

ALYSSA TAYLOR WENDT

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"Sanctum" Explores Ancestral Memories in Our DNA

Alyssa Taylor Wendt and five other artists look at inherited memory in this group show at Big Medium

BY ROBERT FAIRES, SEPTEMBER 6, 2019, ARTS

You have your mother's brown eyes, your father's strong chin. But do you also have her capacity for love, his fear of heights? Have traumas experienced by your parents' parents, or *their* parents' parents, also been passed down to you, encoded in your DNA? Biologists have found physical evidence of this – genetic memory – in people who lived through traumatic events and their offspring. Holocaust survivors, for example, have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and so do their descendants. Other studies have shown similar results: experiences causing physical alterations that have then been passed down the line genetically.

For years, artist Alyssa Taylor Wendt has been drawn to the idea "that we inherit not simply DNA but potentially trauma, habits, magic, triumphs, love, failures, and knowledge. The idea that all of our actions affect a larger pool of cultural expression is important to consider in regard to our daily behaviors and future legacy. Are we temporary caretakers of a longer lineage of archetypal behavior? A unique living combination of elements from different aspects of our ancestors? How does this affect our cultural consciousness?"

Wendt has long sought answers to those questions in her own works, such as the three-channel videos *H A I N T*, shown at the University of Texas Visual Arts Center earlier this year and at the International Istanbul Experimental Film Festival, where it was an award winner. Now the artist has invited others to join in her search in the group show "Sanctum," opening Sept. 6 at Big Medium. Though small, Wendt's crew is diverse in cultural backgrounds and artistic mediums: Scott Vincent Campbell (Detroit), Cordula Ditz (Hamburg, Germany), Birthe Piontek (Vancouver), Beili Liu (Austin, born in China), Jaime Zuverza (Austin, born in El Paso), and Wendt (Austin, born in New York City), showing work in video, installation, photography, sculpture, and painting. We talked to Wendt to learn more about her interest in genetic memory and "Sanctum."

Austin Chronicle: *When did your fascination with inherited memory begin?*

Alyssa Taylor Wendt: I believe a specific influence was an interview with the great cult filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky in *The Paris Review*. He discusses a book he wrote called *Where the Bird Sings Best*, a retelling of his ancestry where he transforms the pain of his familial history into mythic legacy. From there I discovered books like *The Memory Palace* by Edward Hollis and *It Didn't Start With You* by Mark Wolynn. I did not know about the tradition of memory palaces, where orators use the interior architecture of a known famous building as a mnemonic device for retelling a long saga of history, where each room would trigger a different aspect of the story. The basis for my new video project has uncanny parallels with this concept, which had been previously unknown to me.

AC: *How did you start exploring it in art?*

ATW: The first experiment with inherited memory was a photographic series I made called *Altertagsgeschichte* that was part of a two-person show with Erin Cunningham called "these, our precious scars" at the original ICOSA Gallery. Inspired by the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*, I took large photographic prints of places that have a complicated and problematic history and tore them according to a buried layer of information usually in the form of a map or boundary lines. I subsequently glued them back together and gilded the repairs, as gestures of both recognition and healing.

AC: *Has your approach to visualizing inherited memory changed since then?*

ATW: In a sense, inherited memory has always been part of my research and explorations. *H A I N T* was the result of six years of production, research, and editing about layers of history, truth, memory, architecture, and song. In this process, I realized that architecture, specifically interior spaces, are triggers for memory. Carl Jung talked about buildings as symbols for the soul in his writings on dream analysis. My new video *TMI (The Memory Inheritance)* uses abandoned commercial public spaces to represent genetic memory and to create an abstract ritual for exploring that potential. I filmed in empty malls, basements, hospitals, nightclubs, retail stores, and office buildings to create an environment to trigger an act of cultural remembering with a variety of performances and mediums that personally move me. Spoken word, gospel singing, rock & roll, tap and modern dance, whistling, piano playing, and torch song became vehicles for collaborative conversations, places where disparate backgrounds can overlap and celebrate our collective subconscious. I specifically asked the performers to bring their own elements of historical memory to the table, through pieces of clothing, songs, and gestures. I'm showing the work-in-progress at "Sanctum."

AC: *It's a fascinating collection of artists in "Sanctum." Was the international/cultural diversity important to you?*

ATW: Thank you! I am really excited about this group of artists. The element of diversity was extremely important to me in order to explore a wide range of backgrounds, histories, and mediums alike.

I love introducing the people of Austin to artists that have previously not shown in Texas; that is a huge perk of curating such exhibitions. In 2017, I co-curated a show called "Good Mourning Tis of Thee" with Sean Gaulager of Co-Lab Projects at DEMO Gallery Downtown, where we had over 60 artists and performers making work about death and transformation, both as it related to rituals of mourning and gentrification.

I like to think of art as a conversation, a visual dialogue. In that sense, much of the discussion in contemporary art circles revolves around things that exist in a different realm from my line of thinking – nostalgia, palette, violence, and minimalism, to name a few. Here, I am creating my own conversation by surrounding my new work with artists who explore similar arenas. Being a working artist can become quite myopic and solitary. The beauty of curating shows is the privilege to elevate the work of others and create platforms for discourse. I look forward to the conversation that the works will have with each other and will inspire in the people who come out to see the exhibition. I welcome the dialogue and look forward to how these conversations will affect the production of the end of my film in the coming year.

"Sanctum" is on view Sept. 6-Oct. 5 at Big Medium, 916 Springdale Rd., Bldg 2, #101. A reception will take place Fri., Sept. 6, 7–10pm. For more information, visit www.bigmedium.org.

Conversations with the Inspiring Alyssa Taylor Wendt

August 2019

Alyssa Taylor Wendt

VoyageHouston

Today
we'd
like
to
introduce
you
to
**Alyssa
Taylor
Wendt**

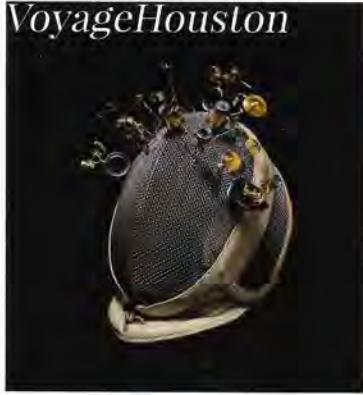
Alyssa, please share your story with us. How did you get to where you are today?

I am a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Austin, Texas. Originally from New York City, I have lived in the Southwest and on the West Coast. I began my career as a photographer, musician, underground film actress, and antique dealer. I returned to my native New York to earn my MFA at Bard College in 2008 and subsequently moved to Texas so I could live as a working artist. All of my previous experiences in the arts converged and created the perfect platform for my multimedia work, especially in film. I make dark, non-linear video installations that use all my skills for the soundtracks, production design, wardrobe, props, and image-making. I exhibit my work internationally, am on the board of three non-profit arts organizations in Austin, belong to a 20 member arts collective called ICOSA, curate shows in Austin and beyond and spend my summers in Detroit, where I made a film five years ago. I hope to continue to make my work with the supportive arts community in Austin and hope to open a museum of cultural artifacts within the next five years.

We're always bombarded by how great it is to pursue your passion, etc. – but we've spoken with enough people to know that it's not always easy. Overall, would you say things have been easy for you?

I wouldn't say the road to my current full and blessed life has been particularly easy, but I welcome and relish the challenges as opportunities to become a better person and artist. Starting with family dysfunction, divorce, childhood illness, and several moves, my young teen years were full of rage and delinquency. I survived this time mostly due to live music and found a community of outcasts, geniuses, artists and unique people that continue to inspire me to celebrate myself and work hard.





This support and alternative family of people are part of an extended community that has helped me through dark times. Once I embraced myself as an artist and the path of my life which is not the norm, I found that things organically fell into place and I can consistently make opportunities for making the work that keeps me sane and thinking outside the box. Being a strong woman in modern society has been particularly challenging and I have experienced the same misogyny, sexism, bias, and condescension as many have. I have tried to surround myself with people who relish my leadership and strength and not ones who are threatened by it. I would tell young women to believe in themselves, use their story as a springboard and provide compassion and support to other outsiders and minorities who they can empower and help.

Please tell us more about what you do, what you are currently focused on and most proud of.

My process- and research-based cross-disciplinary practice uses video, sculpture, large-format staged photographs, sound, and performance. The projects embrace animism, in that all the physical objects resonate with spiritual energy. I am most interested in exploring questions of inherited memory, material degradation, and temporal engagement, overlapping history and healing patterns- to investigate how much our work plays in the reinvention we employ to process our given identities. The mythos and cosmology that people recognize in my work come from a dark filmic world of interiors, both architectural and spiritual and most undoubtedly, a projection of my own consciousness- mysterious, complicated and full of possibility.

The latest pieces are unapologetically aesthetic, mythic and conceptual responses to questions of mortality and transformation using a cosmic, complex and somewhat occult approach. I am working to examine my identity as a woman and an artist in times of upheaval and change, working to actually bring more conflict and confrontation into the presentations. Cinematic and mannerist in its appearance, all of the projects gather complexity the more time is spent with them and encourages active interpretation, encouraging the viewer to use their own metaphysical lens with the works. My most recent notable projects include: Curating, producing and participating in a 60+ artist group show at DEMO Gallery about death called Good Mourning Tis of Thee; Collaborating on a two-person show with Kate Csillagi at our ICOSA Collective Gallery in Austin about scars, transgression, alchemy, and kintsugi; And exhibiting a three-channel video installation H A I N T after a five year process that premiered at the Visual Arts Center at UT Austin in January 2019 and won the International Istanbul Experimental Film Festival; Inclusion in multiple group shows in Los Angeles, Lubbock and at MASS, Dimension, Northern-Southern and Grey Duck Galleries in Austin.

Recent work such as the aforementioned epic video project H A I N T have long examined and inverted notions of ruin and monument- a metaphor for urbanism, cultural upheaval, truth and repeated cycles of history. I use these questions to push both myself and the work into uncomfortable explorations of power, healing, and collective memory. For my next series of films and work, I am researching the concept of genetic memory, that we inherit more than DNA from our ancestors and carry the habits, failures, pain, joy, and actions of those that came before us. I want to know where the boundaries of cultural interaction lie within these parameters of memory.

I have started a new film called The Memory Inheritance and a small excerpt work-in-progress will show at an upcoming exhibition that I am curating called Sanctum that opens at Big Medium Gallery in Austin on September 6th. This group show includes some incredible artists: Beili Liu (Austin), Scott Vincent Campbell (Detroit), Jaime Zuverza (Austin), Birthe Piontek (Vancouver) and Cordula Ditz (Hamburg, Germany). Art and the art community continues to give me the foundation that my given life did not and this is the cure for a fervent imagination, marginalized visions, shadows and the inheritance for our cultural bedrock.

Looking back on your childhood, what experiences do you feel played an important role in shaping the person you grew up to be?

My childhood was an unusual one. I was born in New York City but moved upstate and was raised in an unorthodox household of a menage-a-trois with my mother, father, and other women. I had no brothers or sisters and we lived in an ultra-modern house on top of a mountain in the Catskills. I was fairly ill as a child and spent a lot of time alone with my imagination. I wasn't allowed to have commercial toys, so my creative self was encouraged to think outside the box from a young age. I made cities out of trash and wanted to be an inventor. I do feel like my dreams have been fulfilled as each project I undertake is like a new invention to me. Additionally, that house was built on what I believe to have been haunted land and I saw many spirits as a child that I did not understand, but definitely accounts for the dark and otherworldly sensibility of my work today.

As a teenager, I delved into a world of delinquency and punk rock. The power of the music and the DIY community inspired me and I learned that I can do anything with enough passion. This ambition, fire and anti-establishment sensibility has guided my life to this day and I am so grateful for those early experiences and that I stayed mostly out of harm's way through it all. I got to live in New York City in the mid-'80s, a time when the outcasts and artists were few and far between. At an impressionable age, I met a diverse array of cultural pioneers there who gave me something very valuable to aspire and live up to.

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Gothic beauty: Alyssa Taylor Wendt's "HAINT"

A three-channel looping film is an epitaph to collective memory, cycles of time and cultural consciousness



Alyssa Taylor Wendt, "The Smile in the Shadow," 2014. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.

By **Mary K. Cantrell** - February 13, 2019

Haint blue graces the front porch ceiling of many a home in the Southern United States. The tradition started in the nineteenth-century with the African American Gullah people, who believed spirits could not pass through water. Painting a porch ceiling blue to ward off spirits and ghosts was later adopted across the South.

Alyssa Taylor Wendt's "HAINT" is an epitaph to collective memory — an epic three-channel 33-minute looped film that explores time and its endless cycles. Haunting, spiritual and, ultimately resonant, "HAINT" wrestles with the spirits and ghosts of history, both personal and cultural.

A viewing of "HAINT" and
Q&A with Wendt is at 5:30
p.m. Feb. 19, utvac.org

"HAINT" is presented in its entirety for the first time at the University of Texas Visual Arts Center, on view through Feb. 22.

Wendt spent a total of six years completing her multilayered film, which was shot in Texas, Detroit and Croatia.

The cast of characters and locales in “HAINT” include workers in hazmat suits, an avant-garde dance troupe, a curadora, an opera singer, an abandoned bathhouse, a deserted armory, retro futurist East European architectural monuments, a series of floating objects, and more. In the gallery, Wendt adds a *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, of vintage objects and an abstract bronze reminiscent of an equine hind leg as intriguing visual interest points along with photographs of staged scenes taken on the film sets (which are not to be mistaken as film stills).

Wendt’s strong background in photography as well as underground filmmaking — not to mention her years as an antiques dealer — make this confluent project a stand-out.

Sightlines recently sat down on the gallery floor at the VAC with Wendt, surrounded by her work, to discuss her various inspirations and process of creating “HAINT.”



Alyssa Taylor Wendt, “Uraniamadchen,” 2016. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.

Mary K. Cantrell: Where did the inspiration for this project come from and what has it been like working on this for a number of years?

Alyssa Taylor Wendt: I’ve been working on this project for six years. The actual filming happened over a period of three years. My mediums in general are video, photography, and sculpture—probably in that order—I also do some performance and sound design. I came up with this project and I wanted it to be a three-channel video installation from the get go and I wanted it to be of a high production value. My videos from the past were a little more DIY, shot on DSLR and camcorders, and I really wanted this to be epic. So in order to shoot on 4K, on Red Dragons and these amazing cameras with a full crew, it takes a lot of funding, which, as a working artist, I don’t have access to that much funding at once. The piece was inspired by a lot of conceptual ideas that I have worked with in the past and continue to—such as cycles of history, ruins, the function of

monument, death, song as a vehicle for information, faded grandeur, and animism—which is about the energy of objects, objects that I make, objects that I collect and find and objects I use in my films. It was filmed in three different productions. The first was filmed in Texas, in Austin and San Antonio, the second one was filmed in Detroit — that has a more narrative, feature-length segment, that I've shown separately — and the third part was filmed in Croatia.



Alyssa Taylor Wendt, "Abacomancer," 2014. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.

MC: Why specifically those three places?

ATW: I started in Austin just because of convenience and budget. I also had access to a huge arts community of friends who I knew would help me get it started. There were spaces that I really wanted to use, a former armory and an abandoned former bathhouse in San Antonio.

I've always had an affinity for Detroit and the center channel that was filmed there represented trying to refictionalize the mythology of my father's upbringing. My father is German, he was born in Berlin and as a child he lived through WWII. He left soon after and emigrated to the United States. In the years before he died he started telling me a lot of stories about surviving after the war and I found this sense of trauma to be so topical to what's happening to people in the middle east and all over the world, this brutality of conflict, and the pointlessness of war and what people have to go through to survive, and what that trauma does to a cultural consciousness.

I've always wanted to work in Detroit, because it's a fascinating city with its own complex history. I used it as a stand-in for post-WWII Berlin. At the time, five years ago, Detroit was pretty destroyed, much like the aftermath of a war, but this was an economic war. For the third part, I filmed in Croatia, specifically because I am really fascinated by the [Spomenik](#) monuments, which are some of the buildings and Brutalist memorials you see throughout one of the channels of the film. Spomenik is a Slavic word that means "monument," but it has come to be associated with these structures which are scattered throughout former Yugoslavia, so they're not just in Croatia, they're also in Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, all the former Yugoslavian countries. Most of them were commissioned in the 1960s to 1980s by Josip Tito, the former communist statesman-turned-benevolent dictator. I think it was an effort to increase his popularity. Most of them are memorials to WWII to either lost lives, ruined places, deaths, or tragedies and traumas. So they all have this really amazing, somewhat Russian inspired Brutalist and

futurist aesthetic to them that now looks so avant-garde, especially in the countryside, most of them in the middle of nowhere. So these these things that were basically monuments and memorials built in homage to ruins are now becoming ruins themselves. I'm really fascinated with that cycle as it applies to many things that are cultural in our society. I think these are great, very emblematic of how we deal with our past. So that was the inspiration for Croatia.



Alyssa Taylor Wendt, "Baphomet," 2014. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.

MC: Why did you decide to shoot a three-channel film?

ATW: Each of the different channels or productions has a different idea about time and each of them deconstructs time in a different way. The Croatia section lives in a timeless space where it could be any time, the future, the present, the past, but it's like a timeless, non-specific, temporal space. The Detroit portion in the center is more of a narrative, it is sort of a historical fiction. So it exists in the past, or at least reflecting on the past. The Austin version has a circular sense of time—it starts out where you see people excavating objects in ruins of a bathhouse. These objects are then brought into a building by various characters who interact with each other, and then, in a ritualistic way, end up smashing a pile, like an effigy, of these objects. Then we go back to the hazmat workers in the suits to get the object, so it's a chicken or the egg thing... it's that endless cycle of time that has no beginning and no end like an ouroboros.

These three segments are very specifically inspired by three artists' works. I was very inspired by Pierre Huyghe, specifically a work he did called "[The Host And The Cloud](#)," which is a film that he made in an abandoned folk art museum outside of Paris. He wrote structures for specific characters, and then let them improvise within the world of that character. The part that I filmed in Texas had similar experimentation. Another art piece was "[Muster](#)" by [Clemens von Wedemeyer](#) that I saw at the Documenta art festival in Kassel, Germany six years ago. He showed this piece that was a three-channel video installation, but instead of

being side by side so you can view them simultaneously like mine, it was in a triangle, so you could only view one screen at a time. He also dealt with conflicting structures of time, so it just made me think about the way you could approach three different aspects of something or show multiple versions simultaneously. The last piece is [Omer Fast](#) who did a piece called "Nostalgia" that was somewhat of a triptych as well, and had three approaches to the same theme of building a partridge trap that were all very different. But that was a big inspiration in my thinking for writing "HAINT."

MC: Can you talk a little bit about the desire to have the certain types of performers, like the opera singer, and the role song plays in the film. How were the groups and music chosen?

ATW: I'm very sensitive to soundtracks. I used to be a musician for many years. I sang, played guitar and Theremin. Having recorded albums and worked with different bands, I really like to have a layered soundtrack. I feel like sound is just as important as the visuals. Everything is just very specific to the story. For instance, in the first channel, the Austin part, "Just A Closer Walk With Thee" is a traditional song they play in Second Line parades, which are these funereal processions in New Orleans. So I knew I wanted to replicate that because in the film it's right before they smash this effigy of objects. It's a ritualistic, impending sort of doom, but also celebratory in a way. I have a lot of drone tones in there as well.

For the Detroit portion, I actually hadn't cast the part of Helmselm, who is the opera singer, he plays the shadow side, our subconscious/death in the movie. I saw [Joseph Keckler](#) perform, who is a performance artist in New York. He was so incredibly dark, with this gothic beauty. He's a professionally trained opera singer, but he takes it to a different level with his performance art. I basically lured him into acting the film because he just was the perfect person. [Cipkice](#), the choir in the Croatia segment, sang a variety of songs. They sent me a selection and I picked the ones that had the moods and the lyrics that best fit what I was making. There's some great stories I could tell you about the background of parts of the film- for instance, the whistling — so there's a scene where you see a lot of shots with the Spomenik monuments, where there's whistling over the top of it. I had this group of actors cleaning and polishing the monument in this gesture of preservation, but also of purification and protection. At some point, I had them marching in a circle around the monument and naturally, they all started whistling a song that I was not familiar with, and it sounded very Slavic. It was some partisan workers song from Yugoslavian history, a song of solidarity among the working class. I was like, this is so perfect to fit in with the themes of my film, and it came about completely organically. The soundtrack is really composed of opera, black metal music, experimental music, compositions, sound effects, ambient sound, voiceover, dialogue tracks and performed songs. I did most of the sound design myself with help along the way by the various editors. There are six speakers and three sets of stereo mixes for each one. I intentionally edited it so that it wouldn't be a cacophonous mass, that it would be more of a dynamic inter-folded soundtrack that will guide people both emotionally and narratively throughout the viewing.





Alyssa Taylor Wendt, "Alchemical Crone," 2017. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.

MC: What was the inspiration for the cabinet of curiosities? Can you describe some of the items you've curated?

ATW: Those are all altered props from the film, there's very few things in there that are just straight ahead props. I used to be an antiques dealer, so I'm very good at sourcing strange objects, and I just have an affinity for them. Most of them have been altered in some way. They all are things that I found or made. I think often when things are props in films, they just get thrown out, or reused. All these things were special to begin with, then through the experience of being in the film, they now have the energy of whatever happened in the film. I wanted to elevate them by presenting them in this glassed-off, illuminated cabinet. I added the labels to add this taxonomic, energy of a natural history museum. These were archived and catalogued — again, elevating them to the status of being important artifacts. The shoes belong to be actress Karolin Brandi who played Karo. They were really scraped up after, in the feature version of that channel, a rape scene where she's assaulted. It was one of the last things we filmed and her shoes got completely destroyed from being dragged over and over again. It was a very emotional and difficult scene. She was going to throw the shoes away I said, "No, no, no, give them to me." I get chills just looking at the shoes because they remind me of her being dragged down the sidewalk. As a gesture of healing and thinking about scraped up and skin, I replaced the laces with sinew, an animal product, and laced and tied them together. It enveloped the meaning that they now have to me. Now, another example is the little monkey...

MC: That is seen floating at some point in the film, right?

ATW: Yes, I have a lot of objects that are suspended and rotating. The monkey was actually given to my father when he got on the train to go to the boat to come to America. He was really scared, really young and his sister stayed behind. She gave it to him and said, "Don't worry, only the good die young," like a little dig, right? The irony is that she had, unbeknownst to her, a brain tumor at the time, and only lived for another year or two, and my father live to be 87. He gave that monkey to me when I was a child, and told me the story about what his sister said. The label on that says "only the good die young." I've labeled all the sculptural props with very enigmatic labels that are either references to the film or references to my own life. I like adding multiple layers beneath the work. Someone can enjoy it on a very surface level, or dig a little deeper, or they could dig a little deeper than that. I still see new things when I look at the film, and I believe me, I've watched it thousands of times. I like that endless discovery, to me, it justifies the existence of the work. The energy of places and objects are things that will have

relevance continually, but in different ways. So, someone might see this work in 20 or 30 years, and it might be very relevant, but it's not in the same way it is now for our collective consciousness.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

TAGS

Alyssa Taylor Wendt

Profiles & Interviews

UT Visual Arts Center



Mary K. Cantrell

Mary K. Cantrell is a 23-year-old, Austin-based writer who splits her time working at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and freelancing. She has journalism and women's and gender studies degrees from The University of Texas and a fondness for covering local arts stories.





Mourning Is Magic

Alyssa Taylor Wendt Offers Austin A Startling New Glimpse Of Grief And Architecture

by Brittani Sonnenberg

Photography by Leah Muse

WE ALL WANT TO SKIP OVER GRIEF when it shows up like a dreaded relative. We look away from the bereaved, mumble apologies and flee funeral parlors. But when we do so, grief goes underground, a silent river, waiting for us to build a well. And, indeed, drawing up buckets of that grief, when we are ready for it, is the only way to get well. We forget that mourning is magic; that if we allow it in, it can carve out a space of breath-taking beauty in us, bestow us with new vision.

“Good Mourning Tis of Thee,” a conceptual art installation written, curated and directed by Alyssa Taylor Wendt, along with Co-Lab’s Sean Gaulager, seizes upon grieving rituals as sites of profound transformation. And in an act of radical curatorial insight, Wendt has chosen to add architecture and development to the exhibition’s heady brew of loss and recovery. Co-Lab’s DEMO Gallery, housed in a downtown building scheduled for demolition, provides a poignantly “purgatorial” setting for the show.

We rarely see grief and architecture explored in tandem. How did you land on this pairing?

My work has long explored the cycles of ruin and monument. We disregard figures and structures only to venerate them at different moments of social change. Four years ago, after making a film in Detroit, I bought a historical home in the city's tax auction. Spending time in Detroit, as well as watching the unfathomable development in Austin, has had a large influence on these constructs and ideas around destruction, transformation and the animism of objects and places. A home or a specific place is a vessel for life, just as our bodies are, and they often record and contain the energy of the activity therein.

Is there a time in your life where steeping yourself in the rites of mourning has helped you? Or do you feel that you, like many others, were raised without the tools of mourning and ritual? How have you let go of houses or other beloved structures you've left behind?

I became interested in the concept of ritual early on in my art career and have explored this as a tool for art-making as well as healing. Our society has a serious denial about death and could benefit greatly from other cultures and their approaches.

I recently lost my beloved dog Prince and was at a loss on how to move on without his life energy. Despite protests from my friends and family, I decided to sit with his corpse for a day, a sort of shiva, anointing him with oil, talking to him and photographing him surrounded by flowers and his toys. This process helped me immensely; I was transformed immediately and filled with an acceptance of his sudden passing and peace. I do think that leaving homes can have a similar significance, as a loved place that has been witness to one's life, full of memories, hopes and emotions. Just think of the grief in the city of Houston and in many places in the Caribbean right now. Very apropos.

How can we apply the lessons of "death as a positive agent of change" in architectural arenas where such change negatively impacts previous inhabitants?

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uestion will be addressed by a panel discussion I have scheduled for October 15th featuring an architect, a mortician, a developer, an artist and others. Healthy mourning is about feeling and expressing your true emotions to the full extent and then letting them go with an acceptance of change as a positive agent. A simple acknowledgement of how important place is would be a healthy place to start, as well as the recognition of the history of a building or structure, rather than the disregard and emphasis on new development. A symbiotic balance can be achieved when humanity is considered before capital.

Do you believe that it's possible for buildings, like humans, to die of "natural causes"? Is the razing of a healthy building a kind of execution? What responsibility do we have to the shelters/institutions we create, in how we maintain and how we destroy them?

Old age and time will weather any vessel, the duration of which depends on its innate strength and longevity. Seeing all the amazing buildings in various states throughout the Midwest and in Detroit in my recent travels reminds me of the history that precedes me. Perhaps buildings should dictate their own timeline and not be "resurrected." It's hard to say, but I do believe that razing of buildings especially for purposes of commercial gain should be seriously questioned. Preserving history through its physical and architectural manifestations promotes a sense of respect and a greater understanding of our cultural lineage.

What works in the exhibition are you most excited about?

All of the artists are contributing work from deep in their spirit and I am honored to have them all in the show. I am excited to bring installations and performances from artists who have never done anything in Austin, including Scott Hocking, Frank Haines, Jon Brumit, and Chris Carlone as well as returning favorites like Joseph Keckler, one of my muses.



<https://www.austinchronicle.com/arts/2016-01-08/alyssa-taylor-wendt-compartments-of-desire/>

"Alyssa Taylor Wendt: Compartments of Desire"

Personal strength, theatrical animism, and sexual dynamics dominate this exhibition at Women & Their Work

REVIEWED BY [SETH ORION SCHWAIGER](#), JANUARY 8, 2016, ARTS

It's been a strong year for Alyssa Taylor Wendt. The artist's mysterious work was seen throughout 2015, in individual pieces or small groups at Northern-Southern Gallery, POP Austin, Art Alliance's Artbash, Co-Lab Projects screenings, and her studios during the East Austin Studio Tour. Crafting a solo exhibition is an entirely separate art form, and it's refreshing to see Wendt's work in this layered format.

Women & Their Work gives significant curatorial control to artists, letting them select and arrange their own work and providing a budget for a curatorial adviser of the artist's choosing. The result of this, for better or for worse, is that the artist's voice comes through doubly strong. At times that manifests itself as welcome purity, but at others the work and its arrangement can feel untempered or over the top. For Wendt, it's a bit of both, but that's not altogether a bad thing.

As viewers enter the gallery, they must pass *Saint Grab*, four blue-black hands extending from the wall at suggestive heights, poking, grabbing, and groping in what the artist describes as "making each visitor automatically an object of desire." After passing this trial, viewers move to a series of large photographic portraits of stoic, partially nude figures modeling talismans, magical arms, and armor of the artist's design. The photos give way to sculpture: a grotesque runner rug in the image of enlarged human skin with a rubber-band ball bulging through from underneath (in which, we are told, are written secrets of the artist); a freestanding set of terraced shelves holding crudely crafted "trophies," most of them in the shape of male or female genitalia; and a full history museum display of the items worn by those in the photographs, most made of old sports equipment altered and adorned with feathers, horse hair, false teeth, and plastic bling. And then, tucked away in a corner is a peculiar curiosity, a curtained closet of sorts next to a chair occupied by a black "SECURITY" ball cap and a matching shirt. In the small enclosure is a vanity with a blurred-out image of the artist in

place of the mirror, and several pages of the artist's plans and research for the exhibition. At the opening, two performers animated the space, the first in the security uniform, and the second behind the curtain, topless, and acting in surprise at any who might pull back the curtain on the faux private space.

This final space, along with the initial work's aggression toward the viewer, changes the atmosphere of the exhibition, somewhat counterintuitively making the show more theatrical, lighthearted, and ridiculous. The photos, taken in individually, have a strong air of mystery and personal power, each subject strengthened and made proud by the objects that adorn him or her. It's easy to imagine any one of them existing spotlighted, full of hidden meaning, in a dark, grand house. Shown en masse so closely together and viewed through the lens of the performance space and *Saint Grab*, they conjure an entirely different meaning. Here, the same items show up in multiple portraits, stitching together a mock-tribe of characters passing props among themselves rather than symbols. The suspension of disbelief so easily found when faced with a single image or object becomes almost impossible. Instead, viewers find themselves watching a game of pretend, a group of individuals barely concealing their laughter at the strange staging they've agreed to.

These contradictory readings have their own distinct appeals and drawbacks, but thanks to the tight professionalism and production value of the work and its display, the paradox is less jarring than it would otherwise be. Whether taking the serious tone, reading the portraits and items as symbolic extensions of the self, or taking the jesterly holistic read that celebrates a self-deprecating arrangement of contrived narrative and half-willing participation, each interpretation can be valued on its own merits.

"Alyssa Taylor Wendt: Compartments of Desire"

Women & Their Work, 1710 Lavaca

www.womenandtheirwork.org

Through Jan. 14

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