

# Artist Talks - Tay Butler\_ac

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Tay Butler, Edith Villasenor

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 Edith Villasenor 00:00

Hello, Welcome. Today is March 28 2019. My name is Edith Villasenor. And I'm here to interview Tay Butler about his new art exhibit, American Geographic at the Architecture, Design and Art Library. Thank you, Tay, for being here. And thank you UH Libraries for sponsoring this program. Tay Butler is currently a student at the University of Houston in his senior year at the School of Art's photography and digital media block program. And today Tay will be talking about his work, experiences, and plans for the future. To begin, Tay, could you tell us about your background?

 Tay Butler 00:33

Sure. Thanks for having me. So I've definitely done a lot in my 38 years. I actually turn 39 next month.

 Edith Villasenor 00:43

Oh, wow.

 Tay Butler 00:45

So I have a weird path to U of H. I'm originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, born and raised there. After high school, like immediately after high school, I went into the army, went to Fort Hood, Texas. I was a tanker, truck driver, [?] specialist... a little bit of everything. And I got out of the military in 2002. And I went back home and I went to school for journalism. I liked to write at the time. And then after that, I say maybe a year later, I went on my first deployment, because I was still in the Army National Guard. And so I went on my first deployment to Iraq. And that was a life changing experience, because we lost a couple of people on that trip.

E Edith Villasenor 01:32

Oh, wow.

T Tay Butler 01:33

And so that trip kind of gave me the ferocity and intensity that I have now. I don't take a lot of things for granted, I know that I could easily not be here, could easily be me on one of those convoys. So I definitely attack everything I do with intensity and happiness to be able to be here doing what I'm doing. So after that trip, I went home and started working at a power plant. I was a boiler operator. My job was to kind of go through the plant and set the machinery up so the plant would work. I wasn't very good at the job, but it was very high paying, and it was a job everybody wanted. And so I stayed there for almost 10 years, and made a lot of money and lived a pretty good life. But inside I was miserable. And what I realized is I was one of those people that needed to have a purpose, needed to have passion about what I was doing. And I didn't have that at the power plant; it was just a job, just a way to pay bills. But I say that, and then also the social, social events that were happening at the time. Around that time, this was 2014, that was the time Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson. So that moment, kind of influenced my life where I knew that I always wanted to have a purpose in what, whatever I was doing. And so a year later, I quit that job. I remember telling my mother that I was quitting and she thought I was crazy. And my girlfriend too at the time, she just couldn't really wrap her head around a person walking away from that much money, especially me, where I'm from, I don't come from money, so you don't leave money on the table. But I knew that I had to do, I had to make a change. So we moved to Houston into U of H at the end of 2015, started in graphic design and it was okay. It was a safe decision and I felt like I could get a job as a graphic designer. But I still don't have the purpose. And so that's when I converted over to photography and everything just kind picked up from there. And the rest is history, as they say. Why did you choose photography? Well, I've always had a, I always had a love affair with imagery. Even as a kid I would have posters - basketball players and girls on my wall and so I was always in love with photography and created or captured moments. But I didn't have a specific language for that. I just knew I loved the imagery. I never took pictures growing up. I never didn't know what aperture meant, I didn't know what shutter speed meant. I just liked the finished product. And so once I started here, I bought my first camera and then I started to learn. And as I started taking pictures then it kinda grew. Here they want you to study, study your history, know about the history of photography and art in general. So then I started to learn about Lorna Simpson and Romare Bearden and Gordon Parks and all these different people. That's kind of when my love affair with collage kind of started. And since then everything's [?]

E Edith Villasenor 05:38

And have you explored other mediums besides photography?

T Tay Butler 05:41

A little bit, a little video, a little, little bit of installations, sometimes I'll type things, I'll print things or put things on wood and kind of put it together. I've also done, I've dabbled in painting, I shouldn't say I've done painting. I'm not that good, but I've dabbled in it some but I still want

I shouldn't say I've done painting, I'm not that good, but I've dabbled in it some but I still want to do better. I definitely want to do film one day in the future. So just a little bit, is it still reasonably close to photography. I hope to do a little bit of sculpture in the future too. I'm open to a lot of different ideas and different mediums fit different ideas.

 Edith Villasenor 06:28

What themes are usually pursued in your work?

 Tay Butler 06:33

I would say my work kind of hovers around three trains, three ideas. Number one is the black experience. I do a ton of reading. I read one book a week, every two weeks. It's usually of a historical nature. So when we came in here, I had a book in my hand about civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee in the 60s. So I'm always reading about history, and particularly Black people, what we've been through. We know the history of this country very troubled. We, me in particular, I'm from Milwaukee, but my family moved to Milwaukee in the 50s from Mississippi. And so because of that, I don't have a lot of access to my family's history. I don't know anybody beyond my great grandmother. And so we don't have any records, we don't have any pictures. And so another frame of my work is that, archiving of my work. Every time I make a piece of work, every time I make anything that's talking about anything that I'm thinking about, to me, it turns into a document that later people can use to recall my family as far back as we can go. And then also, because I fell in love with collage I wanted to promote collage as an equal partner to photography, and painting, and sculpture. You think fine art, we think sculpture and painting, and then the little brother of sculpture and painting is photography. And then the little cousin of photography is collage. When in actuality, they've been doing collage since the days of Picasso and probably before. So I want to, I want to be a part of that bringing collage back to, or to a respectful place for the first time.

 Edith Villasenor 09:04

And now could you tell us more about the American Geographic series? How did that get started?

 Tay Butler 09:11

Yeah, so because I do collage, I deal with a lot of magazines. Usually when people collage, they tend to deal with older material, because you don't really want to worry about using newer material and having the authors of the material come back and get you. So it's a little easier to use a picture from the 40s and cut it up and turn it into something else, or 50s or 60s rather than using a picture out of Vogue that was made two weeks ago. It's a little easier to use older stuff. So I have easily like 100 plus National Geographics at home, in addition to like all the other magazines. I've got tons of Ebonys and Essences and Jets, basketball magazines, rap magazines, old fashion magazines, you name it, I have, literally at my house right now I have maybe 800. And so I'm always trying to find different sub sets out of my projects. So I have my main project, which is about migration, about my family moving from Mississippi, me moving back to the south, but then also have smaller kind of one-off projects like changing magazine

[?]. And so that kind of birthed National Geographic, I wanted to take the covers off the National Geographic, and kind of give them new context. And the reason I wanted to do that was because of an editorial piece that was written by the editor in chief in April of 2018. And in that piece, she said, I as the editor in chief of National Geographic, admit that this magazine has had a racist history. And that history has been a very monolithic, racist, depiction of people of color. Depiction of people that are from Eastern civilizations as primitive. They've also tended to promote the beauty and the sexualization of island women. They also tended to promote white western civilization as saviors for these primitive, savage civilizations. And so she admitted that and they had a professor from the University of Virginia actually, like go through all of the issues, annotate his findings. So I thought that was interesting. Like, you don't see that too often, where people admit, hey, we have, we have a history of racism in our DNA. And so, you know, it's not going to fix anything like that's centuries of damage. But it is a respectful attempt to reconcile with that history. And so I wanted to give a visual counterpart to that history. I didn't want it to kind of just be a thing you can Google and never think about again, I wanted it to have, I want it to live in space. And so I have all these National Geographics, I would take the cover off, then I would go through the issue. And anytime I would find anything that kind of resembled what she was admitting to, and I would cut it out and put it on the back cover. So that way, you can see the front cover as they wanted you to see it. And then you can see the back cover as I see it. And so, and so it was really just, it was really just, how do we find a way to, how do we find a way to give it life instead of, a lot of times even when people do admit certain things, there's nothing after that. There's nothing, you know, there's no, there's no additional--I don't know what word I'm trying to use--there's no additional work on their end. They just have to say, it happened, we're sorry. We'll do better from now on. A lot of times that's not enough. A lot of times you kind of need to see what happened. That's all I wanted to [?]

 Edith Villasenor 14:19

Thank you so much for sharing that. And have you used the public space before?

 Tay Butler 14:30

Yeah, a little bit. So 2017. By that time, I was fully immersed in photography and the block program. I had no shows under my belt. And then last year, that turned right away and I had 14 shows last year. So I've shown in a space called Noble Artisan, and I've shown in, I've done a little performance thing in Project Rowhouse, where I gave a frame archived history. I had a show in Alabama Song, that was actually the first place I showed the National Geographic project in its early stages. Also had a couple, a couple shows in the Blaffer and just, you know, little places around the city. And so I'm definitely looking forward to my senior show coming in May. And then just whatever else comes my way, I also have a show in Madison, Wisconsin. So, yeah, just little, little stuff here and there, trying to stay active, because people want to see that you're constantly thinking about how you're making it work, not only how you're making it but how you're showing it and displaying it.

 Edith Villasenor 16:04

From the exhibition, what's your favorite?

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Tay Butler 16:09

My favorite piece? I can't, I can't say I have one, only because, only because they're kind of--I won't say systematic, but they're kind of--the titles are the dates of the magazine issue. And so for the, for the flyer, I used an issue about East Harlem. And they had a young, young black girl on the cover. And she kind of reminded me of my daughter, for some reason, kind of had a similar face to my daughter, I would say that's probably my favorite one just because I love that image.

E

Edith Villasenor 16:52

Make that connection.

T

Tay Butler 16:56

But otherwise, I tend to like, I tend to just pick the covers based on the information that they're given. So there's, there's covers I love and don't get me wrong. Like, I think that, I don't think that everything the National Geographic has done has been negative. I think there are some good parts to it. There are some good components to it. They've had some great photographers, as well, that have captured iconic imagery. But a lot of it has been problematic, one-sided, and it is what it is. But they're still, you know, some great images in here somewhere. So the one of the girl, is kind of my favorite, if I had to pick.

E

Edith Villasenor 17:46

What's the process that you go through, I know you've touched it a little bit.

T

Tay Butler 17:51

I really, really just kind of read the magazine. I don't read it word for word, but I go through it. And I have a pile, I have a couple piles. So I have a pile where this kind of fits the narrative, and then this one doesn't. So you know, National Geographic also does like a lot of animal research and documentation. So stuff about animals I'll put to the side, like that's not anything I need. Typically, if there's a person, a person of color on the cover, I'll put that in a usable pile. And then anything that's people related, whenever they make people and the study of people the main idea, then I'll use that.

E

Edith Villasenor 18:38

And when do you know when you're finished?

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Tay Butler 18:45

For these, they haven't been too, haven't been too complex, it's kind of I'll take a picture out and then I'll leave the caption with the picture so you can see how the editors wanted you to conceive. And so I don't cut them up like I would my normal collages. Normally with a collage I'm taking eyes off of heads and taking lips off other people and putting arms on different people. A little more haphazard. This time, I'm not doing that, I'm just taking the square or picture out and then I put the caption.

 Edith Villasenor 19:25

Interesting. Tell me about your influences. What art is inspiring you?

 Tay Butler 19:33

These days, a little bit of everybody. So maybe in the past I was kind of boxed in and I had, you know, a little niche that I kind of stuck to because I didn't know any better. So I kind of stuck to black photographers and black painters. And so you know what you know, but as I got more researched and informed my influences ranged from Irving Penn to like I say Romare Bearden, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Gregory Crewdson, a lot of different people, [?] Brand, just all types of different ideas. I like ideas. So even if I'm not crazy about the art or the work or the image, I like to find out what people's ideas are.

 Edith Villasenor 20:37

Do you have a favorite work?

 Tay Butler 20:39

Favorite work? I would say, I would say Romare Bearden's Harlem Renaissance collages. I would say those are, those are the most representative, most representational of what I do. So he would take his perception of what he was seeing in Harlem at that time. And he would just combine it all. So maybe you'll see this in one neighborhood. You'll see this on 125th Street and you'll see something else on another boulevard. But he put it all in one place like it's all in one section. And that's kind of what I do with my collages. I take things that I've seen in Milwaukee, things I've seen in Houston, things I've seen in Iraq, and I put it all in one place. Outside of that I'm really into, if I'm pronouncing his name right, Egon Schiele. Really into his paintings. I'm really into [?]s photography. I'm really, really, really into Deana Lawson's photography right now. So yeah, I'm kind of all over the place, I'm really into. I just finished Leonardo da Vinci's autobiography. And so that gave me a different viewpoint on his work just seeing how much intelligence went into that work. A lot of times, we kind of give the masterworks a thumbs down because it looks like, it looks like colonization in art form. But you know, Leonardo da Vinci. [...] And really thinking about it in ways that nobody has before or since.

 Edith Villasenor 22:59

And what do you say is your favorite [?]

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Tay Butler 23:03

Books, books. I go to museums and galleries all the time. But it can be rushed. And you get tired of sitting down or standing up and paying a price or sitting in lines or whatever it may be. I was actually in Arkansas yesterday, I went to Crystal Bridges. Very new museum and it's beautiful. But I didn't get to see everything because it's like, gotta kinda go through everything and you sit there for a little while but you can't absorb it the way you can with a book. With a book I can sit there for hours and come back to it and put it down and come back to it again. So I look at a ton of books. I'm always here you see me all the time, checking out books all the time. It's all I do is, if I'm not making art, I'm looking at it.

E

Edith Villasenor 23:59

Very insightful. So what's next for Tay?

T

Tay Butler 24:03

Well, I had just mentioned that I was in Arkansas. I'm going to pursue my MFA from the University of Arkansas. So I wasn't even going to apply to grad school. It just didn't seem feasible because of money and my wife and my daughter. I was like, I probably should just graduate and maybe work, make a little money and try to get things back where we want them and then maybe try again. But my professor just told me to think about it, just give it a shot. You don't have to accept. You can always hold off for a year and do something else. So I applied to six schools. I applied to a school in LA, Otis, MICA in Baltimore, University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, North Texas in Denton, Arkansas. I'm missing one more, Brooklyn College. To my shock and surprise, all of them said yes. With different offers on the table. After I kind of got all the people out the way it was down to two, North Texas and Arkansas. And so I really, really considered North Texas just because I would still be in the state. But in the end I chose Arkansas; it was a perfect fit. So I'll be there in the fall, starting middle of August. Looking forward to it.

E

Edith Villasenor 25:44

Congratulations. Good luck with that. So what about the series? Would you be willing to go back and continue adding more collages?

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Tay Butler 25:58

Absolutely. I have 14 up now like, my goal is to have 100 plus. Maybe I don't show 100. Maybe I have 100. And then I'll choose different editions to show. I've also considered blowing them up super big to kind of give it a different context like as a 10 by 14 collage it still looks like a magazine. But maybe if it's a wall sized mural, it feels like actual lives are being broadcasted. So I'm definitely considering different ways to show it. But yeah, I'm still making one or two a week. Even after I put the show up. I'm still making more of them.

**E** Edith Villasenor 26:50

Happy that you're still going to continue the series. Tell us, is there like a website where people can find your work? Do you have social media accounts people can follow you on?

**T** Tay Butler 27:02

Yeah, so definitely. I just came back to Instagram, I had deleted it off my phone. I was on there a little too much. So I'm definitely addicted to Instagram, I'm on Instagram at stayclosetay, S T A Y, C L O S E, Tay T A Y. And my website is the same thing, stayclosetay.com. Most of my work is on there, a little bit of the National Geographic is up there, some of Migration is up there, some of my portraiture is up there. I dabble in music, too, not making it myself but I make album covers for artists from LA and some in the East Coast. And so I've got my album covers up there and I have a book you can purchase there too, I have a book called Dress Code where I make collages out of NBA uniforms and fashion ads. And so just you know, little stuff I'm always working on. In my Instagram I try not to, I never post food so don't worry. I try to keep it exciting and informative and I try to show what kind of music I'm listening to, what kind of art I'm looking at. When I did my visit with Arkansas I kind of show all the things that I've seen on the visit on my Instagram. So I think I'm a pretty fun guy to follow.

**E** Edith Villasenor 28:34

Thank you Tay for everything. Definitely been really good talking to you and sharing your story.

**T** Tay Butler 28:40

Thank you for having me.