get those types of films too, but they're probably just not films that I'd ever make. I do understand them, because I've also been an executive producer on a nine hour film.

Was accessibility really important to you when you were creating this piece?

I don't think it's important to me, it's just a byproduct of my personality. I don't think I'm super inaccessible myself, so it just comes out that way.

I did have someone ask me recently if I wanted to be understood by the masses, or if I wanted to be understood by a niche group. I remember wondering if that was something I needed to even think about. I think whatever happens, happens. If more people understand my work — great. But I don't think I should be forcing myself to be one way or another. If I'm making a commercial for a brand, of course I need to be accessible, and of course I need to be mainstream — but if I'm making my own work, then maybe that question is not as important.

How much of yourself and your story did you put into this particular piece?

Emotionally, quite a bit, but it's not like I drown in water all the time. I would say, yeah, a part of myself. This isn't who I am, but a portion of it.



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The .Wavs, Amanda Tan (Empyreal)
2018, Film Still

Some artists have distanced themselves from their work by consciously keeping themselves outside of the equation when creating art. There are artists who create works but do not explicitly state what their intentions are, or how they've inserted themselves into the work. The viewer is then free to think whatever he or she wants to, and the onus kind of flips over to the viewer, in that sense.

Was it natural for you to insert a part of yourself into your work?

Yeah. It's natural, and for me, it's necessary. Maybe one day I'll reach the point where it isn't, but right now, it is. If I were a writer, I think I'd be a confessional poet. In the visual sense, it's almost the other way round. It is a confession of sorts, the video, but not really either because I haven't just created a film of my life story.

The writers that I enjoy, like Junot Diaz, Charles Bukowski, Sylvia Plath, they're all presenting their [personal] journals [to the reader] on a platter. It's almost like, well, here it is. You don't like it? I don't care. I feel like I'm

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I wanted to ask you, also, about why you decided to work in film.

I think it's because I'm a masochist. In school, I thought I was going to do photography. But I soon realised that there was also video and film making, and I felt like I could learn more from it. I've just never turned back since then. It's such a challenging medium, and there's so much to learn about it. I kind of hate it and love it at the same time. I hate film so much sometimes, but I think everybody kind of does from time to time.

It's really funny because I was talking to a fellow film maker last night on Instagram, and we were both talking about how film making is always going to be tiring and stressful. One kind of needs to be some sort of masochist to love it. It's also probably why we all have tattoos.

I don't know why film in particular. I almost feel like at this point, it's really because I have the skills to do it, and because I can do it. I shouldn't be doing anything else. I want to do other things too, but I think film will always be there. It's a skill set that one takes so much time learning that I can't just throw it away — it'd be such a waste. On top of that, building relationships take time, and forming teams that you trust takes time.

Another film maker said to me recently that I'm at the age that's almost like a a make it or break it sort of age. It's kind of when really become something because it's the right time. I feel like I can taste what he's talking about, and I'm hoping he's right. But even if he's not, I don't think it really matters whether the world sees me as successful or not.

It's interesting because some of the world's most successful artists, like [Damien Hirst](#) or [Jeff Koons](#), have been labelled as sell-outs. Yet, they are successful in every sense of the word. Does that underlie, even in a small way, your attitude towards success?

Not to worry, concerned with success. I am determined to be recognized as successful by people, but I think

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I think it's about treading the two lines. You don't want to be so obscure that nobody understands you at all. But then again if you are, that's fine as well. Maybe that one person that understands you is all you need, right?

I feel like I want to be successful, but I also know that although the successes I've attained give me moments of happiness and pride, they fall away rather quickly. True happiness and self esteem do not come from things like that — they comes from within. Making works in an honest way is probably the best possible way I could feel about a piece.

“More than just an artist, and as a human being, it's really about authenticity. I think if you're authentic with yourself, and with the people you're around, then it becomes really simple.”

It's really about what is success, right? The world is filled with a lot of weird people who have their own thoughts about things. So if everybody concurs that you're a great artist, I would be worried.



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Yeah, and that's probably why it's really important that we have a variety of works produced and made. For example, with *The Deepest Blue*, it was so important that we talked about having different works to showcase a multiplicity of opinions and perspectives. There is conversation about the themes the exhibition explore, but perhaps it hasn't taken the shape or form that we both feel has been constructive with regards to changing perceptions and galvanising people to take action.

When you talk about creating work that is honest and true to yourself, how do you balance that with wanting to add a different voice to the mix? It's so easy to create works that people want to see, or are fashionable for the time. How do you, as an artist, negotiate that with yourself, and stay true?

More than just an artist, and as a human being, it's really about authenticity. I think if you're authentic with yourself, and with the people you're around, then it becomes really simple. It's not really about what's fashionable. Whatever you're trying to get across works out perfectly when you're just being your true, authentic self. That's a really short answer to a really long question.

When people come to see my works and ask me what it's about, I can easily talk to them about how it was made and the process. But if they do talk to me about the emotions portrayed, I'd flatly tell the viewer how I got there and made these visual decisions.

I think that was why I was so disturbed by the way in which a [Teenage Magazine interview](#) I did phrased the questions and answers. The way the questions were phrased gave off a sense of, oh let's talk about mental health! I mean, yes, we want to talk about it so things will get better, but they didn't want to publish the bits

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Not everything is positive in the world. Even the positive things have a tinge of negativity in them, and that's why they work. Can I also say that my piece somewhat glamourises unhappiness at times? Maybe. But people wouldn't want to publish that.

It's almost like a tried and tested route to say things in a way that's sanitised and acceptable. But I'm interested as to why you said that your work could count as one that glamourises sadness.

I don't think that it does, and I wasn't thinking about that when I was making the film. The reason why I brought that up is because I've heard a lot of people describe the film as "pretty". It looks pretty, like the wardrobe is beautiful. I can see where they're coming from, but at the end of the day, it's also not a fashion film, you know what I mean? I definitely wanted to make sure that the film did not come off as a fashion piece, because that's not who I am.

Maybe the word "glamourising" is not the right word. I think when depression and anxiety get really bad, then there's nothing pretty about it. But there's this little line where genius can be created. If we stay at that line, there is a beauty in sadness. Beyond that line, it just develops into death and suicide.

But why make art about something as sad and depressing as this? Do aestheticising such issues help in any way?

Does it matter if it helps or not? That's my question to people. What makes you think that art is supposed to help you anyway? Is that the purpose of art? Some people would say yes, but my answer to that is, not necessarily.

That's really what I've been disturbed by. Yes, we want to have this exhibition to talk about it, but we're not

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something that you should be thinking about.

Is there a particular story line or a theme that you've always wanted to explore in your works, but haven't got around to doing just yet?

I don't know if there's a theme, but I would like to make a film one day with an all female crew.

About?

Don't know. The whole point of it was just to do it with an all female crew in Singapore. I know it's been done before, but not here.

With regards to themes, whatever I want to talk about, I kind of just do. At the moment, I think I'm saying whatever I want to say, but I would like to get to a point one day where I am able to transcend these topics. I think that also comes with me transcending these topics myself.



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The Deepest Blue Exhibition
2018, Installation View

I want to go back to what you said about working with an all female crew, and also how important the female and the feminine are to your work. I want to say that it's obvious because no one would ever ask a man the same question, but I wanted to talk about why that was important for you to state as a project you really wanted to embark on.

I think it'd be fun, first of all. But at the same time, there are certain roles in the industry that are not occupied by women. Lighting, for example, is one. There are very few women in the commercial lighting industry here in Singapore. I think, there are more women represented in lighting departments overseas. For some reason in Singapore, you always see guys doing lighting. I understand that it's because lights are heavy, but it's not impossible to find a strong girl. Some of the guys who are working in lighting are not the strongest men as well. So it would be a good opportunity to see how we could fill those roles. I don't even know where I would find a female lighting team, commercially at this point, but I suppose I would try to figure it out.

Another reason I want to do it is because, at the end of the day, the industry is incredibly male-dominated. Some people would say that it's not really important because a film with an all female crew has been done

Is it more about the process as compared to the end product?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, of course you want to have a good end product, but it *is* about the process. It's about seeing how it looks like when you put women in roles that have been traditionally filled by men here in Singapore.

I would also want to have a diverse race mix as well, although that wouldn't be the main focus — because [the film industry] is primarily a Chinese-dominated domain.

Have your perspectives towards art making or your practice changed since putting up this particular piece at *The Deepest Blue*?

If I do want to continue exhibiting in galleries more, in this universe of the fine arts, I need to think about how I want the work to be displayed. Usually

I just make a video and it's done. You put it on a screen or you put it online, 16:9 or it's widescreen or its 4:3. I don't have to think about what kind of wall I want it to be projected on, or if I want it to be in a single room with speakers. Do I want to include headphones? I don't think I've ever thought about it in great detail. For *The Deepest Blue*, I kind of did, but I also left it to the last to figure out.

For example, the curator for my next project wants the film to play on three screens concurrently. So I need to figure out how to make that work. I don't really know how, but I suppose I'll have to think about it and figure it out.

“Some people would say that it's not really important because a film with an all female crew has been done before. If that's the case and it doesn't matter, then just let us do it anyway! I mean, what's the big deal?”

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it, how would the flow work? Those are just a few of the things I've been thinking about for my next project.

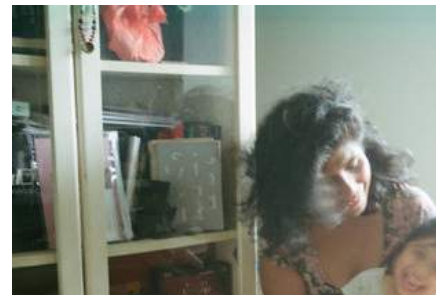
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