

Theodore Saskatche Wan

Hornby Island, 1975

artist book

Collection of Sophie and Christos Dikeakos

Hornby Island was made in July 1975 while Wan was still an undergraduate student at UBC in the Department of Fine Arts. In this durational performance, Wan suspended himself nude from four posts and read from the Old Testament's *The Book of Ecclesiastes* for as long as he could withstand the pain. This early work was informed by international currents in body art, related to the movements of minimalism and conceptualism, in which the artist's body was used as the work's medium in an often disinterested and impersonal manner. Testing and studying the body's endurance—and its limits—over a sustained period of time was a common characteristic of body art.

Wan intentionally chose Hornby Island for its association with white Canadian modernist painters; for example, both Jack Shadboldt and Wan's studio instructor Tom Burrows (one of the credited assistants of the work) owned houses and studios there. By taking up the dominant visual language of photoconceptualism and performance art, Wan asserted his own difference and religious and cultural background as a Hong Kong immigrant who was raised in a Baptist family. *Hornby Island* was a pivotal work in Wan's oeuvre as he was beginning to think through how his interests in performance and body art related to his photographic practice.

Theodore Saskatche Wan

(left to right)

Theodore Saskatchewan; The Village Of Theodore Saskatchewan; Name Change, 1977

lithograph, silver gelatin print, ink on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

Scanning Electron Microscope Photographs Of The Artist's Sperm, 1977

silver gelatin prints on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

Name Change documents an important event in Wan's life that also doubled as a conceptual art piece: the artist's legal name change, from Theodore Fu Wan to Theodore Saskatche Wan, in April 1977. Wan's name-change was a sardonic pun, alluding to the real town of Theodore, Saskatchewan (depicted in the aerial photograph included in the work). On *Name Change*, Wan wrote that to identify oneself with a piece of land was a "victim's position" that made a "fool of oneself" akin to "being branded." This act of satirical self-victimization critically underscored the expectations of immigrants and members of racialized communities to assimilate into white Canadian society.

In many of his exhibitions, Wan displayed *Name Change* alongside another series of "self-portraits": *Scanning Electron Microscope Photographs Of The Artist's Sperm*. This juxtaposition was another word-play, alluding to the fact that the town of Theodore was named after a British settler named Theodora Seaman. The *Artist's Sperm* series marked Wan's earliest interventions in the tropes of medical photography and his fascination with hospital equipment and technologies. Wan explained that his *Sperm* photographs were intended to re-articulate the inherent "narcissism" of self-portraiture. Much like in *Name Change*, the *Sperm* series illustrate how Wan's sense of humor was used as a means of critique.

Theodore Saskatche Wan

Bridine Scrub For General Surgery, 1977

silver gelatin prints

Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

For *Bridine Scrub*, Wan photographed himself with his body painted with antiseptic solution in the scrub patterns for patients in surgeries. In a subversive act of “queering” official medical diagrams, Wan chose to mark his body with the scrub patterns designated for female patients including those for mastectomies, thoracotomies, and thyroid operations. While Wan himself did not identify as queer, the artist can be said to be “queering” this work as he challenged heteronormative standards such as the gender binary. In his MFA artist’s statement, Wan wrote that he was “highly selective” in choosing the medical procedures to appropriate and claimed that his aim was to “invest the images with extra-medical meanings signifying specific emotional states.” These “extra-medical” meanings include potential semiotic readings, for example, Wan’s pose with his hand raised could allude to a diagram in art historian E.H. Gombrich’s essay “Visual Image” (1974), a copy of which was found in Wan’s archive.

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Panoramic Dental X-Ray, 1977

silver gelatin prints on paper

Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

Theodore Saskatche Wan

(left to right)

***Study for Bound By Everyday Necessities I*, c. 1979**

silver gelatin print on paper

Collection of Sophie and Christos Dikeakos

***Bound By Everyday Necessities II*, 1979**

silver gelatin prints on paper

Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

The *Bound By Everyday Necessities* series features real-life nurse Linda Mills and Wan in the role of “patient.” He is shown strapped to models of now-discontinued hospital beds used for individuals with spinal injuries: the Stryker Frame Bed and the Circ-O-lectric. The series of photographs debuted in *The Inversion Of The Readymade*, an exhibition at the Center For Art Tapes in May 1979, curated by Brian MacNevin. Simultaneously, *Everyday Necessities* was also displayed on the thirteenth floor of Halifax’s Victoria General Hospital where they were perceived by staff as straightforward instructional materials for doctors and nurses. The series functioned as either works of conceptual art or instructional illustrations depending on the viewing context, an intervention that reflected Wan’s continual interest in the Duchampian readymade.

Paul Wong

The 7 Day Activity series

Day 1: Soapdish, 1977

Day 2: Mint Suled, 1977

Day 3: Apricot Cleanser, 1977

Day 4: Alcohol, 1977

Day 5: Zinc Ointment, 1977

Day 6: Tower Rack, 1977

Day 7: Condom Extractor, 1977

colour photographs, dry mounted on card

Courtesy of Paul Wong Projects

Wong produced *7 Day Activity* as part of The Mainstreeters' tapes, a series of autobiographical video works made by the members of Wong's "art gang." Wong described *7 Day Activity* as a work intended to insert himself into mainstream beauty culture, which reifies white bodies and Western aesthetic standards, though as a "pimpley Asian young man" his attempts to conform were futile. The video chronicles Wong's skin-care regimen over a week, in which he tries different methods and treatments each day. The video is narrated by the artist himself, giving voice to an inner monologue detailing his struggles as a twenty-three-year-old man with acne, along with voiceovers from artists Anastacia McDonald, Jeanette Reinhardt, and Patrick Ready. While McDonald and Reinhardt's narrations offer Wong friendly advice on how to treat his skin, Ready's narration consists of clinical scientific definitions and medical-like prescriptions relating to the artist's skin conditions. The work speaks to Wong's visible difference within a predominantly white society, given his positionality as an individual with acne and of Chinese descent, and the expectation of people of colour to assimilate.

Wong made these photograph boards to accompany the video (on the adjacent wall) for an exhibition entitled *Twenty Photo Artists* presented at the artist-run centre PUMPs in April 1978. This exhibition marks the first time these photographic works for *7 Day Activity* have been exhibited publicly since 1978.

Paul Wong

7 Day Activity, 1977/2008

colour video with stereo sound

8:29 minutes

Courtesy of Paul Wong Projects

Paul Wong and Kenneth Fletcher

Blood Brother, 1976/2024

60 Unit; Bruise

50/50

colour video with sound

7:43 minutes

Courtesy of Paul Wong Projects

Blood Brother, a new video edit by Wong, is made up of two collaborations between the artist and his partner Kenneth Fletcher that took place on April 27, 1976: *60 Unit; Bruise* and *50/50*. In *60 Unit; Bruise*, Fletcher withdrew sixty units of blood from his arm via a syringe and injected it into Wong's back. In the years since, the works included in *Blood Brother* appear eerily prophetic especially following Fletcher's death at age twenty-three in 1978, and the HIV-AIDS epidemic in the 1980s that predominantly affected members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, at the time, this visceral exchange of bodily fluids was intended as a "blood-brother" ritual that was emblematic of Wong and Fletcher's close relationship. In addition, both works were intended to experiment with a new colour camera that had just been acquired by the artist-run centre Western Front where both performances took place.

50/50 is the companion piece to *60 Unit; Bruise*, involving Wong reciprocally injecting his blood into Fletcher's body and vice versa. In contrast to *60 Unit; Bruise*, which was exhibited widely after its creation, *50/50* was thought to be lost for 46 years until the original recording was rediscovered in 2022. This exhibition marks the first time *Blood Brother*, containing the long-lost *50/50*, has been exhibited publicly.

Content Advisory: This work contains potentially triggering imagery. Visitor discretion is advised.

1. **Paul Wong**
installation notes for *In ten sity*, 1978
2. **Paul Wong**
flyer for *In ten sity*, 1978
3. **Paul Wong**
contact sheet for *In ten sity*, 1978
4. **Jim Gorman & Paul Wong**
installation view of *In ten sity*, 1978
5. **Robert Keziere & Paul Wong**
interview in *Videoguide*, 1978

Courtesy of Paul Wong Projects

Paul Wong

In ten sity, 1978 / 2024

black and white video with stereo sound

24:16 minutes

Courtesy of Paul Wong Projects

In ten sity was a multi-channel video installation and endurance performance, that took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery on December 7, 1978, dedicated to the artist's partner Kenneth Fletcher following his death by suicide earlier in June of that year. In the work, Wong placed himself in an psychiatric-institution-like padded cell measuring 8 x 8 x 8 feet and comprising four walls and an open-ceiling, from which five cameras surrounded him. Throughout the twenty-five minute performance, feeds from all of the cameras were visible on monitors to those viewers situated directly outside the cube, who both cheered and jeered as Wong bounced and thrashed off the walls to music by some of Fletcher's favourite musicians (including Patti Smith, Avengers, and Sex Pistols). Towards the end of the performance, fellow members of the Mainstreeters jumped into the cube where they all moshed along with Wong. *In ten sity* was one of Wong's visceral works from this period that pushed his body to its limits and further explored the themes of the "othered" body scrutinized under institutional surveillance systems (see also: *7 Day Activity*). This is a single-channel version of the five surveillance cameras that documented the performance.

Collection Close-up

Cynthia J. Smith

b. 1955

***Anthology of a Facelift*, 1988**

silver gelatin print

Collection of the City of Richmond

Without its title, this dramatically lit black-and-white photograph of a woman wearing a paper bag covering her face would be highly ambiguous. It is one of several portraits from Cynthia J. Smith's *Redressing the Crone* (c. 1991), a photographic series documenting women about to undergo or who had undergone plastic surgery. For Smith, this project pointedly yet empathetically addressed such themes as the fear of aging and the pursuit of the fountain of youth, in tandem with the beauty norms faced by women within a patriarchal society.

For Smith, it was important that her subjects—usually family, friends, and friends of friends—had agency during the project. She described the creative process as a collaborative one, where the women agreed to share their experiences, which were “given expression through the medium of photography.” Explaining how *Anthology of a Facelift* came about, the artist wrote, “The woman told me she imagined wearing a paper bag over her head to aid her self-confidence when appearing in public so I photographed her before her facelift wearing a paper bag.”

The presentation of this photograph in the Gallery's Page Hope-Smith Art Lounge is part of a new initiative Collection Close-up wherein we highlight a work from the Permanent Collection, which has a formal or thematic link to the featured exhibition(s).

From the Archives of Theodore Saskatche Wan (left to right)

1. **Theodore Saskatche Wan**
diagram for *Bound By Everyday Necessities I* for Mercer Union, c. 1980
2. **Theodore Saskatche Wan**
diagram for *Bound By Everyday Necessities II* for Mercer Union, c. 1980
3. *Patient Care And Special Procedures In X-Ray Technology*, 1964
page 121
4. *Alexander's Care Of The Patient In Surgery*, n.d.
photocopy
5. **Theodore Saskatche Wan**
drawings on page 69 of *Alexander's Care Of The Patient In Surgery* (fifth edition), 1973
photocopy
6. *Electro-Medical Equipment For General Practice* book, n.d.

Theodore Wan Archive, Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Library & Archives

In his MFA exhibition statement from April 1978, Wan wrote that one of the governing principles behind his practice was that his photographs should not merely borrow motifs from surgical diagrams but rather be “medically correct” and “valid and adequate as medical illustrations,” as well as artworks. This vitrine contains numerous objects owned by Wan including photocopies and torn pages from official medical textbooks, such as *Alexander's Care Of The Patient In Surgery*, that were referred to by the artist when planning his photographic series. In addition, this vitrine also includes two diagram drawings made by Wan meant to aid in the installation of his photographs for his 1980 exhibition at Mercer Union in Toronto.