

Exactly Foundation Residency #25 - *A Way of Becoming* **by Kenneth Wong**

Artist Statement

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I've long felt a quiet discomfort around certain behaviours I see in men, and, sometimes in myself too. They're not always loud or aggressive, but they linger. You sense them on roads, sidewalks, in queues, meetings, meals. It's the way people come across – how they interrupt, assert, boast, or demand, as if it's their entitlement. There's often an undercurrent of impatience or insistence, sometimes brash, other times guarded. A need to dominate, to be right, to never appear unsure.

And I find myself wondering: why does it feel like this? Does it have to be this way?

These aren't questions I ask as an observer, but as someone trying to lead an honest life as a father, a son, a husband, and a man learning to take responsibility without becoming an untouchable, high-functioning machine of a man. I'm not here to point fingers. If anything, I'm trying to understand the unease that sits just beneath the surface – what it is, where it comes from, and whether there's room to shift.

My own experience of masculinity was shaped early on by absence. My father wasn't around much due to work, which required him to spend time away from the family. When he did offer advice, it was mostly about getting good grades and staying on track in school. The lessons I received weren't direct. They were positive and consistent, but fragmented. Oftentimes, I had to fill in the blanks myself. Without much guidance, I simply absorbed what was around me – friends, pop culture, media, all of which, in their own ways, shaped my sense of what it meant to be a man. My mother, over time, grew more stoic and pragmatic in response to her own challenges. I didn't take after her in that way, though I carry a deep respect for her resilience. I became more attuned to emotional currents. But that also meant I had little clarity about what kind of man I was meant to become, apart from the broad goal of doing well.

In Singapore, doing well often means performing well, especially in school. I grew up, like many others, in an education system designed to sort and stream. From a young age, success was defined narrowly: school, grades, course of study, job security. I was taught to push, to perform, to get ahead. Over time, I realised doing well isn't the same as growing well. I've had my fair share of academic success, and as I grew older, I began to ask – what did all this prepare me for? What kind of person was it shaping me into?

The pressure to excel, both from the system and from family, is immense. Of course, one can always choose not to "participate." But opting out doesn't always feel like an option. Especially in an Asian context, where cultural norms already place enormous expectations on men to succeed, provide, and lead. Additionally, we have a system that reinforces those pressures, from school to workplace, making it hard to tell where personal ambition ends and societal demand begins. These expectations ripple outward, shaping families, relationships, and how children are raised. Amplified, these anxieties can become generational. And in a culture that rewards visible achievement and decisiveness, quieter strengths like attentiveness, patience, and care often go unrecognised, even though they're vital to the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities.

I suspect many men feel this absence – not just of rest or recognition, but of something deeper: a space to express uncertainty, to be vulnerable, to be valued for traits that fall outside the usual mould of masculine success. We're fed relentlessly through media, peers, and systems, to be the "man" – suave, physically capable, in control; be rewarded for certainty over doubt, action over reflection. When the only markers of value are good looks, grades, promotions, or material gain, what happens when you fall short? Or when those markers start to lose relevance, say, in retirement, or in a changing world where the old definitions of "remarkable" no longer apply?

This body of work is not about diagnosing those behaviours. It's about surfacing the quiet weight they carry. Much of it unfolds in my own home. I am, after all, the head of my household, but I don't always feel like I know what I'm doing. I second-guess myself. I wonder if I've done enough, or done right. My wife and sons mirror back different parts of me. And the spaces we live in, the objects that hold memory, the shared routines – all carry the tension between what I've inherited and what I hope to pass on. I'm fascinated with spectacle but more so the subtle things. How silence can speak volumes. How pride can

mask fear. How habits form and harden without us realising. I want to observe, to understand and maybe offer a way of seeing that doesn't blame, but invites reflection.

We live on a small island. The pressure to perform, to outdo, to pursue excellence and exceed expectations can leave little space for pause, softness, or doubt. Striving may sharpen us, but it doesn't always make us better fathers, better friends, better sons. And when the pressure builds without release, it's no wonder we sometimes snap, grow distant, or struggle to connect. I often wonder what my sons are watching and absorbing. They see how I behave when I'm tired. How I speak when I'm frustrated. How I respond when I don't have the answers. And I ask myself: what are they learning from that? Am I modelling strength, or performance, or insolence?

A Way of Becoming doesn't present solutions. It's not an answer, but a beginning and a gesture towards conversation. About the scripts we've inherited. The roles we've defaulted into. The values we've memorised without reflection. I want to know what's worth keeping, and what we can finally set down. And I hope others, especially men, but not only men, might be willing to ask those questions too.

It's not about being softer or louder. It's about being clearer, rooted, and less afraid. I don't believe we need to reinvent manhood. But I do believe we need to examine it with courage and care, to step back. To question long-held assumptions.

After all, what kind of people do we want to become? What kind of homes do we want to build?

What kind of stories do we want our children to tell about us?