THE BELL AND PONTIAC’S MURDER

Much of Cahokia today consists of a 20th century vernacular landscape, one that belies its early French colonial urbanism based on a typical orthogonal grid. Cahokia sprawls across mostly flat land, with ranch houses, parking lots and retail buildings dodging occasional creeks, channels and green spaces. Camp Jackson Road remains the central commercial thoroughfare, with its roadscapes fully linear and fully in the mode of retail strip. Nothing in the built environment divulges that Cahokia in fact is Illinois’ oldest town.

Among the big boxes, gas stations and strip malls of the road stands a small studio and art space called “The Bell.” Presented by Bortolami Gallery and organized by Los Angeles-based artist Eric Wesley, The Bell is one of the American Bottom’s oddest adaptive reuses. The Bell also conjures a morass of conflicting American modes of cultural identification. This Mission Revival structure, built in 1980, invokes traditions of Mexican food, Spanish colonialism and white American fast food culture – in the middle of a town founded by French colonists and named for a Mississippian settlement.

That the Taco Bell, a sturdy building rendered in concrete block made as brick and clay tile, opens into the confusion of European settlement of North America is clear. The symbolic mundane, however, is also apparent. Taco Bell is a ubiquitous signifier, and without a clever reuse such as an art gallery, almost signifies nothing in roadside America. Of course, the original Taco Bell in Downey, California, built on 1962 and the architectural prototype upon which the three-arch and belfry-carrying Cahokia building is based, became the subject of an intense historic preservation campaign last year. The image of the Taco Bell of 1962 was legible cultural heritage – so too may the 1980 building, as it embodies the chain’s early expansion. (Ironically, the first restaurant closed around the time that the Cahokia branch opened.)

Somewhere to the east of The Bell, the great American warrior Chief Pontiac met his demise. There is no tension to note between the two sites, except for the anxiety that quietly obscure, taken-for-granted generic American landscapes may induce. Something is always silent that would shatter the calm. The geographic locus of Pontiac’s demise is not specific, but its enunciation speaks to the racial strife that continues to define North American partitioning. Pontiac died in Cahokia because the French of the town, founded after the establishment of a mission in 1696, recognized First Americans as equals. Yet the circumstances of Pontiac’s death invoke hostility between the British and native tribes that foreshadowed later American tribal expulsion. Cahokia stands as a site of rare continental consilience between First Americans and Europeans.

Pontiac had risen to chief of the Ottawa by 1755 and later chief of the Council of Three Tribes, consisting of the Ottawa, Potawotami and Ojibwa. Pontiac led a campaign to expel the British from tribal lands, while providing support to French settlement. In 1763, Pontiac led a successful series of battles against the British around Fort Detroit, but never captured the fort itself. As Pontiac retreated to the Illinois territory, the French ended up shifting political alliances to the British in 1764. Loss of French support and erosion of tribal solidarity would throw Pontiac into exilic inhabitance of the American Bottom.

In July 1766, Pontiac signed a peace treaty at Fort de Chartres that bred resentment among Ottawa that he had overused his authority. While Pontiac's relationships with tribespeople became fraught, and his power declined, his bonhomie with French colonists remained strong. Pontiac relocated to Cahokia, and engaged in organizing against British occupation of Illinois and the St. Louis area. French army Captain Louis St. Ange de Bellerive, whose own whereabouts and authority were challenged by the British conquest of Illinois in 1765 and the Spanish takeover of St. Louis in 1766, sympathized with his friend Pontiac.

St. Ange de Bellerive warned Pontiac of a potential assassination, but reportedly met the rebuke from Pontiac: "Captain, I am a man. I know how to fight." On April 20, 1769 a member of the Kaskaskia tribe murdered Pontiac after the chief had been drinking in a tavern. Pontiac's body was buried in St. Louis, near Fourth and Walnut streets downtown. Today, the sites of both Pontiac's murder and burial are unmarked, erased places. Cahokia itself is not even the same place as when Pontiac fell; the village declined toward the nineteenth century and many early buildings were lost. Flooding hastened decline, while railroads tamped any resurgence. In 1814, St. Clair County moved its seat to Belleville, leaving Cahokia as one of Illinois' many disempowered seats of territorial statecraft.

The Bell may be the prototype for the architectural symbols of the American Bottom: commonplace at first glance, seeming to belong to a generic American vernacular, signifiers that seem tautological in the presence of meaning. Yet The Bell is situated in a suburban landscape yet fully surveyed, whose cultural patterns and meanings are quiet perhaps only because they lack the robust historic inquiry that old Cahokia has received. The Bell also is a marker pointing elsewhere, because it is so generic. The visitor seeking meaning always already looks elsewhere when faced with such a building, so it points to relational geographic meaning that eventually may unlock its own presence. At the least, The Bell raises the consciousness needed to "find" Pontiac's death site. A landscape of demystified objects tells no real story of the American Bottom, because the American Bottom is inherently mystified and defined by the lack (not abundance) of such objects.

IT'S A WRAP

Eric Wesley's latest project, burritos and the search for Middle America

BY EVAN MOFFITT

If you follow the I-55 highway over the Mississippi River, past the St Louis Arch, and turn right past a row of strip clubs and petrol stations, you'll arrive at Camp Jackson Road in Cahokia, Illinois. Barren car parks surround an archipelago of fast-food restaurants: this could be anywhere in the US that politicians keep declaring has been 'left behind'. But here you'll find the artist Eric Wesley in an abandoned Taco Bell (the largest Mexican fast-food chain in the US), keeping company with his paintings of burrito cross-sections and a variety of bronze and glass sculptures. You can almost detect the lingering scent of synthetic nacho cheese.

Wesley came across the building in early 2015. After being quoted a 'ridiculously low' rental price, he decided to lease the building and embark on a year-long site-specific project, titled *The Bell*, which would weave together strands of his practice from the past decade, beginning with his 2002 *Endless Burrito* sculpture at Meyer Riegger in Karlsruhe, Germany.

Wesley grew up in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, where much of its flat expanse is carved up by stucco strip malls and fast-food restaurants. Dominating the area are carbon-copy 'tract' homes, many designed in the neocolonial 'Spanish Revival' style, perhaps in a nod to the nearby San Fernando Mission, founded in 1797. *The Bell* – with its terracotta roof and ersatz belfry – is a bastard child of this history, the kiddie-meal version of California's period architectural exotica. In contrast, Wesley considers the Pizza Hut across the street from *The Bell* to be an example of 'fascist or brutalist' architecture, with the building's 1950s 'Googie' features signifying the corporate America of the atomic age.

The aesthetics of California, though, are fairly foreign to a Midwestern audience. To most people in Cahokia, art is an inaccessible interest for the wealthy residents of St Louis. *The Bell* is the second project of Artist/City, an initiative launched by Bortolami Gallery in New York, which obtains unusual spaces for gallery artists outside the traditional art-world circuit. (Daniel Buren started the programme in Miami in December 2015.) Wesley's art-world status is mostly met with indifference in Cahokia. However, his sincere attempts to collaborate with local construction workers and other residents could resonate, when the cultural divide – between urban and rural, liberal and conservative, elite and uneducated – has widened so severely it threatens to swallow the country whole. The culture of the 'middle' – middleclass, middlebrow – lends Wesley's work its pop sensibility, and also its absurdist humour; through his clashing references, we take notice of the banal comedy in bad food, tacky advertising and strip-mall architecture.

Along with his installation of sculptures and paintings, Wesley has planted a corn maze according to the golden ratio; he plans to use the harvested ears of golden corn to produce high-fructose syrup, the industrial sweetener partly responsible for national obesity levels. A taxidermied crow rests on a branch in a back pantry, visible through a peephole Wesley drilled in *The Bell*'s cheap plaster walls. The bird's name, Heseeus (literally 'He-see-us'), refers to the remarkable skill at facial recognition that crows possess; with his eye locked on a glory hole, Heseeus is also an uncomfortable sexual reference to the surveillance systems found in fast-food restaurants. CCTV contributes to worker safety, but it also feeds information to a nebulous (and perhaps voyeuristic) corporate machine.

Fast food is a loaded class signifier; in many poor communities, it is one of the few affordable dining options. Visitors to the US are often shocked to find produce in supermarkets priced higher than items on a McDonald's menu; this cost disparity exacerbates the country's obesity crisis. For inner-city and suburban communities of colour, who may be unable to afford healthier dining options, the class signifier of fast food acquires a racial dimension, too. This is especially true in the suburbs of St Louis, which include both Cahokia and Ferguson – the latter the location of the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, and the site of greatest resonance in the current battle for black lives.

What could be more American than cultural appropriation as fast food – or profiting from its sale? The country's new, orange soda-coloured president is the proud purveyor, at his Trump Grill, of a US$19 'taco bowl' (even as he spouts racist remarks against Mexicans). Politics aside, Wesley's experiment celebrates the poetry in cheap burritos and the formalist beauty in this hard-scrabble landscape of car parks and drive-thrus. This is thinking outside the box – and the bun ●

The Bell, 2017, video still

The Bell, a *frieze* video produced by Evan Moffitt in collaboration with Eric Wesley and Punderson's Gardens, can be viewed online at video.frieze.com

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Shock, Light Therapy With Life Thrown In

NY CULTURE / FEBRUARY 4, 2012
By Peter Plagens

Eric Wesley's "Improbability of Intentionally Creating Shock, Part II" (2011) is a big, double "exaggerated rubber band" (as the gallery describes it), attached on one end to the far wall of the capacious front gallery and on the other to a chrome-and-steel square "wheel." When a motor cranks the wheel, the band is tightened and static electricity builds up. Touch a connected metal ball mounted in the reception area of the gallery, and you get a little shock. "Shocking art"—get it? The joke would come off better if the piece weren't so slick. But "Improbability" sure is nice to look at.

As is "Real Time Europe Room (early Dawn)" (2011), a smaller work in the back gallery. It's a tabletop relief map housed in a dark, temporary plywood room and lighted from above to replicate what the European Union countries look like from a satellite at the moment you're viewing Mr. Wesley's piece; 3 p.m. in the gallery, for instance, will get you 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. across the Atlantic. Good, clean, science-fair fun. But outside the room, Mr. Wesley has installed on the walls some more relief maps of the Continent. One is "Flat Black Europe (Original Art)" (2011), with the support structure and errant strokes of black paint in plain sight. It's a nice, rough painting. But why does he put such a thing with such a title in the show, if not as an aesthetic hedge?

Bortolami Gallery
520 W. 20th St., (212) 727-2050
Through Feb. 25

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

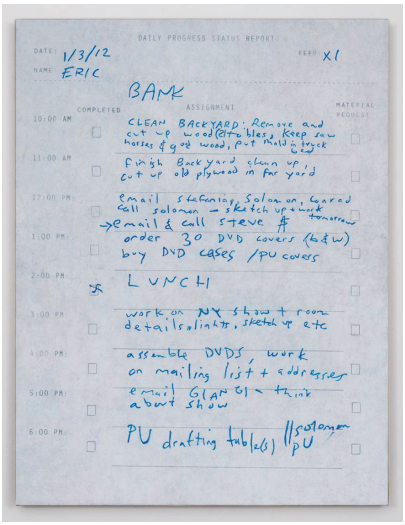
ARTSEEN OCTOBER 3RD, 2014

ERIC WESLEY *Daily Progress Status Reports*

by Lucy Li

BORTOLAMI GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 4 – OCTOBER 4, 2014

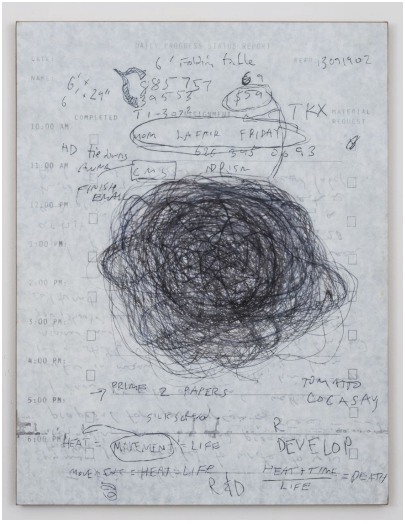
It is common for workers to embellish their to-do lists out of boredom, but creating trompl'oeil, four feet tall, meticulously polished replicas of sheets of doodles takes a more worrying level of ennui. Eric Wesley's new work is comprised of a suite of aluminum surfaces slapped against raw stretched linen, each presenting a reincarnated page of a routine "Daily Progress Status Report" (DPS), a standard form used to track one's activity and goals throughout the work day. Each page requires a date, reference number, and a list of assignments with a column of accompanying boxes to check off once complete. For the most part, these paintings shrug and say, "I didn't do sh*t today."



Eric Wesley, "DPS #20 (Power Blob)," 2014. Acrylic on aluminum on linen, 48 × 37 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. Photo: Josh White.

Wesley's exhibition at Bortolami buzzes with inactivity. To create these works, the artist completes a DPS before placing it over a light table, and subsequently recreates it with insouciant frankness using a variety of painting techniques on aluminum. Some paintings are green because in California (where Wesley is based) boxes of recycled paper always come with a few green pieces—a pastel, practical shade to conceal impurities. The resulting aluminum sheets are impressively paper-like, almost as if they are flat sculptures buoyed by the linen blocks underneath to become paintings.

While they are rooted in the aftermath of lethargy, all 20 works on view boast purposeful and engaging compositions, and emulate the relaxed focus of a cellphone vibrating from some unimportant call. On good days the progress report lists a solid set of activities—"clean backyard," "assemble DVDs," "work on mailing list"—some even have a box checked off ("lunch"). Most pages, however, look as if they were directly dipped into Wesley's day and rubbed against every surface and movement to collect oil paint stains, dirt smudges, juice spills, musings like "experiment with gravity," fruit stickers, and origami ridges as testimony for activity.



Eric Wesley, "DPS #6 (Bank, Lunch, Pu)," 2014. Acrylic on aluminum on linen, 48 × 37″. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. Photo: Josh White.

On particularly low-wattage days when nothing gets done, he paints the blank side of the report and describes the texture of the cheap, thin recycled paper's pulp with an Impressionistic airiness, like in "DPS #3 (Ether)" (2014). One mesmerizing page called "DPS #12 (Who's Afraid of Bleach)" (2014) shows a green sheet suffering a serene chemical burn which blossoms into a beautifully feathered white half. Another moment, "DPS #26" (2014), is simply a blank-side-up piece of paper resting in a slight arch after spending a day folded down the center, slightly worse for wear.

These cheeky works pose penetrating questions about the politics of artistic productivity. Cascading uniformly down the gallery's walls, these precisely marked progress report templates almost look like chemistry beakers ready to evaluate the volume of their contents, or prison mug shots with rulers that indicate height. These progress reports would be fantastically effective if only artistic production was a Newtonian-mechanical undertaking with sensible units of measurements. In "DPS #20 (Power Blob)" (2014), after a field of various applications of numbers—"TI 3072," "6' Folding Table," "626 345 0693"—Wesley attempts an equation of life: "heat = movement = life", and offers an enticing corollary: "(Heat + time)/life = death." The sheer absurdity of the heftiest existential concepts pursed inside a fraction is just dizzying, and the day's progress curls up into a giant abyssal hairball in the middle of the page.

Although Wesley repeatedly vandalizes the Daily Progress Status Report template like a frustrated weight watcher smashing up an honest scale, the rubric's necessity is emphasized and magnified in these impeccably crafted, durable metal paintings, and momentarily rebuts the artist's apparent apathy and irreverence. One scrawl of a ship is captioned with a clever pun that might be right on the money: "study for enterprise with no sells sails." With annual art fairs, monthly exhibitions, established magazine deadlines, and art market theories to furnish, the demand for aesthetic output is intensifying and becoming more and more scheduled, more reliably a function of time. The structural incompatibility between Wesley's impromptu scribbles and the DPS's strict grids and industrial connotations signals a larger issue of supply refusing to meet demand and the rejection of a theorized economic context. This show discusses these issues in a manner that is perhaps a bit too literal and simplified, but the creative artist's increasingly salient identity as a traditional wage-earning laborer in a market system is worth sleeping on.

Duray, Dan. "Bortolami creates US-wide mini-Marfas". *The Art Newspaper* (July 26, 2016) [Online] [Ill.]

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Bortolami creates US-wide mini-Marfas

Artists given non-traditional spaces and free rein to put on shows

by **DAN DURAY** | 26 July 2016

A former Taco Bell restaurant in Cahokia, Illinois, will show Eric Wesley's work. Courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York.

As the art market continues to move beyond traditional bricks-and-mortar and embrace fair- and jpeg-centric business plans, New York's Bortolami Gallery has begun a novel experiment in how to keep its artists visible and happy. The gallery's Artist/City programme, run by its associate director Emma Fernberger, pays to rent non-traditional exhibition spaces for artists not based in New York. These "mini-Marfas", the Texas home of the Judd Foundation, allow artists to show their work throughout the year with self-curated shows in unique venues. The artists are free to programme the spaces as they wish.

The gallery has already established spaces for Daniel Buren in Miami and Eric Wesley in Cahokia, Illinois. Wesley's space is a former Taco Bell restaurant "replete with ersatz Spanish colonial architecture", according to a release. Fernberger is also working with the sculptor Tom Burr to find a venue in

New Haven, Connecticut, home to the Yale School of Art (where Burr has taught). She's also working with Barbara Kasten for a project in Chicago in 2017, and scouting locations for a Nicolás Guagnini space in San Francisco.

"It's a dream job," Fernberger says of establishing the programme, noting that while it allows for experimental shows, it also enables the mid-tier gallery to reach out to collectors and dealers in other cities during non-fair periods.

"It's a way for us to expand our reach without opening full-scale operations in another city or in New York," she says, "and just getting to see more of the country."

Thomas Crone, “A Los Angeles Artist Has Transformed an Abandoned Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois into a Temporary Gallery,” *St.Louis* (July, 2016): [online]

St.Louis

Eric Wesley had looked for a space to create an off-the-grid gallery and studio in places like “Berlin and all around the world,” but decided that the old fast food location on Camp Jackson Road was exactly what he’d been looking for all along.

As artist Eric Wesley tells it, a lot of happenstance was involved in his complete, though very-much-in-progress reinterpretation of an abandoned Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois.

For starters, the Los Angeles resident had to be connected somebody with ties in St. Louis; his girlfriend, the artist Alika Cooper, was taking part in a residency program here. While visiting Cahokia Mounds, they somehow found their way onto Camp Jackson Road and noticed a forlorn Taco Bell, sitting amidst a vast expanse of strip mall parking. After running by the place another time or two, they were seemingly now drawn to the space. Eventually, they "saw it for a third time and checked it out," Wesley says. "We saw the 'For Lease' sign and I immediately called. The rent was unbelievable to me, being from L.A."

He'd looked for a space to create an off-the-grid gallery and studio in places like "Berlin and all around the world," but decided that the old fast food location on Camp Jackson was exactly what he'd been looking for all along. Redubbed The Bell, he found support from his home base, Bortolami Gallery in New York. As it happened, timing again smiled upon him, as "I got together with my gallery and they happened to be starting a program by which artists on their roster are being given the opportunity to start a room, or space, for one year, in conjunction with the gallery." The caveats were that these emerging spaces had to be in cities other than their own, and they weren't to overlap territories.

As luck would have it, only one artist represented by New York's Bortolami Gallery (yes, Wesley!) was interested in creating an art gallery within an old Taco Bell in Cahokia.

A meandering conversation with Wesley inside and outside the space is a fascinating experience, as he frequently stops to notice little things, like a frog that's popped under the small bit of shrubbery that The Bell offers; strangely, The Bell's predecessor offered something green in what's otherwise a sea of asphalt. He refers to the place as "an island," in fact, and tries to identify what this area exactly… is.

"I'm trying to get to know the land, you know," Wesley says. "I had an interesting conversation with a city planner, in terms of this place; about what is suburbia, quasi-suburbia, pseudo-suburbia. I came to the conclusion that proper suburbia is right outside of a city; affluent, mostly well-kept, and crime is low."

Cahokia's not exactly all those things, at least not in the corner of the town that The Bell inhabits. Not that it's sinister, either. Camp Jackson has that thoroughfare feel; cars pass by this semi-filled mall at a fast clip and folks generally seem on their way to somewhere else. The flip here, of course, is that an artist with worldwide experiences would root down smack dab in the middle of a parking lot in a part of town that, he's learning, isn't known to many St. Louisans.

Wesley's been checking out his environs with fresh eyes and a developing sense of the history of here.

“We went to East St. Louis’ downtown and it’s so f****d, it’s unbelievable,” says Wesley with the interesting candor of someone not tied down to local niceties. “But it’s very beautiful. This one building has trees literally growing out of it. My feeling—and a lot of this is what I’ve learned from Uber drivers—is that it’s been ignored.”

Jumping on down to the road to Cahokia…

“I’m trying to understand the village of Cahokia,” Wesley says. “I’d like to study the immediate areas surrounding East St. Louis. It’s almost like I was sent here, or something. I like to think that this is seen as as a violent place. There are strip clubs around. It’s a got a seedy, underground feel. I can sum it up with a story. Things here were really a mess, and I was working and got tired, and I took a nap on the floor, on my jacket. The doors were open, and I was worried about locals coming through the door, though it could’ve been police or kids or anything. So I took the nap and wondered if anyone would approach. I heard something outside and there was a pack of dogs running through this parking lot. I was not prepared for that. Kids, gangsters, police… I can talk my way out of something with them. Dogs, you can’t do that. It was very strange. To see those dogs… that summed this place up for me.”

At times, when talking about his vision for The Bell, Wesley might fix his conversational gaze on something small. Out there in that parking expanse, for example, there are little bits of wildlife. That lone frog, for example, bounces over a tiny patch of grass and into a bush; this grabs his attention and starts him on a story. Hanging from a gutter, a small bird’s nest still has life. While Wesley imagines having a sculpture garden on the roof—including pieces made from, or referencing the HVAC that’s been pulled down—he also imagines the nest remaining there. Out front, there’s a potential corn maze, allowing for an alternative entrance to the venue. At the time of our conversation, he’d hired a farmer to plant the corn. His plans for the old freezer, well, we’ll let you get that information directly from the source.

Out of the most impractical, but entertaining, notions comes from a drainage ditch that runs along Camp Jackson. There’s a thin tunnel that connects to another such water runoff across the road. The tunnel somewhat connects The Bell to a Pizza Hut, one that he riffs about having a fascist architectural vibe; he imagines scheduling art happenings there, too. (While Taco Bell has elements of brutalism, sees The Bell, harkening back to a 1700s-era California mission church.) Not content to just program art at a functioning, low-brow pizzeria, he talked about sending kids through that tunnel, with notes for attendees, passed between the venues. It was hella funny, perhaps a bit brilliant, as were other ideas and that’s exactly the kind of freedom Wesley’s enjoying with this space.

“There’s something intertwining me to this space,” he says. “At the beginning of my career, I had some success in Europe and New York and L.A. The kind of work I do, or did, was working in a European contest; success in Europe was a goal for myself and many artists. A lot of my teachers and mentors first achieved success in Europe. Success here meaning fame and money. You know, success. I was really concentrating on Europe, showing there and New York. And I thought about six or seven years ago that I wanted to go to the middle of America. It’s known to a lesser degree now, but it’s still a really ignored contemporary art [region]. I felt that six or seven years ago there wasn’t much going on St. Louis, Chicago, the Midwest. Now, this is six or seven years back. So I researched places in Missouri, Kansas, all around, with the idea to take a trip, but a piece of land in the middle of nowhere.

“At the time,” he adds, “I could have just afforded it and that would be it. That was the plan, a mission. What happened was that I found all of these other places online and this idea kind of passed as I was working on other art projects. I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t know why. But it really came back when we found this place. We were staying in St. Louis and there was this old brick garage that I could fix up as a kind of asylum; and that wouldn’t be specific to the terminology of an asylum as a place for mentally ill people, but as a political thing, a kind of sanctuary. I was going to revisit that idea, but when I found this place, I infused the ideology of what this place is and was.”

Well, it was a Taco Bell, purveyor of affordably priced, strangely tasty, if unwholesome food.

It’s now The Bell, a playground for an artist delightfully untethered to the traditions and mores of this place.

Wesley unveils the next phase of The Bell on Saturday, July 16 with a reception from 6 to 9 p.m. The exhibit will include two new glass sculptures, “facsimiles of the trapezoidal windows of the Pizza Hut across the street, as well as a sculpture made of HVAC ducts inspired by the many ducts on the roof of the building,” which is a space Wesley would like to transform into a small sculpture garden. Future additions to The Bell will include the corn maze mentioned above, to be installed in front of the building; performances; and a “reality television show” based on the goings-on in the space.

The Bell is located at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, Illinois. Open hours are Thursday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., and by appointment. Wesley will be planning exhibits and programming for The Bell through April 2017. For more info, visit bortolamigallery.com.

Israel Cohen, Nancy. “To Do List: Bortolami Gallery Brings Conceptual Artist, Eric Wesley’s Work to the Dallas Art Fair.” *Patron* (April/May 2015): p. 66-67 [ill.]

PATRON

ART / CULTURE / DESIGN

FLYING COLORS
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Window Dressing
Fashion For A City Girl

TO DO LIST

BORTOLAMI GALLERY BRINGS CONCEPTUAL ARTIST, ERIC WESLEY'S WORK TO THE DALLAS ART FAIR.

Eric Wesley installing. All images courtesy of Bortolami Gallery.

"I produced this form to manage my life," says Los Angeles-based conceptual artist, Eric Wesley. He adds, "I didn't have artwork in mind to start with." The form in question is for the Daily Progress Status Report that he began using about four years ago. Two years ago, he began the process of translating this into art, using it as the basis for his DPS painting series. These works, represented by New York's Bortolami Gallery, make their local debut at this year's Dallas Art Fair.

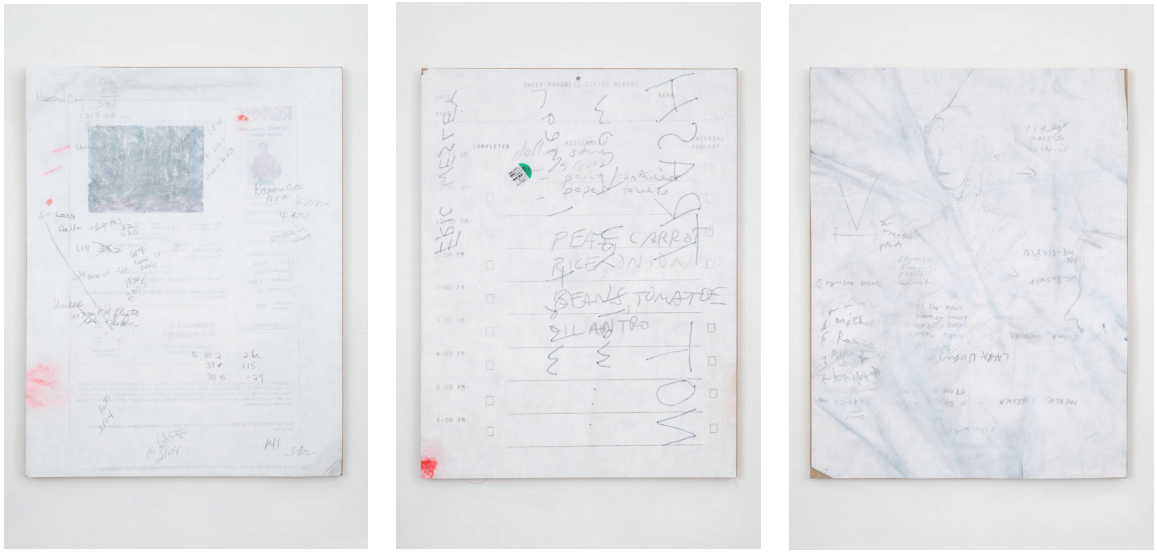
The DPS works are rooted in the mundane job of list-making. Each morning, Wesley fills one of these in. It is an hour-by-hour schedule, with the date on top. There is even a box to check upon completion. Sometimes the forms are filled in with actual tasks. Often they serve as a backdrop for sketches, fruit stains, and other ephemera of life in the studio. Next, he lays that paper, regular copier grade, onto a light box. In addition to illuminating the list, it also shows the grain of the paper. Using this as a template, Wesley creates large paintings on brushed aluminum that he then bolts to canvas. According to gallerist Stefania Bortolami, the aluminum replicates paper in that it can be manipulated in the same way. Corners of several DPS paintings are folded or torn. Wesley originally planned to create about 30 of these paintings, one for each day that the work is typically on the walls during a gallery exhibition. Since most art fairs run for three days, that is how many DPS paintings will be in the fair.

For Wesley, these paintings go beyond a replication of his daily schedule. He cites Renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca as major influences, particularly their use of *sfumato*. This art historical term describes atmospheric effects that create imperceptible gradations of light. He says, "At the moment, I am really into the ether stage: the reflection and refraction of light due to paper and how I relate that onto the metal." To achieve this effect, he uses a variety of media, from oil and enamel to airbrush. The diethyl ether in the airbrush creates "a physical connection between the picture plane and my body," he adds. However, unlike the work of the Renaissance, Wesley's aim is not to perfect nature. "A lot of pictures have stains or soils, or they're torn. It is the idea of the accident. That's the art," he explains.

"The DPS have entertainment value, which I really appreciate," says Wesley. Lest anyone construe conceptual art as a purely intellectual exercise, this is a sentiment Wesley repeats often. His humor also shines forth in an earlier installation work, "D'Cartes Blanche." Yes, there is a reference to French philosopher René Descartes in there. Beyond the play on words the work is an amalgamation of formalism, engineering, and philosophy.

For this project, Wesley designed three small, white

BY NANCY COHEN ISRAEL



From left: Eric Wesley, *DPS #36 North American Center (Notes from my Mother)*, 2015, acrylic on aluminum on linen, 48 x 37 in.; Eric Wesley, *DPS #34 This is not Trash ... well you know what I mean*, 2015, acrylic on aluminum on linen, 48 x 37 in.; Eric Wesley, DPS #35 Haydn Bust (Assistants), 2015, acrylic on aluminum on linen, 48 x 37 in.

carts: one moves up and down, another moves sideways, and another moves laterally. Bortolami explains that using Cartesian philosophy of x, y, z, theoretically, they could map anywhere in space. Three 20' paintings based on the primary colors are also part of the installation. In each, one color is brushed, another is splattered, and another is dripped. Wesley says that he further explores the emotional characteristics applied to color: Blue (b) = sadness, Red (r) = anger, and Yellow (y) = fear. From this he further extrapolates Cartesian ratios. Wesley adds, "I'm a huge formulist. That's what interests me with the 'D'Cartes' project."

Wesley is one of three artists Bortolami will feature at this year's fair. The other two, Piero Golia and Ben Schumacher, also have local connections. Golia is scheduled for an exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, opening in October. Schumacher has previously donated work to TWO x TWO.

Bortolami is pleased to participate in this year's show. The Goss-Michael Foundation, one of the Dallas Art Fair's beneficiaries, is honoring Michael Craig-Martin at the annual MTV RE:DEFINE. For Bortolami, Craig-Martin is "like a stepfather." She concludes, "We always participate in TWO x TWO and we have met quite a few people in Dallas. We feel Dallas is a great venue to let people know of our program. It seems like a good time to be here." **P**

Eric Wesley, *Blue, Yellow, and Red Picture*, 2010, latex on canvas, 132 x 228 in.

Johnson, Ken and Martha Schwendener. "A Sampling of the Art World Under One Tent." *The New York Times* (May 15, 2015): p.C30 [ill.]

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2015

A Sampling of the Art World Under One Tent

By KEN JOHNSON
and MARTHA SCHWENDENER

With 198 commercial dealers and three nonprofit galleries displaying all kinds of modern and contemporary art under its white, quarter-mile-long tent, the fourth annual New York edition of the Frieze Art Fair on Randalls Island is a lot for even two critics to cover, but we gave it our best effort. This year offered more opportunities for visitors to participate in specific artworks, and circled back to the careers of overlooked women artists from earlier periods. Here are some things that caught our eyes.

Ken Johnson

BORTOLAMI (A14): ERIC WESLEY

On chest-high pedestals are six realistic, dollsize sculptures of men lying flat as if they have fallen and can't get up, by Mr. Wesley. They represent the ancient philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Confucius, and the modern French thinkers Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard. The set is less respectful homage than Oedipal impudence.

Martinazzoli, Luca. “WEST SIDE STORY.” *Mousse* (Issue #10, June 2007) [ill.]

MOUSSE

Eric Wesley, *OUCHI*, 2002

WEST SIDE STORY

by Luca Martinazzoli

Eric Wesley is a son of Los Angeles to his backbone, as he was born there in 1973, and there he has always lived. There he took his first steps, found a gallery to work with and a close friend in the person of the gallerist himself, Giovanni Intra. There he met his destiny, that of being hounded by the media, after Intra’s death (which happened in 2002 in unclear circumstances) swept him away in a flood of suspicions and insinuations which still go on. Still in Los Angeles he saw his career take a leap, with his solo show at the MOCA in the spring 2006. An Ellroyan story, Eric Wesley’s one, dirty and complicated; but at the end, just like in Ellroy’s own biography, salvation breaks into it thanks to art. All of us that are endlessly far from L. A. restrict ourselves to support him and to visit his fall exhibition at the Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples.

Few months ago (January 15, 2007), the New York Magazine came out with a cover story on Dash Snow, restless artist that at the age of 25 finds himself having reporters clinging to him, eager to tell his dissolute life story. They want him half-naked and halfstoned. If you have a chat with those who populate the scene— big, rough, and damn beautiful metropolitan cowboys—you think that maybe they do it on purpose: they call it ‘troublemaker strategy. ‘ Parties and covers of magazines. But

the press is wicked, and the temptation to turn some figures into myths, making their borderline-living glamorous, often becomes a nightmare for those who live in a society that is terrified of junkies or just has reached the paroxysm of “private vices and public virtues. ” Glancing through the last catalogue published by Eric Wesley, you slide into a dimension like this. But we’re in Los Angeles, and the glamour is stuck on the gloss of other magazines. He has a solo show at the MOCA; in the catalog we find a sequence of shots that portray him in his everyday life. Bedroom infested with bottles of beer and rifles. Mess. Street life and blurred snapshots full of melancholy. And the curator that writes an essay where he cooks up references to Nan Goldin. Bullshit, it’s clear. Eric is in a tight spot. He plays the kid on the block, plays with a mythicized image of his person, with the media and the gossip that revel in it. And this catalog seems to be a reaction against the character created by the local rumors and by a bad story.

Let’s take a step backwards, and let’s try to understand why an African-American artist finds himself being so confused, torn between his own work, the market, and what people say about him. On December 17, 2002, Giovanni Intra’s dead body is found. He’s only 34 and the circumstances are kept hidden. On the same night, Eric Wesley’s opening at the MetroPicture Gallery. His debut in New York City. His consecration.

Giovanni is Eric’s gallerist in Los Angeles. And the hidden circumstances of the death suddenly turn into conjectures on the nature of their relationship. “Drugs, ” people say. Very well, then—drugs. It’s still a mystery, but Eric is carrying the weight of conjectures on his back. Giovanni Intra was not only an art dealer, he was one of the smartest intellectuals of the art scene. He was a (very good) writer, editor for Art and Text and contributor for Semiotexte. His gallery, named China Art Objects, has changed the art geography of L. A. In a beautiful text that he wrote for the series of exhibitions titled Circles (Karlsruhe, Germany, 2001), he says: “Most days there’s a lot of laughter in our gallery, and it often surrounds the perversion of the art system and our part within it. ” (I suggest you to recover the whole text, which is full of life and ideas.) His partner was Steve Hanson, who is still successfully running the show today. They opened in Chinatown, a district of L. A. that was first of all a movie set. A swarm of galleries followed them, creating what until a few years ago was the most interesting art district in Los Angeles. Around the China Art Objects artists like Jorge Pardo, Steven Prina and Pae White clot, together with many young artists just out of the college. At that time, Eric has already had a couple of shows at the China Art Objects. Giovanni was his mentor and his brother. But on December 17, they were not together. Eric wants to write a book, something like an investigation reportage aimed at reconstructing the facts of that story, at bringing truthfulness back, at setting off Giovanni’s person. It’s one of the many projects that sweep you away when you talk with Eric.

We talked about it at a bar in Echo Park. His studio is off limits; it’s in a damn mess. He’s working for an exhibition at the Morra Greco Foundation in Naples, and it’s impossible to stay in there. The project he’s working on consists in a space used both as an office and as a health spa. Two spaces, really. One in L. A. and one in Naples. However, we meet at this bar in Echo Park. The Little Joy. Hard drinks help us. I try to

make a story for this journal. He tries to make convincing stories for me. He's well-built. Monkey boots and Hawaiian shirt. A lot of military stuff. He's very 'working class hero. ' The legend tells that he buys the white t-shirts and the black dickies when those he's wearing are dirty enough. Maybe. What I know is the first time I got into his car, an old Japanese purplish red pick-up, I saw that the dashboard had been removed, and the wires and resistors were frightfully uncovered. I'm not sure this is the best way to understand Eric's work, but I'm sure it can clarify his own relation with it, his investigating nature that leads him to keep removing covers and discovering workings.

He often talks about science, he's especially fascinated by the scientific process of reducing the world to categories and standards. And when I ask him what's the common ground between him and Piero Golia, whom he founded the Mountain School of Arts with, he candidly says: "Science. " This enthusiasm in science also clears up the empiricism characteristic of his last works: what he wants to do is to demonstrate the correctness of certain suppositions and to explain how things work. And making art is meant as dealing with the inner nature of things rather than with the history of art.

Eric Wesley, *The Mall*, 2001

Even though he has a full knowledge of the history of art, his main references are artists like Richard Jackson and Paul McCarthy, who have always liked better to remain in the art-world's background (even if the market has never forgotten about them). To tell the truth, Eric is much more conscious of the art-system and of its market than his mentors were. But this consciousness often turns into impatience. In his works you can find pranks with a hint of grudge against society and its institutions; you can detect the paranoiac attitude of somebody who experienced— for the color of his skin, for his way of living, for Giovanni's cold dead body— how it feels to be left out. In recent times he's launched a business called FRIT ("French for fried, but pronounced like free, freed or freet"), which consists in a line of jewels that are actually

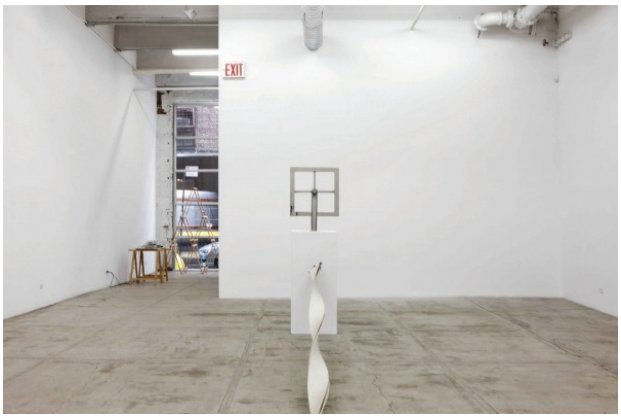
gold-plated junk foods (like french fries, onion rings, waffles). Eric intends to use the proceeds to fund the fight against the inhumane work conditions of African miners. He's looking for a partner to make it real, and—since market surveys report that the renowned Italian jeweler's art is fatally waning, especially for the lack of ideas—I hope there's somebody reading Mousse that has a finger in the pie. The reference to the issues of consumerism, fashion and race is obvious from the very first look. But this work, as well as the Mountain School of Arts, is based on the purpose to construct a complex structure that is effective and totally integrated in the system. And again his constructive spirit reveals his scientist nature. He has created his best-known work a few years ago. It's a bronze sculpture portraying the logo of Wells Fargo, the most influential finance company in the history of California. The symbol is a convoy full of securities that is pulled by six horses. Eric's reproduction is faithful, but it shows the convoy messed up/upside down, as if the horses had become restive or the Indians had launched an attack. Obviously, it hints in a mocking tone to the creaking of capitalism.

Mockery is in fact a constant element of his work. Not that kind of mockery which goes well with thoughtlessness: it's more about the beauty of failure, and the consciousness of being an artist because everything else you've tried could not be enough. This is why, I think, Eric promotes the admission to the Mountain School of Arts not only of young artists but also of people that are trapped in other professions. He's one of the few left that don't consider being an artist as a mere profession. Unfortunately, this awareness leads to disillusion, and the disillusion that his works are full.

Mousse Publishing

Eric Wesley, "2 new works" at Bortolami Gallery, New York

February 11, 2012



Bortolami Gallery presents Eric Wesley's third solo show at the gallery.

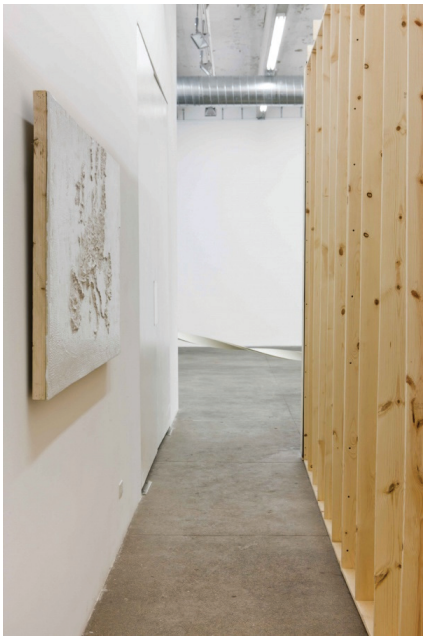
The first work, "The Improbability of Intentionally Creating Shock", is comprised of four individually presented elements constituting an elaborate machine. The artist confronts issues of success and failure, and initiates a conversation about the nature of "shock" by literally attempting to "shock" the audience. The primal intent of the work involves one person, the artist, touching another, the viewer: an electrical and biological exchange of energy. The first element is an exaggerated rubber band acting as power supply and storage of energy. Then there is the anchoring system that fixes the machine to a stable point within the space. The center piece of the apparatus is a 200-pound solid-steel chrome-plated square wheel. The final element is the point at which static electricity interacts with the observer, creating a tickling mild zap, or simply the sense of anticipation. The shock is merely implied and not made explicit, derived from physical form and phenomenon, or lack thereof.

Presented in the smaller gallery, the second work is a temporary room which demonstrates a paradox of time and space. A three-by-five foot representation of the continent of Europe floats in the room. The likeness of the EU is rendered in great detail according to multiple sources of information. The artist trusted established topological maps, images from space (NASA, ESA), as well as instinct and memory. The viewer walks into this room in New York City from 10am to 6pm to encounter the waning of daylight into darkness of Europe, designed to accurately portray the present reality on the other side of the Atlantic.

Eric Wesley *was born in Los Angeles, California in 1973, where he continues to live and work. Wesley has held solo exhibitions in galleries internationally as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Foundation Morra Greco, Naples, Italy. Wesley has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France; Fundación/Colección, Jumex, Mexico; Museo d'Arte, Benevento, Italy; The Prague Biennial in 2007; Institute of Contemporary Art, London; P.S.1, New York; and the Studio Museum in Harlem.*

Improbability of Intentionally Creating Shock, Part II, 2011

2 new works, 2012. Installation View



Gloss White Europe (Artist Proof/First Cast), 2011

2 new works, 2012. Installation View

Realistic Europe, 2011

Real Time Europe Room, 2011

Real Time Europe Room (early Dawn), 2011

2 new works, 2012. Installation View

Flat Black Europe (Original Art), 2011

2 new works, 2012. Installation View

Los Angeles Times

(August 2007)

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Living friskily is best revenge

By Christopher Knight
Times Staff Writer

The milieu at "Milieu" is chaotic and jumpy. In the lively group exhibition of five artists at the Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery, a funeral is a fandango, soccer is less sport than brawl and, when the personal is political, personal adornment becomes political action. Art is cast as a kind of pick-up match composed of serious ad hoc play.

Eric Wesley's disconcerting "Frit Display" is an elegant black mannequin-hand attached to the handle of a brutal knife blade that has been thrust into a pedestal top. Draped around the slender wrist is a slinky bracelet made from a chain of three skinny French fries cast in solid gold.

Since that precious ore has been a historic motivation for European colonial incursion and brutality, the juxtaposition of elements in Wesley's sculpture generates contradictory thoughts of glamour and gore, sex and violence, high fashions and low deeds. A handout notes that the word *frit* is French for fried — and paradoxically, given this slave-labor context, in French it's pronounced "free."

But it's also a slang term meaning ruined — as in "*Il est frit*" (He's done for). Chic is rarely shocking, but Wesley gets provocatively, productively close.

A horizontal painting of wide green acrylic stripes by **Chris Beas** is overlaid with the linear white markings of a soccer field. A wry international twist is given to the specifically American artistic tradition of abstract field-paintings.

In other works, soccer action figures are orchestrated into exuberant, tangled clusters. It's impossible to distinguish an altercation from a dance, a game pitch from a mosh pit or a lusty

Brian Forrest

'FRIT DISPLAY': *As part of the "Milieu" group show, Eric Wesley attaches a graceful black mannequin hand to a knife. A chain made of French fries cast in gold is draped around the wrist.*

Spellacy's artful messiness pales next to **Aaron Garber-Maikovska's** installation, in which a foul-smelling tent is draped with butter-yellow cloth, surrounded by busted office equipment, stacks of packaged bagel sandwiches, sacks of CDs and other assorted junk. Music hints at amusements hidden inside the makeshift hobo camp-

An African litter in the home-made painted-plywood shape of a Mercedes limousine is propped atop booming speakers, from which hip-hop rhythms blare. (The music was salvaged from a pirate radio station in Miami.) A small flat-screen TV inside the limo-hearse plays a continuous loop of snapshots gleaned from personal Internet websites, most

Los Angeles Times
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT / ARTS & CULTURE / Culture Monster

Two machines with conceptual liveliness built in at Redling Fine Art

Christopher Knight
LOS ANGELES TIMES
christopher.knight@latimes.com

FEBRUARY 20, 2015, 1:00 PM

An eccentric pair of diabolical machines – one by Olga Koumoundouros, the other by Eric Wesley – seem to propose technological absurdity as an inevitable outcome of modern life. At Redling Fine Art, both sculptures vaguely allude to the human figure.

Wesley's "Clean Machine (Turkish Style)," made in 2008, is a small, top-loading domestic washing machine that the artist put to bad use. Filling the drum with water and dry cement, he turned the washer on and let it spin. The cement set, the engine burned to a crisp and a useless half-cylinder of solid concrete was left behind.

Process art of a distinctly irrational kind, it takes a "what would happen if" approach -- pretty much just for the heck of it.

Wesley removed the cement-larded drum and set it atop the washer. The sculpture is a playful cross among an abstract sculpture on a pedestal, a comic-book idea of high technology and an android from an old Saturday afternoon B-movie serial. It is visually rather inert, though conceptually lively.

By contrast, Koumoundouros' recent "Denial and Longing for the Big

Nap" literally moves. A revolving, mechanized display stand is festooned with semi-inscrutable objects – small balls, a Duchamp-style plastic vulva mold, a blown-glass finial, a gilded sign extolling "Competition" and a woman's handbag attached by a heavy gold chain. The whole ensemble rests atop a white pillow, slyly nodding in the direction of Robert Rauschenberg's "Odalisk," a classic mid-1950s combine.

The artist, however, is hardly luxuriating in exotic sensuality. The handbag hangs at the bottom, dragging and bumping along the floor as the display slowly turns – a clever image of Sisyphean drudgery.

Her antipathy for it all is also paraded in a similarly well-conceived way. Near the top, a female leg dressed in papier-mâché and a thigh-high boot juts out from the revolving rack. Since a viewer needs to lean in close to examine the odd objects on display, it is necessary to keep an eye out for the boot-kick headed your way.

Back off, the sculpture says.

A handout says the Wesley and Koumoundouros sculptures evoke the "Glomar response" -- the name for governmental refusal to either confirm or deny aspects of a news story, such as details of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib, out of purported security concerns. (The term grew out of a Cold War saga first reported in the Los Angeles Times.) The link is a bit of a stretch, but with these sculptures the preposterousness certainly rings true.

Redling Fine Art, 6757 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 378-5238, through March 7. Closed Sun. and Mon. www.redlingfineart.com

Twitter: @KnightLAT

Keh, Pei-Ru. "City limits: Bortolami Gallery's 'Artist/City' upends the traditional exhibition model". *Wallpaper** (August 11, 2016) [Online] [Ill.]

Wallpaper*

City limits: Bortolami Gallery's 'Artist/City' upends the traditional exhibition model

ART / 11 AUG 2016 / BY PEI-RU KEH

Bortolami Gallery's 'Artist/City' exhibition platform is giving artists the chance to stage exhibitions over the course of a year in specific cities. Pictured: a series of porticos by Daniel Buren in Miami. Photography: Gesi Schilling

New York's Bortolami Gallery is well on its way to disrupting the traditional five-week exhibition model. Since the end of last year, the gallery has been pairing different artists with a city to stage work over the course of a year. The experimental platform, called 'Artist/City', presents work in two phases and thus charts a creative evolution of each artist, while also giving visitors reason to return during the time.

Bortolami unveiled its first pairing with a bang – Daniel Buren in Miami, opening during Art Basel last year. Comprising a series of new works in which Buren uses striped linen fabric to mimic his painted linear pieces, the exhibition is installed at The M Building, a former 1950s manufacturing warehouse

restored by architect Chad Oppenheim, in the heart of Miami's Wynwood district.

The exhibition's second phase saw Buren install five colourful porticos throughout the gallery space, a site-specific piece entitled Passage aller-retour. The installation toys with the viewer's idea of space, while also considering the stripe as a different visual tool that Buren uses to explore the notion of art.

In May, the gallery unveiled its second union: the Los Angeles-based artist Eric Wesley in St Louis. Wesley has pitched up within an empty Taco Bell restaurant and filled it with five new tondo paintings that greatly resemble an open burrito. Employing a variety of painting techniques, Wesley depicts different ingredients on each of the wood panels in abstract fashion.

Wesley's year-long intervention includes several projects, such as casting a bronze bell for the Spanish Colonial structure, planting a vegetable patch for the grounds and creating a series of abstract sculptures that respond to the local Pizza Hut, located across the road.

With future collaborations including Barbara Kasten in Chicago and Nicolás Guagnini in San Francisco, 'Artist/City' presents a new chance to get to know these artists a whole lot better.

frieze

Eric Wesley

FONDAZIONE MORRA GRECO, NAPLES, ITALY

Published on 27/10/07
by Emily Verla Bovino

Courtesy Fondazione Morra Greco, Napoli. Photo: Gennaro Navarra

Eric Wesley's *Spa fice* (2007) is a multi-sensory experience, an interactive installation expressly designed for Naples' new project space, the Fondazione Morra Greco. A steep stairwell leads to a cellar carved from volcanic sandstone. The sweet smell of gas permeates the clammy atmosphere. Natural light creeps through small windows, but the principal sources of illumination are glowing screensavers projected onto the walls. Arguing neighbours and whizzing scooters from the streets above the cellar play background accompaniment to the sounds of the installation's protagonists: a humming gas heater and the rhythmic slapping of water in a large wading pool.

Established as emblematic of the 'Art of Idleness' by sightseers on the late-18th-century Grand Tour, Naples is the perfect location for *Spa fice*, Wesley's exploration of the age-old concepts *otium* and *negotium* (Latin for leisure and business). 'Everyone knows the story of the traveller in Naples who saw 12 beggars lying in the sun and offered a lira to the laziest,' Bertrand Russell begins his 1932 essay 'In Praise of Idleness', '11 of them jumped up to claim it, so he gave it

to the twelfth. This traveller was on the right lines.' Spa fice nods to Russell and winks at Tom Hodgkinson's recent *How to be Idle* (2004), rendering homage to socialist activist Paul Lafargue's belief that technology was the 'God' to liberate men from wage-labour, rewarding them with idleness and freedom.

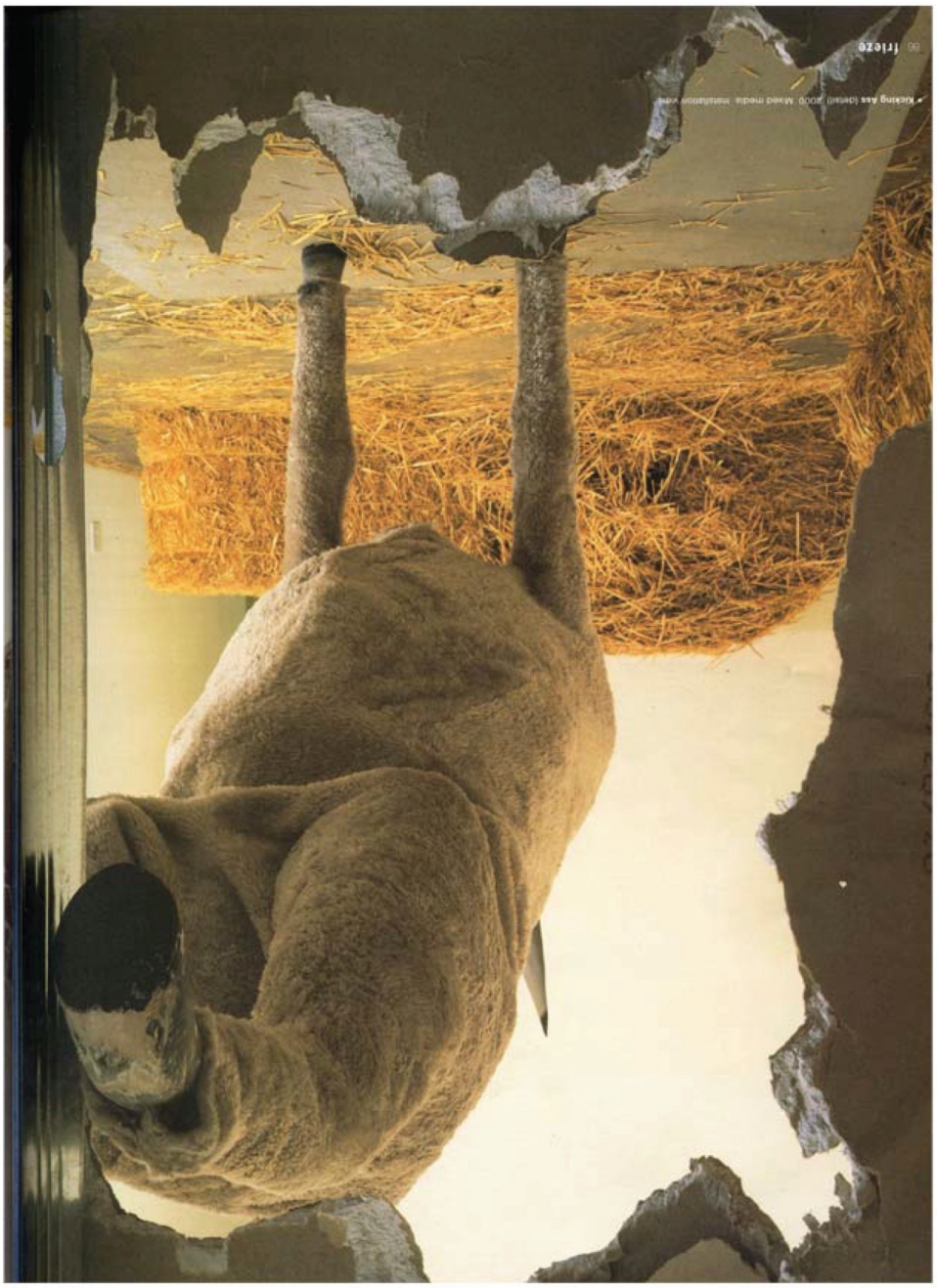
Wesley fuses sculpture, installation and architecture to create his combination Spa-Office. A changing room complete with robes and cotton shorts initiates visitors who the artist hopes will disrobe and participate in his work. Nearby, a laptop with wifi sits on a table surfaced with white tiles: all of the installation's environments are created using variations on this same minimalist furniture design. In the sauna, pool, and studio, a table-auger assemblage repeatedly appears: two large holes are born through a low table directly into the cellar floor, an auger is left resting at a diagonal in one hole, while the element protruding from the second varies in each environment. In the sauna, a large cylindrical gas heater is planted in the table's second hole; in the pool, a stream of water spits from the second hole to the pool's opposite end. These assemblages suggest that *Spa fice* is self-sufficient, that its gas and water derive from sources directly below the exhibition space (which is of course not the case). A precarious walkway of furniture lined up across the pool's centre invites visitors to pass under the arch of water to an artist's studio. Punctured bags of gesso and cement are posed among funnels, cement puddles and gesso-filled plastic bottles, a composition that recalls Wesley's training as a sculptor. In the studio, the table-auger assemblage is again repeated but its second hole is empty.

The Internet is a constant presence in Spa fice. In Wesley's world, as in that of Lafargue's, the computer is the omnipresent, all-knowing force offering us the freedom to skip from work to play effortlessly, our salvation from the 'Right to Work'. 'Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish,' scolds Russell at the end of his essay, 'but there is no reason to go on being foolish for ever.'

Emily Verla Bovino

frieze

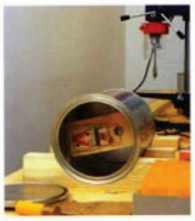
(January-February 2003)



Julian Myers on Eric Wesley

Just for kicks

A recent photograph of Eric Wesley shows the artist on the corner of Pico Boulevard, near his studio in Los Angeles. He stands in the indefinite pose of the dealer: wary, attentive, non-committal, simultaneously open and defensive.



• **Ouchi** 2002. Installation view

Curb Servin (detail) 2002 Mixed media Installation view

Ready to run, ready to sell. But sell what? Drugs? Contraband? Or art? Picture Daniel Buren selling rock instead of painting stripes.

Or – and this comparison seems closer to home – David Hammons hawking snowballs on Cooper Square in New York City (*Bliz-AARD Ball Sale*, 1983). Wesley's recent work seems to owe a great deal to Hammons, from its proclivity for literalizing slang – compare Hammons' *Pissed Off* (1981) with Wesley's *Kicking Ass* (2000) – to the hilarious negativity of its institutional critique. Wesley's work is often straight-faced, serious in its intent but also deeply funny in its off-centre imagining of what an artist does and how he occupies himself. He shoplifts and schemes. He is a dysfunctional bootlegger and a failed conman. The 'drug dealer' photograph is one such case: Wesley's performance is just faintly out of tune with his role, his face on the edge of cracking up at his own half-arsed enactment of the drug dealer stereotype. And doesn't the shifty pose of the dealer seem uncomfortably familiar? It's a little too close to the solicitations of an artist working the collectors at an opening. The subtle subtext of desperation: 'Buy my shit, *please*'.

• **Untitled (Mug Shot #3)** 2002 C-type print 130 × 100 cm

Wesley's recent installations have taken a similar tack, though their methods and imagery vary from place to place. In each Wesley has transformed the gallery into the scene of a parasitic, dysfunctional sub-economy – one that echoes that of the gallery itself. The idea seems to have originated with Wesley's contribution to the 'Snapshot' exhibition (2001) at the Hammer Museum at UCLA (named after Armand Hammer, who made his money through the Occidental Oil Corporation). The artist initially proposed installing a Jiffy Lube (the American oil-change franchise) in the museum's car park: Wesley designed working hydraulics to pump the dirty engine oil from his car through the museum offices and into the galleries, using the existing water pipes as their host. The museum, unsurprisingly, did not go for it. Instead Wesley made them a 'proper' oil painting, with unaesthetic splodges of used oil from his car. In reproductions the work seems to ventriloquize a certain convention of abstraction – Vija Celmins, maybe? But up close the painting was grimy and reeking, oil painting at its (literally) crudest extreme.

Another installation, at Galleria Franco Noero in Turin, posed as a custom paint shop called Ouchi (a bastardized version of Gucci), which sold only red and black paint. Behind the scenes, however, visible beyond the unoccupied sales counter, was a disorganized workshop that exposed Ouchi's true function: the paint cans were actually weapons – primitive grenades. Installed in each was a bomb made of a mousetrap and a shotgun cartridge, and the shop was thus revealed to be a front for a low-level arms manufacturer. Conceivably, the paint cans were functional explosives, though the crumpled cigarette packets and open beers scattered around the terrorist workshop suggested something more muddled than dangerous.

These installations are not merely reflexive – the gallery posing as a paint store posing as a terrorist workshop posing as an innocent art gallery. They also refer to the secretive, quasi-parasitic businesses that are everywhere in Los Angeles. Pico Boulevard is crowded with them, dotted with ramshackle car-refitting shops, scavenger and second-hand stores, taco vans and the like, the kind of unregulated sub-economies and weird, vaguely legal modes of getting by that have little to do with – and little visibility in – culture at large. (Indeed, the whole Pico/Crenshaw area, quite a large neighbourhood wedged between Hollywood and downtown LA, is apparently, bizarrely, nameless.) How do these places make money? Who are their patrons? And what else is going on behind the scenes? What are they a front for? What are they really making in there? They don't really sell artworks in those galleries, do they?

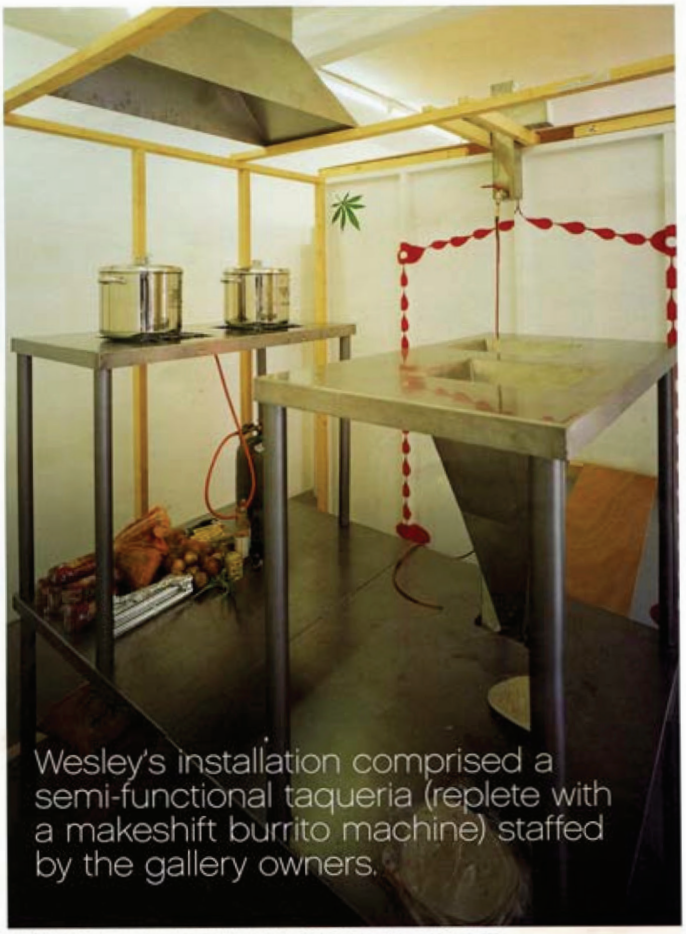
It is this concept – the gallery as a front for more grimy or suspicious production – that has structured Wesley's most recent installations. In his 2002 exhibition at Meyer Riegger Gallery, Karlsruhe, Wesley installed a surreal, semi-functional taqueria staffed by the gallery's owners, replete with a makeshift machine that actually assembled the burritos and a hollow cross full of Tapatio hot sauce suspended from the rafters. The actual workspace of the taqueria was invisible on entering the galleries – the completed

Myers, Julian,
"Just for Kicks"
Frieze Issue 72,
December 2002

burrito emerged from the makeshift kitchen through an odd hole in a minimalist façade. It was only by ignoring the façade and going behind the scenes that one witnessed the hidden work area: rice cookers, puddles of Tapatio, gallerists in hairnets, mesh bags of onions and six feet of faecal burrito spread out on tin foil. They made burritos once, tasted the wares and then left the uneaten leftovers and unwashed workspace there for the duration of the exhibition. The installation evokes Paul McCarthy's squalid, ketchup-covered performance scenes, but the comparison ends there – these are leftovers of labour, of production, not a tantrum. They really made burritos and ate them. For that day the gallery was a functioning taqueria.

In his landmark polemic *The Tourist* (1976) the writer and geographer Dean MacCannell argues that an anxiety about authenticity structures modern social life.[1] Ironically, he claims, authenticity is increasingly something that needs to be performed or faked. Historically, social establishments have been divided into front and back (dining-room and kitchen, reception and offices, showroom and factory), a division constructed to conceal those props and activities that might discredit the performance up front. Now, though, as large-scale production becomes more and more invisible in the West, those props and activities are often made visible strategically to dispel the inauthenticity of the commercial façade, and thereby endow the performance with a powerful reality effect. Examples of this are common today – guided tours of factories, for instance, or restaurants that stage the preparation of food in the dining-room. Something similar could be said about Janet Cardiff's video tours through the off-limits areas of museums.

Wesley's installations are a fabric of such false fronts and off-stage settings, though the moment of their authenticity is always incomplete, compromised, giving way to even more submerged layers of meaning. Take, for instance, his December 2002 exhibition at Metro Pictures, New York. There his plan centred on the production, transfer and sale of tobacco, with minimalist hothouses, a hand-welded trailer for illegally trafficking cigarettes, and secret rooms filled with stockpiles of custom-repackaged Marlboro Lights available for sale at competitive prices. The exhibition worked on many levels – as a cynical riff on Philip Morris' sponsorship of cutting-edge art, maybe – but most of all as a pirate economy operating semi-legally on the gallery's premises. Again the work is profoundly funny in what it imagines a gallery doing – here it is cast as an unregulated cigarette distributor, and the gallerist as a bootleg tobacconist. An art gallery, for Wesley, is a system of exchange, in the image of the market but also beneath it, more primitive, more spurious. And if it is at its base an economic system, then it can traffic tobacco or burritos as easily as art.



Wesley's installation comprised a semi-functional taqueria (replete with a makeshift burrito machine) staffed by the gallery owners.

• **Untitled** 2002 Wood, stainless steel, burner, gas clynder, food, acrylic paint, plaster 320 × 410 × 350 cm

The façades and false back rooms in the Metro Pictures installation never quite produce a reality effect in MacCannell's sense. Wesley's parasitic economies are always real in some sense or other, of course: you can eat the burritos; the paint-can grenades might actually explode; you can smoke the cigarettes. They work. The engine of the work sputters to life at least once. But there's always another purpose, another layer of privacy just out of sight. Letters – ZBS – secretly built into the trailer's frame. More back rooms to discover. Cigarettes concealed in the walls, in the ceiling panels. Wesley's work is deeply attuned to the pleasures of this kind of secrecy – the underground economy, the secret hand signal, the complex sign language of the drug dealer's body. Keep your secrets, he seems to say; they're all you've got.

1. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

Griffin, Jonathan. "ERIC WESLEY: 356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles." *Frieze* (Issue 170, April 2015): p.150 [ill.]

frieze

ERIC WESLEY
356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles

Ironically, perhaps, for such a wayward, unpredictable and contrarian artist, Eric Wesley has a fondness for numbers and systems. 'Some Work', his sardonically titled quasi-retrospective at 356 S. Mission Road, was arranged around a neat numeric structure. A map, printed on the back of the invitation card in lieu of a press release, provided a key.

One: the single integer constituted by a twisted steel beam, 11 metres long and suspended in horizontal equilibrium by a cable from the ceiling. As it torques, it almost imperceptibly transforms from an I-beam at one end into a U-channel at the other. The singular work, *I Beam U Channel* (2015), is on its way to becoming two. The gesture is typical of the Los Angeles-based artist. Wesley has said: 'I don't like to pick sides.'

Two: the large, round, stained-glass windows inserted high into opposite walls of the gallery space. That the brown, yellow, red and green shapes resemble cells under a microscope is probably not lost on the scientifically inclined artist. The work, *Inch-Alota* (2015), actually represents two cross-sections through a burrito, alluding to a project Wesley made in 2002 in which assistants constructed and fed an endless burrito through a hole in the wall of Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, where it was devoured by gallery visitors. (The proposed retrospective format of 'Some Work' was kiboshed by the artist when, in every instance, he elected to make new versions of existing pieces.)

Three: the funny little white buggies that Wesley fabricated in 2010 to represent the x, y and z axes of a three-dimensional Cartesian matrix, and three corresponding abstract expressionist paintings in which x, y and z are translated into red, yellow and blue, the colours apparently representing aggression, fear and sadness. Sometimes, as here, Wesley's appropriation of scientific formulae seems wilfully obscure or even facile. His gift for puns, however, is profound; the white vehicles are titled *D'Cart X*, *Y* and *Z* (2010/2015).

In 2007, Wesley presented a cross-shaped Jacuzzi at Bortolami, New York, titled *Spaference Room* (2007). For this exhibition, he dismembered the installation and reconfigured it in four parts, each theoretically useable by the viewer. *Spa-Brary* (2007/2015) includes reading material (*In Touch Weekly*, *Picture Puzzles* and a patent for something called the 001DXecutor), helpfully laminated for the bath. In *Spa-Versation* (2007/2015) a fiery gas heater throws furious hot air at the seated viewer's face.

Number five was represented by *5 Plants of New Amsterdam* (2001/2015), a glass herbarium cultivating five tobacco plants which Wesley will harvest for his New Amsterdam Lights brand of cigarettes. Unlike the formally underwhelming spa sculptures, this glass tank – which revealed the plants' roots and soil strata – transcended its origin as a witty conceptual gesture to become a compelling metaphorical object that rhymed evocatively with *Inch-Alota*'s cross-sectioned burrito.

Six small models of men lying on wooden plinths depicted slumbering philosophers, three ancient (Aristotle, Plato and Confucius) and three modern (Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze). Wesley cast the ancients in bronze from altered moulds taken from their plastic, latter-day successors; the work was perhaps less about philosophy *per se* than the canonization of thought and thinkers ('New Realistic Figures' series, 2009–15). Wesley's sculpture *WTF (What The Fuck)* (2015) could be seen as an oblique corollary: since 2009 he has been casting the successive moulds of an object whose genesis is now lost in time. On display here was its seventh iteration; each time it is purchased, a new bronze cast of the existing outer mould is taken, and the exhibited form becomes larger and more indeterminate.

Perhaps the truer correlation is between *WTF (What The Fuck)* and the eighth work on Wesley's numerological system. For his finale, he turns eight on its side to make &; a rented Infiniti sedan is parked outside the gallery, protected by a nearly imperceptible coat of clear automotive lacquer. In both works, invisibility makes space for thought, and signification. *Infinity Project (Black)* (2015) is an almost cosmic work, the title casting one's thoughts towards the gleaming forever, towards an endless perfection. Like most of Wesley's *oeuvre*, it is deeply – even painfully – ironic.

JONATHAN GRIFFIN

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Eric Wesley
I Beam U Channel, 2015,
installation view

The World's Leading Art Magazine
Flash Art
(March-April 2007)

ERIC WESLEY

LET'S DO A TRADE

Sonia Campagnola

SONIA CAMPAGNOLA: *I was at the China Art Objects booth in London, the gallerist opened a folder in his computer labeled with your name and an endless list of images appeared. I was surprised to realize the quantity of work you have accumulated. Do you consider yourself an artist that produces a lot?*
Eric Wesley: Yeah, I think I am very productive, and what is eventually realized is a small fraction of the ideas, and what is seen is a small fraction of that small fraction. I don't pay attention to keeping a tight studio. What sucks is the same few things are always shown. And what is even worse is when it comes to written material. I'd read something someone wrote, which misrepresented the work, and when the next thing is written you can tell the person just read the previous text and cut and pasted it almost literally. This creates a snowball effect, you know when a snowball runs down a hill and gathers a mass, by the time it reaches the bottom it is a real treat…

SC: *I imagine your studio filled with things, junk, various objects. Would you say collecting things is inspirational for you?*
EW: I'm often lazy and sloppy but I do aim to put out a somewhat polished product. I'm not interested in the raw and grotesque pack-rat thing. On the other hand I think the cold, clean, inhuman quality is problematic too. Things should look like you know them. So, things around, material around are not really an inspiration more than a problem. Sometimes I work with stuff around, just grab something and attach it to something else and I'm happy that it will soon be out of my environment — this is also a good reason to have things you like around…

SC: *So, speaking of collections… how do you like art collectors?*
EW: Hate 'em… naw, just kidding, love 'em. No, seriously, I have a friend in LA, Kyung; he's not rich, he's a normal job-having guy but he is into art and I always introduce him as my collector friend. He owns a de Kooning, and has works from some friends of mine but he has supported me for years. Another friend of mine in LA is Lonnie Blancard. He is a lawyer by

trade and also into real estate. We came to something like, "let's do a trade" and I think Lonnie and I see eye-to-eye. I'm into the bartering system… Fix my teeth and we can hang this painting in the office or something. A lot of doctors and lawyers in the game. It's inspiring, it makes me want to produce something worthy of joining their professions.

SC: *And what about Franz Ackerman? You were working on a project for him, weren't you?*
EW: Franz is a good friend of mine; he supports my work in another way, in a real personal and collaborative way. About future projects for and/or with Herr Ackerman there're some ideas out there… Franz did the first lecture at MSA, the school I'm involved in, in LA.

SC: *Do you have a studio in LA or in Berlin? And how is it being an LA Berlin-based artist?*
EW: I have a studio in Berlin; I feel like I'm on a mission there. I would say 80% of my 'business' is in Europe. I have always had an unorthodox life/work situation, now I'm just doing it in two different cities; 6 months LA, 6 months Berlin — that's the plan. There are so many artists in Berlin. You can't throw a rock in Mitte without hitting an artist. I don't feel special here in Berlin… don't know if that's good or bad. In LA, I was the only 'artist' on my block for sure and I thought of myself as just another person in the neighborhood but with a different job. I remember likening myself to the discipline of neighborhood drug dealers or prostitutes or the drunk guy at the liquor store… getting paid to shut up. In Berlin everybody is an artist and makes a living on government money, parents, stipends, grants. It's just a different thing.

SC: *How do you think LA and its culture enter or frame your work?*
EW: I love LA and ideas generate from there. You can't fade LA. But when it comes to art I tend to think in a more universal way. LA reminds me of things like survival, science and style. I truly believe that myself and the city have both developed as a result of a convergent and at the same time divergent evolution. The divergent evolution began at UCLA, as I stumbled onto this amazing art program. These teachers really meant something to me, Richard Jackson and Paul McCarthy especially.

SC: *Thinking of father-artists, your name is often associated with 'institutional critique' artists…*
EW: Being considered an 'institutional critique' artist makes me feel so misunderstood. I feel like, "I should have never said that joke in the first place." Institutional critique is way too serious and noncommittal at the same time. It has no humor, no comedy. To see David Hammons work as institutional critique just makes things way too easy. Often my work is called also 'prankster.' At first I disliked it, but I have since warmed up to the term, it's better than 'institutional critique' anyway.

SC: *Most of your works have an ironic nature indeed, often connecting pop culture with classical sculptural elements, sometimes in evident ways such as in* Kicking Ass *(2000) or* Silverlake Tub *(2000) or* FTW *(2004) (the globe sustained by the middle finger), and other times in a more subtle way, like in* Outer Space (2004)…
EW: I think irony, sarcasm, that kind of mean-spirited stuff needs to be part of a greater comic pursuit. I like to use comedy, jokes, raw entertainment. I like the idea of talking about *Kicking Ass* as irony. Actually the kicking legs of the beast were designed to impact the chest of an average-height adult human. So really it's 'body critique' here… The *Outer Space* piece was one of a series of the Carrom boards that I made (Carrom is a popular game for children in US). These painting/sculpture/performance objects were part of a greater project called *The Pico Youth Center (PYC)*; this was a fully functional, although underground, youth center… I was both counselor and troubled youth. Sometimes friends would come by and play Carrom. There is irony in how and why the Carrom boards were made, but the theme in *Outer Space* was simply the nature of space.

SC: *Which of your recent works do you consider the most demanding?*
EW: The *Audi* piece. I showed it at Meyer-Reigger last June. The main element was a slowly rotating platform, the kind of turntable that in car dealerships shows off the car, with a lone hubcap on it spinning very fast in a perpetual centrifugal action. The smell of peeled out tire rubber filled the air; in this sense it is a 'smell-sculpture.' In this sculpture the 'sculpture' does not exist. The pedestal becomes the work and the smell in the space takes form. I am concentrating on ideas that can take form by not laboring on them. One dimension of this work is expressed by the title: it relates to the physical object, the Audi 5000 car, but it's also an adoption of the slang term for people parting ways, 'outtie,' which means "I'm out of here." Another good term is 'ghost.'

Above: FTW, 2003. Mixed media, 40 x 20 x 20 cm; below: Audi, 2006. Installation view at Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe. Opposite: Outerspace (detail), 2004. Mixed media on board, 121 x 12 cm. Courtesy China Art Objects and PYC, Los Angeles.

Clockwise from top: Untitled (Audi ad), 2006. Enamel paint and nylon on board, 96 x 120 cm. Courtesy Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe; PYC Corporate Icon, 2004. Installation view. Courtesy China Art Objects, Los Angeles; Eric Wesley working at the exhibition "You say tomato, I say tomato," 2006. Courtesy Galleria Fonti, Naples; ...So This Is Reality, 2004. Two of 8 sets arranged as one cube. Courtesy Whitney Museum, New York; Untitled, 2004. Production still. Courtesy Bowie Van Valen, Amsterdam. Opposite: Cordless Light, 2006. Mixed media, 51 x 51 x 122 cm. Courtesy the artist and MOCA, Los Angeles.

If you say "I'm ghost" it means 'bye.' It's interesting to think two people can be talking and exist as one, and then they part ways and become two, just waves of each other. It's the idea of the otherness literalized. I wanted to formalize this thought and make a comment on the discipline of sculpture. This was the last large-scale thing I made… The trick then is getting the viewer to invest and construct things themselves.

SC: *In this work you also concentrated on a time problem…*
EW: Yes, there's a time discrepancy between the two overlapped spinning objects. I want to take a photograph of this piece, titled *This is the last thing I will ever say…part 1*. It'll be a time-lapse image of the turntable making one full revolution, a circular black mass turning very slowly, and the hubcap spinning and burning a light pattern onto the print… spiraling in time in an elliptical orbit.

SC: *The "Audi" show also included several paintings. A lot of your work is painting, and each time it takes a different shape: canvas, writing, expanded painting…It seems you want to question the status of both sculpture and painting.*
EW: I don't like labeling; it's non-progressive. I like what the Hip-Hop Nation has turned into, the entrepreneur mindset, even if the end result is uninteresting… J-Lo's perfume or Lil Jon's *Crunk Juice*, all the clothes, music, Snoop Dogg has a porno production company… This is also why I like Leonardo da Vinci. He made these great pictures for rich people and churches and at the same time designed weapons for governments and did other work in the invention department. That is the point in entrepreneurship that really turns into art; it's not like you make art, express yourself and then market it and enter the business. That's what artists like Jeff Koons and Warhol do and I think this is less interesting. No, I think the true beauty lies in the opposite direction, arriving at the point where you are your own client. But to answer your question, I just do what I feel; it is only on the economical side that things get categorized anyway.

SC: *Can you give some examples?*
EW: I did a show in Amsterdam a couple years ago and what I did is I took these panels I made for a work at the Whitney Biennial and showed them as paintings. I designed half-scale sets for a reality TV show I was planning on producing at the height of the 'reality show movement.' I love the tacky, suburban feeling, the fake high-design matter these producers churn out. The frosted glass and aqua-blue plastic and ceramic kitchens and 'modern' and 'progressive' co-ed bathrooms, Ikea-living situations. There's something evil and repelling in this but there is also a comfort. My sets were really pushed into this mode of aesthetic and I think they functioned as sculptures. So I simply took the 3D 'real' form, found the crease and flattened it out, removed the 'furniture' and retitled the work as painting. I made a blue screen, did some

'actions' wearing a blue suit so I became invisible and digitally fused the resulting non-image onto a still shot of these 'readjusted' paintings. So, for example, on the video you would just see a cigarette smoking and getting smaller on its own against the backdrop of a waiting room. This show was painting, sculpture, design, performance, video, film, drawing and anything else you can think of.

SC: *That makes me think of all your, say, 'extracurricular activities.' For instance, I'm interested in the book you're working on…*
EW: I started writing a romance novel. The idea now is to rent a hotel room in Manhattan Beach to finish it. The title is either *The Manhattan Beach Project* or *Los Alamos Lovers* so there's a clue as to what it is really about.

SC: *Finally I would like to ask you about failure and success. These are two terms to which you return regularly, as in* You say tomato, I say tomato *(2006) or in* 33.333 *(2006), the work your made for your solo show at MOCA…*
EW: I instinctually like the concept of failure: it's easy and natural and you can't beat it. The MOCA show was designed to be a 'thesis show' and the physical rendition of the thesis became a kind of puzzle. You know how the discipline of physics is encoded in calculus? It was a matter of dealing with objects, assigning value to variables, balancing equations. I don't know if anyone including myself would even engage the work that way, but to see this kind of brain fart should at least be a fleeting moment of entertainment. One method for constructing this equation revolves around the idea of people expecting a 'success' or a 'failure,' almost as a kind of humorous anxiety, which is both fascinating and scary. To relieve this anxiety is my job… ■

Sonia Campagnola is Managing Editor of Flash Art.

Eric Wesley was born in Los Angeles in 1973. He lives and works in Los Angeles and Berlin.
Selected solo shows: 2007: Kunst Haus Baselland; Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples; Franco Noero, Turin. 2006: Fonti, Naples; Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe; MOCA, Los Angeles. 2005: Bowie Van Valen, Amsterdam. 2004: China Art Objects, Los Angeles. 2002: Metro Pictures, New York; Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe.
Selected group shows: 2007: Prague Biennale 3. 2006: "Alien Nation," ICA, London. 2004: "100 Artists See God," ICA, London; Whitney Biennial, New York. 2001: "Freestyle," Studio Museum, New York; "New Art From Los Angeles," UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Korman, Sam. "Emma Fernberger on *Artist / City*". *Flash Art* (July 21, 2016) [Online] [Ill.]

Flash Art

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis," exterior view (2016). Courtesy of Bortolami, New York.

News / July 21, 2016

Emma Fernberger on *Artist / City*

Artist/City is Bortolami's new program taking place in various locations throughout the United States. *Flash Art* spoke with the gallery's associate director, Emma Fernberger, about the pressures and rewards of the new initiative.

What is Artist/City?

Artist/City started in December 2015. We pair an artist with a space in an American city for a year. We're responding to the speed of the art world. Again and again, you ask an artist to make something for an art fair, it hangs in a booth for a few days, it is purchased by someone and then put in their home, their museum or, worse, storage. Artist/City attempts to slow things down.

In Daniel Buren/Miami and Eric Wesley/St. Louis, what have these places allowed these artists to do?

Buren's project highlights his career-spanning engagement with the stripe motif. Each iteration of his exhibition focuses on a different mode of artmaking, which would take eight years to present on our normal schedule. Wesley's project is about accumulation. He transformed a vacant Taco Bell in a St. Louis suburb into "The Bell." He'll be adding artworks for a year, as well as presenting happenings and performances. Working outside of New York also means cheaper rent, which is, of course, a concern.

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis," exterior view (2016). Courtesy of Bortolami, New York.

What additional pressures does the yearlong duration generate?

There's pressure to constantly change things up because of how short everyone's attention span is. But under what other circumstances would we be able to work in such depth on a single exhibition? They're intense collaborations; we're like co-conspirators.

How do you navigate the slippery divisions between cities and provinces?

So many shows primarily live on social media now, so people can see them from anywhere. We have an Instagram and a dedicated website, though I hope it motivates people to visit, say, Cahokia. The cities aren't chosen arbitrarily. Though temporary, the projects are committed to their host cities. Wesley lives there part-time — so he's sensitive to surrounding social conditions. Tom Burr is from New Haven, and much of his work hinges on autobiography and identity.

What's next?

The next projects are Tom Burr/New Haven, Nicolás Guagnini/San Francisco and Barbara Kasten/Chicago. Hopefully we'll extend it to artists outside our program. Each project has its own concerns and syntax — it's exciting to figure that out.

by Sam Korman

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Flash Art

LOS ANGELES

Holy Mountain

Eric Wesley and Piero Golia of Mountain School of Arts. Photo: T. Lander.

In Los Angeles, artists Eric Wesley and Piero Golia recently established Mountain School of Arts, a fully functioning institution offering an alternative 'supplemental' arts education to its students by inviting space engineers, local artists, philosophers and L.A. art world personalities.

Who is the student body at MSA?
Piero Golia: Our first session of classes starts in January 2006 and we have admitted 15 students: 6 invited from countries in Europe, 3 students from the United States and 6 local students from L.A. The school is open to different categories of people (not necessarily artists, although most of them are). The program is complementary to other schools, some of our students have attended more traditional art schools or are still involved in other programs such as USC or UCLA.

What is the school modelled on?
PG: As with everything in life, we did have a look to the past. Black Mountain College was an interesting example as was George Maciunas' Fluxus school and the school that Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno started. Each were very interesting and poetic experiences.

"The program is complementary to other schools..."

Why did you feel it necessary to create such an institution?
PG: A lot of people have asked us this question and we really think that the only answer is because we thought it was a good idea.

Is it an accredited school? Can one graduate from it or receive a certificate of some kind?
PG: Different from other schools, the Mountain School of Arts doesn't see the diploma as a goal, so we decided to give a diploma to the students the moment they begin the program and it is up to them to maintain it until the end of the program.

How is it funded?
PG: The school is supported by private funding together with public and private contributions. In particular the generous support of the Netherlands Consulate in Los Angeles, BeLA Foundation, the Croatian government, Gai (Associazione Giovani Artisti Italiani), the Goethe Institute and 1+1=3.

Where does the name come from?
PG: The name comes from the bar in Chinatown designed by Jorge Pardo. In fact the school takes place in the bar's backroom. This situation interested us since it is similar to the secret societies in Europe that were fighting for national liberation two-hundred years ago. —*AM*

Chicago Tribune

Eric Wesley's quest for high-art fame leads to a Taco Bell

"Maybe I want to be famous," says Eric Wesley.

The artist slouches in a metal folding chair on the edge of a nearly vacant parking lot in Cahokia, Ill., assuming a slightly self-conscious posture. "But then …" he exhales a trail of cigarette smoke and quickly bats it away, an LA tell, "I also reject all that."

Wesley is wearing a white T-shirt, black slacks and aviators. A black blazer is thrown over another chair. The T-shirt, a promotional item for his latest project, features a grainy photo of an old Taco Bell, low-mission architecture that once signaled something different (tacos! burritos! enchiritos!) was within. In much the same way, Wesley's presence in Cahokia, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, signals something is going on in the building behind him, that same defunct Taco Bell on the T-shirt.

What is taking place at "The Bell" (Wesley's new name for the building, duly noted on the shirt) is part studio, part art installation, and definitely a work in progress. If high-art immortality is the goal, he picked an interesting place to chase it.

"This is the first picture I took of the place," Wesley says, pointing to the shirt. The sun is sinking behind the strip mall that rings the parking lot, putting a glow on the Dollar Tree store, the payday loans place and the interior of The Bell. Its front room is painted white and hung with several of Wesley's paintings — crisp, well-defined circles depicting cross-sections of burritos. Burritos have been an occasional theme in his work, which may partly explain why he is here.

Wesley's strange trip to Cahokia began in 2015, while on a visit to St. Louis. "We passed this strip, like a mini-mall," he says. "Most of the stores were closed, but I saw this Taco Bell out front, and I said 'Awesome, look at that!' and took a cellphone picture."

When he passed by again, he saw it was for rent, and was struck by a sense of artistic purpose, and good fortune. Wesley had been thinking hard about the middle of things: Burritos, artworks, the human body, and, as a natural extension, the middle of the country. Somewhere between his home base in LA and his gallery in New York, he figured, would be an ideal spot to create ... something. He had been perusing "land for sale" ads and thinking about a retreat where he could make art, and a space that would itself become part of the art. Into this fertile creative ground fell a squat, abandoned fast-food joint by the side of the road.

Centering a new art installation around a busted Taco Bell might seem like an odd notion, or a stunt. But Wesley doesn't fit the mold of the slick pretender. He grew up in LA, the smart kid of two social workers, planning to become an aeronautical engineer. "That didn't work out," he says with a grin. Instead, his fascination with science found expression in art. He built a successful career, participating in shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art PS1. He is repped by New York's well-known Bortolami Gallery, and co-founded the Mountain School of Arts in LA, which has gained attention as an alternative training ground for young artists.

"He has a sense of humor, but he's very smart and really thoughtful," says Evan Moffitt, an assistant editor at art-world powerhouse Frieze. "And the work he has shown has been taken very seriously."

That work has encompassed a broad range of media and subject matter, including one early installation that featured an "infinite burrito" being assembled in a gallery while viewers consumed it. "Originally, it was going to be an endless cigarette," he says. That idea fizzled, so "I started looking around for something else representing this kind of linear infinity. And I thought of the burrito. And then I thought, 'Well, a cigarette is boring. It only has one thing in there. A burrito has everything.' "

The burrito, oversized, Americanized fast-food staple, carried plenty of baggage for an artist to dig into: Stereotypes and culture? Check. Hidden realities? Check. Particle physics? Um, OK. Warhol had his soup cans, after all. "There's something about the big dumb burrito," Wesley says. "It's pop culture as a gateway to a deeper reality."

"It is a bit of a chuckle," says Emma Fernberger, associate director at Bortolami Gallery. "There's something ludicrous about looking at a painting of a cross-section of a burrito. But a lot of thought goes into it."

"On the other hand," says Wesley, "I'm OK with people stopping at a certain point and not going any further with it. I mean, at a certain point, you just wanna eat a burrito."

He has a touch of the apologist in him, and so was a little nervous about asking his gallery to underwrite The Bell project. "It's a kooky idea," he says, "and they are a serious gallery." He needn't have worried.

"It was kismet, in a funny way," says Fernberger. Bortolami's new Artist/City program, launched this year, aims to pair artists with spaces around the country, paying the rent to allow them to create and show art in those locations for an entire year, rather than the highly pressurized five weeks of a New York gallery show. The intention is not art-as-charity for out-of-the-way places, but rather a practical route to artistic freedom. "When you don't have to pay crazy rent on a New York gallery space," she says, "what you get is time. Time to work without all the pressure of having to sell art."

“The more the art world grows into an edifice,” Wesley says, “the more things start to fall off the edges.” Like an artist who finds his next work is hiring a crew to hang drywall in an old Taco Bell outside St. Louis.

The Bell opened in mid-June, and so far, the reception seems cordial. “It seems really appropriate for an LA artist with a sense of humor,” says Moffitt. “It’s something I would want to see.”

Cahokia itself is slowly discovering its newest public art. The town, which shares its name with the nearby Cahokia Mounds, a state historic site preserving traces of a prehistoric civilization, is home to surviving remnants of French Colonial heritage, including Illinois’ oldest courthouse, a log structure dating to 1740. But, amid a contemporary landscape of strip malls and suburban malaise, The Bell is a welcome departure.

“Everybody loves the idea,” says Wesley. “People are like, ‘Oh, cool, art! My cousin makes art.’ “ People occasionally drift through, checking out what new life has sprung forth in the nearly dead mini-mall. Wesley has held events including debuting a corn maze planted in The Bell’s front lawn and new sculptures (inspired by the windows of the Pizza Hut across the street and the HVAC system on the roof.)

He has big plans for his year at The Bell, including more events and new work (maybe even a roof garden.) He’ll spend time working on other projects, too, including an upcoming show in Minneapolis. “I’m a slow worker,” he says, “so a lot of that may look like me staring out this window here. I have my eye on that Pizza Hut.” New bronze sculptures will feature The Bell and the Pizza Hut; the already installed window sculptures, he says, are placed to represent an intersection of future and past. “It’s about time travel,” Wesley says, wincing a little. “I know. But what can I say? There it is.

“Time travel is a conversation stopper,” he continues, tracing his own thoughts, “but it really shouldn’t be. … It’s junk science, but it’s not. Like fast food is junk food but it’s still food, there’s still sustenance there.”

“What could be more typically American than fast food?” says Moffitt. “It’s the kind of stuff contemporary artists love, actually. It has much more relevance to mass modern life than something unattainably beautiful and refined.”

An artist’s life is no exception: “When I’m in LA,” says Wesley, catching the early evening breeze outside the doorway, “I eat burritos all the time. There is an alchemy involved, where all the elements have to be right, and in balance. For me, it’s rice, beans, meat and salsa verde. Con todo — with everything.”

It’s dinner time, and across the street, the Pizza Hut is filling up. The artist is framed for a moment in the arched windows of The Bell, straightening papers on a white Saarinen-style table. Half a mile down the road in the shadow of the highway sits a new Taco Bell, a beige box of smooth, latter-day stucco. Inside, back-lit enticements for crispy, saucy and stuffed burritos cover the walls. Straggling customers stand and gape at the signs, shuffling their feet like kids on a museum field trip. “Next?” calls the cashier, but no one steps forward. The options, it seems, are infinite.

FEBRUARY 2017

INFINITE JEST

Jan Tumlir on Eric Wesley's *The Bell*

View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL.

ARRIVING FOR THE OPENING of Eric Wesley's survey-scale exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery 356 S. Mission Rd. in January 2015, visitors encountered a new Nissan parked at a rakish angle in the back lot, with its front doors ajar and music blaring from its speakers. That this was an artwork would surely never have occurred to many of those in attendance had it not been for the checklist, where it was designated *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, with materials given as "clear lacquer paint on Infiniti." The added finish seals the deal on the car's integrity as a sculptural proposition—an assisted readymade—and thereby advances its merely promotional claim on the infinite to the condition of an aesthetic promise, albeit one that proves decidedly ironic on reflection. As a found object that was in fact rented, the vehicle could also be seen as a monument to transience and ephemerality. After the close of the show, one had to imagine the automobile undergoing a further turn in this Duchampian game of contextual transposition, mingling inconspicuously with all the other non-art cars in the rental fleet upon return. Moreover, once replaced within its original context, Wesley's Infiniti can only be faced with steady depreciation, the fate of all uncollected cars. This is the crux of the artist's joke on the world: The infinite, the endless, the eternal are only available to us mortals as time-sensitive concepts. Yet precisely by withholding the punch line—on either side of the art/life divide, his car operates invisibly—Wesley dispatches our thoughts toward a black star of cosmic inertia.

A quasi catalogue raisonné prepared for the occasion of the 356 S. Mission Rd. show linked the works on view to the artist's past projects, detailing an evolution of thought around a consistent set of themes —concerning the history of avant-garde art, relativity, and *n*-dimensional thought. Included in its pages is the self-published book *West Camp Beans* (1999), which is described in an introductory blurb as a "travelogue recounting the artist's month-long journey from Los Angeles, California to Nine Mile, Alaska and back during the last solstice of the millennium." This was a road trip accomplished in "one dimension," as Wesley explains it—driving through shortening days toward night, and then back again, at the close of the twentieth century. It opens a paradoxical perspective on the multidimensionality of his *Infinity Project*—as well as that of his latest endeavor, which involves the repurposing of a disused Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois (just across the Mississippi River from Saint Louis), into a self-run and ideally permanent exhibition space for his art. The idea of commandeering a locale off the beaten track of the art capitals and depositing his work in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, occurred to Wesley on the Alaskan trek. And the site that he chose is no more incidental than his selection of a car named Infiniti for his LA show.

View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL. Center: *Burrito Painting #4 (Sesos)*, 2016.

THE APPROACH to the space of *The Bell*, as the work came to be known, is critical to its function: Traveling south on I-64 from the city center of Saint Louis into Illinois, one must first pass through the industrial outback of Sauget, with its hydroelectric plants, mining companies, truck stops, and strip clubs. Then one turns onto Camp Jackson Road, which cuts a wide swath through Cahokia and gives us a drive-by view of a succession of commercial outlets competing for the attention of motorists with gaudy signage. The route puts us firmly inside the "architecture of entropy," as Robert Smithson phrases it in his seminal essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (originally published in the June 1966 issue of this magazine). Here, the ostensibly eternal momentum of Zeno's arrow collides with the dismally repetitive geometry of "discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. On the inside of such places are maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion," as Smithson puts it. In other words, oblivion, not infinity, is the fate of all temporal trajectories under such conditions. Yet this entropic zone lies at the epicenter of pre-Columbian Mississippian culture; the famed earthworks known as the Cahokia Mounds loom not far away. Contemplating *The Bell* (its alternate title is *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*) in this expansive, at once pre- and posthistorical framework prompts reflection on the extent to which Wesley's work as a whole can be situated in critical relation to post-Minimalism. His road trips and car readymades recall that movement's implicit stake in a postwar culture of automotive mobility, its vehicular mappings of America's unromantic ruins.

Wesley also has a long-standing fascination with drive-in fast food, which, when seen from the perspective of art, downgrades the idea of aesthetic experience to a short-lived pleasure, closely followed by dyspeptic regret. Now we arrive at the locus of ludic abjection in his work, namely, the burrito. This openly comedic and culturally loaded trope reaches far back in Wesley's oeuvre, being traceable to a show titled "Enchilada 'The Endless Burrito,'" first presented in 2002 at the Meyer Riegger gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany. Applying a logic that undergoes diametric reversal in *The Bell*, a space of visual contemplation was there converted into one of oral consumption. A wall erected in the middle of the gallery hid a makeshift kitchen, with only a small, glory-hole-like opening connecting to the front, through which the "endless burrito" was slowly pushed and incrementally segmented off on request from hungry guests. The 356 S. Mission Rd. exhibition, for its part, featured a circular stained-glass window depicting the contents of a burrito seen as a transversal slice, and this motif was reprised in a suite of five paintings, executed in a variety of styles, finally installed in the Cahokia location. At *The Bell*, these works' culinary content becomes context-appropriate, while the offer of immediate pleasure inherent in fast food is eternalized as art, but again not without irony: This is a "golden section" alarmingly tinged with bathroom humor, at once phallic and scatological.

At *The Bell*, there is nothing to eat, though one can imagine that some part of the clientele stopping in might want to do just that. From the outside, Wesley's building, with its reassuring Mission-style design, does not immediately declare its rarefied distinction from the surrounding businesses, which include an inordinate number of chain restaurants. There is in fact another, newer Taco Bell just down the street, closer to the interstate, that is in full working order—a "straight man" doppelgänger. The first clue that Wesley's restaurant is not "straight" is an absence of signage. The bell once set into the arch that rises above the roof has gone missing. Also, the small patch of lawn extending out from its facade is now planted with rows of corn that twist disconcertingly into a maze. These exterior alterations could be overlooked, but once inside, the experience turns openly anomalous. The tables and chairs of the dining area have all been removed, and in their place are two freestanding sculptural constructions both consisting of a pair of trapezoidal glass planes, heroic in scale (just over human height), that meet at a ninety-degree angle along their straight edge and fan out on the other side as they proceed upward. Art-savvy viewers might be tempted to conjure up precedents from the West Coast Light and Space and Finish Fetish movements of the 1960s, but a glance out the window confirms the origin of these works in the design of the Pizza Hut right across the street. This franchise, in fact owned by the same parent company as Taco Bell, boasts dynamically stylized corner windows, which are here precisely reproduced in the absence of their support structure. Likewise perplexing is the appearance of the air duct above them, which is bent, unpragmatically but elegantly, into a tuba-like shape. The counters that would normally open onto the space of food preparation are neatly walled in, with three burrito paintings installed where the cashiers formerly greeted their patrons. Behind this is an empty kitchen and then another wall, sealing it off from the pantry. As in Wesley's Karlsruhe show, a small hole has been gouged, more roughly this time around, into this partition. Peering through, one makes eye contact with a crow, perched on a branch in a state of frozen vigilance. On a table near the entrance, the 356 S. Mission Rd. catalogue gives us the opportunity to retrace the steps that led up to this point: the former division of the Meyer Riegger gallery into a dining space of reception and a kitchen space of production, now including a supply room. In the terms of the complex psychosexual analogies set up so far between architecture and organism, we are here asked to travel backward from the zone of phallic extension through the testicular pump to a storehouse of genetic material. At the terminus of this passage, in an ominous showdown, we meet the logic of the gaze. The bird installed there was selected for its highly evolved sense of facial recognition, a fact emphasized in the ancient-sounding name that Wesley gave to his animal "father": *Heseeus*.

The assertive nature of the name—He-see-us—carries within it a question as to who the "he" that sees and the "us" that are seen are. Is it important to mention, in this regard, that Wesley is an artist of mixed racial background? Yes, but only on the condition that it does not come up first, as the overarching criterion for reading his work. Ideas about passing and about identity as a theatrically performed negotiation with an oppressive order (as explored in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Fred Moten, for instance) are evident in the structure of *The Bell*. Wesley's appropriation of a corporate property as a semicovert exhibition space is a gesture that points toward self-starting autonomy, and yet an awareness of perpetual surveillance is insistently factored in, precluding the possibility that this space could ever be romanticized as an aesthetic sanctuary. Further, we might begin to think of the project as playing on the opposition between integrationist and separatist ideologies, and, at the extreme, ideas about racial "purity" and fears of miscegenation.

Eric Wesley, *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, clear lacquer on Nissan Infiniti. Installation view, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo: Alexandra Noel.

SUCH ANXIOUS CONCERNS have always lurked as a subtext within Wesley's work. The clear coating on his Infiniti can be construed as a prophylactic, while the core-sample views of the "endless burrito" speak, unambiguously, to castration. As of this writing, he is at work to replace the missing bell of *The Bell* with one that makes the occluded vaginal symbolism of the original overt; once installed, it will silently peal out a call to nonconsummation.

Control over reproduction is a matter of biopolitics, perhaps its highest concern, and in Wesley's work it can be linked to a historical narrative of cultural containment. While the Cahokia Mounds stand to silently refute stereotypical views of pre-Columbian North America—that it was barely populated and had no dense settlements, grand architecture, or "advanced civilizations"—another nearby site, Ferguson, Missouri, exposes a different set of repressions and conjures other acts of historical violence, both physical and social. The 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown is an event that has barely begun to recede in public memory, and informed the controversy around Kelley Walker's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis this past autumn. *The Bell* is certainly impacted by these social developments, and yet it insists on a critical measure of distance, suggesting that the politics of representation are far too complex to be assuaged simply by making visible what was invisible, including what was excluded. For Wesley, it would seem, every stage of acceptance must be met with another round of refusals. The artist has repeatedly asserted that he wants to be both "underground" and "popular." These words are carefully chosen, suggesting a broader field of cultural engagement that could take inspiration from music, for instance, and a long line of genres from blues to techno to hip-hop that managed to smuggle marginal or subcultural content into the mainstream. For him, I believe, the tense two-sidedness of this equation is a recipe for troubling beauty, an impression corroborated by the fond nickname he gives to *The Bell*—"La Belle."

A sort of Salon des Refusés (whose precedents may be tracked through the subsequent succession of more independent minded efforts, from Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* to Donald Judd's sited galleries in Marfa), *The Bell* is at once a monument to the artist and an anti-monument, as Smithson defined it. It would appear that on Wesley's intellectual map, all of these roads converge on this Midwestern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and now, swapping one place-name for another, we can ask the question that Smithson asked of Passaic, New Jersey, almost half a century ago: Has Cahokia replaced Rome as the Eternal City? Even when posed in jest, the query's implications are serious. Wesley's desire to link the endless to the everyday via an "underground" passage that could prove to be "popular" is one that cuts to the quick of identity, of the political economy of subjective formation and its representation. As long as his *Bell* remains in operation, the seemingly intractable power lines that run between the "ones" and the "others" will provide material for aesthetic undoing, with a formal joke that will not grant to any side the privilege of the last laugh.

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell), Phase 3" is on view at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL, through May.

Jan Tumlir is a frequent contributor to Artforum.

Dafoe, Taylor. "Bortolami Pushes Art Beyond NY and LA". *Blouin Art Info* (July 30, 2016) [Online] [Ill.]

BLOUINARTINFO

Bortolami Pushes Art Beyond NY and LA

BY TAYLOR DAFOE | JULY 30, 2016

"Eric Wesley / St. Louis," Phase 1, 2016 (Bortolami, Cahokia Installation view)
(Courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York)

Last December, Bortolami Gallery launched the project "Artist/City," in which it helps artists from its stable install artworks in nontraditional spaces across the country for a year. So far the project has spawned two installations: Daniel Buren's in Miami and Eric Wesley's in St. Louis. Two more are on the way: Barbara Kasten's in Chicago and Tom Burr's in New Haven.

The gallery's goal is not to establish "permanent satellite locations throughout the country," said Emma Fernberger, the Bortolami associate director who runs the program, but rather to experiment with exhibition techniques while expanding the art world beyond of the two coasts. "People from New York and LA have the tendency to be self-absorbed, because there's so much emphasis on those two cities at the moment. But there's the whole rest of the country where there's still exciting things happening. There are many different art worlds. It's great to get to know other places, see other things, and meet new people — expand our community."

The project has no set model. The artists are given free rein to find locations and use them as they choose. "Each of these projects has its own syntax," said Fernberger. "For each there's a process of discovering what that is."

Wesley has occupied an old Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois. The building, which he has named the Bell, is “replete with ersatz Spanish Colonial architecture,” according to the press release. The artist has taken a “cumulative approach” to the project: Throughout the year, he has continued to add components to the installation, hanging artworks in the gutted interior, planting a garden in the front of the building, and erecting sculptures on the roof. The Bell will also host “happenings” involving the local community throughout the year. Buren, the first artist to participate in Artist/City project, has taken a more traditional approach, occupying an event space near downtown Miami where he has curated and installed exhibitions of his own work.

For Burr, the project has brought him home, in a sense. Burr is in the process of selecting a space in New Haven, Connecticut, where he was born and raised (his father was a dean at Yale). He also has a longstanding interest in Brutalist architecture, of which New Haven has some of the country’s most important examples. The artist is still planning the programming, but according to Fernberger, his installation in the space will likely be additive, evolving over time. Kasten is working with the gallery to secure a space in Chicago, which she chose in order to strengthen her connection to the Bauhaus, a huge influence on her work. (She was also born in Chicago.)

To document the evolution of the program, Bortolami has established Tumblrs for each project. Those for the first two, featuring candid photos, proper installation shots, artist-shot video, sketches, and more, can be found here.

The future of the project is still sketchy, but there are no plans to slow down. Fernberger is working with other Bortolami artists on securing new locations for new projects.

“It’s been an incredibly rewarding experience,” she said. “It’s nice to be able to go and meet people in their own city, on their own terms. People appreciate you taking the time to get to know their city. They’re proud of their local institutions.”

Lesser, Casey. "An Artist Is Using a Former Taco Bell to Make the Art World Slow Down," *Artsy,* 28 July 2016 [web].

ARTSY

An Artist Is Using a Former Taco Bell to Make the Art World Slow Down

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY CASEY LESSER
JUL 28TH, 2016 1:48 PM

Some three months ago, Los Angeles artist Eric Wesley signed a lease on a defunct Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.

Wesley had been driving back and forth between St. Louis and L.A. with his girlfriend, fellow artist Alika Cooper. After passing by the shell of a fast-food restaurant on a drive from St. Louis to a Walmart in the suburbs, he called the leasing agent, and eventually became its temporary guardian. With the support of his gallery, Bortolami, Wesley spent months overhauling the space and making art in it. Now, it has become a project space-cum-work of art called The Bell.

"Seven years ago or so I was looking for land here," Wesley recalls over the phone from Cahokia. The artist's peers and mentors were focused at the time on achieving success in the art world's heartland, Europe. Wesley, on the other hand, set his sights on middle America, drawn to an area that was untouched and untapped by contemporary art.

“As soon as I discovered this place, I formed a kinship with it,” he says of Cahokia. “I grew up in L.A., in the San Fernando Valley, and Cahokia, Illinois, is quite a bit like it. That had me coming back. It’s what I call the true suburban lifestyle.” Rather than the framing of suburbia in the American consciousness as a place of safety with access to nature, in Cahokia Wesley saw a suburbia “of the Pet Shop Boys’ definition,” he says, nodding to the band’s 1986 hit. The abandoned Taco Bell aligned well with this seedy, decayed version of suburban life. That is, until Wesley began to transform it.

Wesley’s Taco Bell is built in the chain’s typical mission style, with a pitched roof, round arches, and an alcove where a bell once hung. But the structure had sat dormant for years, leaving it in a state of ruin. To create The Bell, Wesley had to bring everything up to code, installing new water and electrical conduits among myriad other renovations. The results are nothing short of transformative. Where customers once chomped on Chalupas Supreme in swivel chairs and vinyl-padded booths now sits a light-filled gallery space with white walls and wood floors.

Wesley’s upcoming plans for The Bell are equally exciting—and tongue-in-cheek. (He’s taken to calling the space “La Belle,” fond of the way the name changes to connote the beauty of its many potential outcomes when in French.) For the project’s first phase, he made paintings inspired by the cross-section of a burrito. For the second, opened this month, he’s created glass sculptures inspired by the architecture of the Pizza Hut across the street. A farmer is in the process of planting a corn maze in the former fast food joint’s front yard. And, among other future plans for the project’s run through April 2017, Wesley will install a new bell on the building’s roof and host a series of performances.

The Bell has already succeeded in engaging the local community. Between renovations, inspections, and sourcing materials for his art, Wesley has welcomed a steady stream of individuals into the space. Word has quickly spread: He’s played host to a spectrum of curious visitors—from St. Louis locals and artists to Wash U. students and the mayor’s assistant.

Wesley is the second artist to partake in Bortolami Gallery’s Artist / City initiative, which sees the gallery rent out a space for one of its represented artists, in a city other than New York. It’s a response to the pressing deadlines and quick turnover that art fairs and five- or six-week exhibitions require, the program allows gallery artists to show their work over the course of one year. “The art world has gotten so fast-paced,” says Bortolami associate director Emma Fernberger. “This is our attempt to slow things down.”

Artist / City sits somewhere between a residency and a gallery show, as artists aren't required to live in the cities they choose. Bortolami inaugurated the program with Daniel Buren in December 2015 at the M Building in Miami, beginning with a retrospective show of his work, and more recently a new sculptural installation. Future iterations of Artist / City will see Tom Burr in New Haven, Nicolás Guagnini in San Francisco, and Barbara Kasten in Chicago. "We're finding that each artist and their work has different demands and concerns; each of these projects has its own syntax and vernacular," says Fernberger.

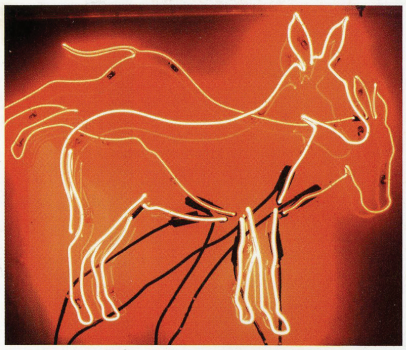
When asked, Wesley agrees that the project has inspired his work in a way that preparing a gallery show would not, but his aims for The Bell are bigger. "I'm trying to reverse that question, if you will," he says. "I'm more interested in inspiring galleries—locally, nationally, internationally." Pushing against the conventions of what an art space should be, and where it should be located, Wesley is on the right track.

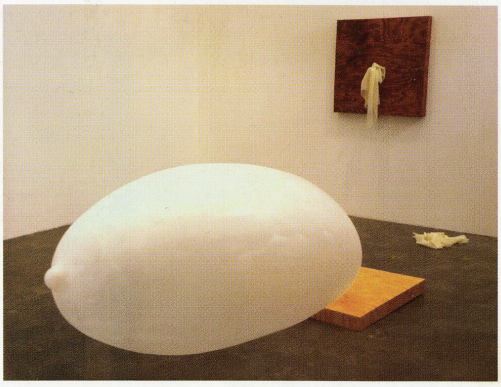
—Casey Lesser

The Bell is on view at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, Illinois, Thurs.–Sat., 12–5 p.m. The space is closed during the month of August.

Art Review:

(March 2008)





Eric Wesley by Paul Schimmel

Eric Wesley's work is goofy, broad, gestural, humorous and anecdotal, and at the same time structured, rigorous, reductive, concrete, intellectual, social and political. The fact that he never went to graduate school (surprising for a young artist in Los Angeles, a town known for its art schools) might have been why his first solo museum exhibition, which was part of MOCA's Focus series, was conceptualised as an off-campus 'thesis' exhibition. This show demonstrated that his rigorously developed sculptural installations are part of a broad matrix that draws from a range of Southern California artists.

In it, Wesley dragged a Vespa (possibly a reference to Chris Burden) into a gallery of the Pacific Design Center. In great incongruity with the elegance of the space, it created an empty stage for a performance that would not happen. The motorcycle, whose exhaust pipe was redirected out of the gallery, would be turned on at regular intervals, thereby igniting or activating the space. Its fuel line ran through a glass painting that acted as an external gas tank, referencing Charles Ray's *Ink Line* (1987), and the electricity generated by its battery-powered lightbulb was jerry-rigged to the museum's electrical light-track system. A stagelike elevated floor was inlaid with rotating disks rendered immovable by museum restrictions. Within this spare environment, one also saw the influence of Paul McCarthy (a teacher at UCLA, where Wesley was an undergrad), Richard Jackson, Bruce Nauman and Michael Asher. In a further show, at Bortolami, New York, Wesley achieved a spectacularly functional minimalist sculpture using the cliché of the California health spa as its centrepiece. On a cold, rainy December evening, the opening was less an invitation as it was an elegant assault on New York's expectations.

These two back-to-back exhibitions allowed me to appreciate what Connie Butler, curator of the MOCA exhibition, had realised – that Wesley is developing a sculptural language rich in possibility and well-grounded both formally and conceptually. Drawing more from the generative period of the late 1960s and early 70s, and working in the as-yet-undefined and certainly noncommercial space between sculpture, performance and political action, Wesley revisits the interest of working between practices. His breakthrough work *Kicking Ass* (2000), a full-scale model of a donkey that has knocked a hole in a museum wall, draws from Liz Larner's *Corner Basher* (1988). However, Wesley transformed Larners's more formal kinetic sculpture into an animatronic reference to Paul McCarthy's goat while making a metaphor for his own development.

clockwise from left: ***Clean Machine***, 2006, washing machine, cement, 163 x 69 x 65 cm, courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York; ***Kicking Ass***, 2000, neon, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist; ***Spafice***, 2007 (installation view), courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York

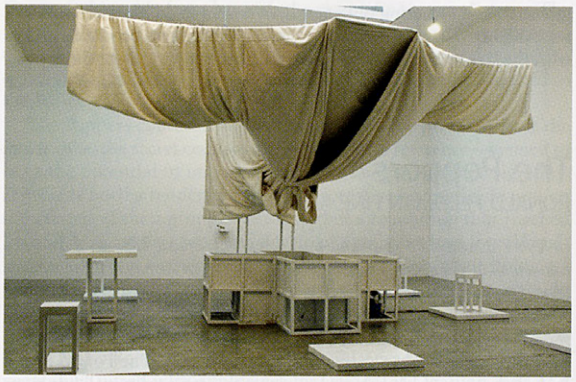
ARTFORUM
(March 2008)

Eric Wesley

BORTOLAMI

That Eric Wesley has distanced himself from institutional critique (characterizing it as "way too serious and noncommittal at the same time") should come as no surprise. Born in 1973, the LA-based artist belongs to a generation that tends toward extremes when it comes to narrativizing their relationships to artistic legacies, whether by way of fetishization or refusal. Many of these accounts amount to little more than cliché; Wesley has elaborated on his "way too serious" comment by dismissing institutional critique as capable of "no humor, no comedy," a characterization that hardly matches up with the expanded field of artistic approaches aimed at undermining cultural establishments. One would be hard-pressed to describe the likes of Marcel Broodthaers, Andrea Fraser, or Fred Wilson as dour, while even a cursory acquaintance with Hans Haacke's oeuvre reveals that it is hardly as somber as it is sometimes perceived to be.

But perhaps more compelling than parsing whether, say, David Hammons should be relegated to the category of institutional critique (Wesley votes no, saying that to do so "makes things way too easy") is to ask why the imperative for such discussions arises around young artists. In other words, why is Wesley urged—overtly or not—to situate



Eric Wesley, *SPAFICE*, 2007. Installation view.

his work in relation to the recent past and, in particular, to ostensibly "critical" predecessors at all? Perhaps by refusing to align with such constructed genealogies, he intends to call attention to the ways in which "radical" practices can be stylistically appropriated, rendered into easily consumable signs of seriousness. But however pressing this question is today, Wesley fails to plumb the issue with much consistency or depth. In his recent installation at Bortolami, for instance, the artist's attempt at a kind of hyperbolic humor fell completely flat, and in so doing became—ironically enough—more didactic than deadpan.

Titled *SPAFICE*, 2007, Wesley's installation marries the spa and the conference room. The gallery thus housed a kind of sculptural homage to this hybrid-space idea, with a cross-shaped, tiled Jacuzzi surrounded by pedestals, also tiled and grouted. Effecting a tired jab at Minimalism, the work also delivered an obvious message: The art world is now basically a place of leisure *and* a place of business. That the hot tub was not meant to be used only magnified the literalism, as visitors circumambulated the shallow pool and awkward tables, eyeballing them as one would an empty set during a tour of a television studio. A gigantic fluffy robe hung over the tub, its dumb, overblown contours part of the gag but, like the whole, lacking any real substance.

While a number of Wesley's earlier projects have more compellingly questioned whether today's artists can address the "institution," whatever that has come to mean, *SPAFICE* inadvertently enacts merely a parody of critique. This could be a useful project if it took itself seriously enough to be serious or was funny enough to be *actually* funny. Instead, it feels simply cynical, but it's neither cruel nor interesting enough to make of that a virtue either. The day that I visited, near the end of the run of the show, the jerry-rigged plumbing had malfunctioned, and the whole thing—feeling way too serious and noncommittal—had nearly dried up anyhow.

—*Johanna Burton*

Tumlir, Jan. “Infinite Jest: Jan Tumlir on Eric Wesley’s The Bell,” *Artforum*, (February 2017): p. 87-90. [print] [ill]

ARTFORUM

INFINITE JEST

Jan Tumlir on Eric Wesley’s *The Bell*

View of “Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell),” **2016–17**, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL.

ARRIVING FOR THE OPENING of Eric Wesley’s survey-scale exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery 356 S. Mission Rd. in January 2015, visitors encountered a new Nissan parked at a rakish angle in the back lot, with its front doors ajar and music blaring from its speakers. That this was an artwork would surely never have occurred to many of those in attendance had it not been for the checklist, where it was designated *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, with materials given as “clear lacquer paint on Infiniti.” The added finish seals the deal on the car’s integrity as a sculptural proposition—an assisted readymade—and thereby advances its merely promotional claim on the infinite to the condition of an aesthetic promise, albeit one that proves decidedly ironic on reflection. As a found object that was in fact rented, the vehicle could also be seen as a monument to transience and ephemerality. After the close of the show, one had to imagine the automobile undergoing a further turn in this Duchampian game of contextual transposition, mingling inconspicuously with all the other non-art cars in the rental fleet upon return. Moreover, once replaced within its original context, Wesley’s Infiniti can only be faced with steady depreciation, the fate of all uncollected cars. This is the crux of the artist’s joke on the world: The infinite, the endless, the eternal are only available to us mortals as time-sensitive concepts. Yet precisely by withholding the punch line—on either side of the art/life divide, his car operates invisibly—Wesley dispatches our thoughts toward a black star of cosmic inertia.

A quasi catalogue raisonné prepared for the occasion of the 356 S. Mission Rd. show linked the works on view to the artist’s past projects, detailing an evolution of thought around a consistent set of themes—concerning the history of avant-garde art, relativity, and *n*-dimensional thought. Included in its pages is the self-published book *West Camp Beans* (1999), which is described in an introductory blurb as a “travelogue recounting the artist’s month-long journey from Los Angeles, California to Nine Mile, Alaska and back during the last solstice of the millennium.” This was a road trip accomplished in “one dimension,” as Wesley explains it—driving through shortening days toward night, and then back again, at the close of the twentieth century. It opens a paradoxical perspective on the multidimensionality of his *Infinity Project*—as well as that of his latest endeavor, which involves the repurposing of a disused Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois (just across the Mississippi River from Saint Louis), into a self-run and ideally permanent exhibition space for his art. The idea of commandeering a locale off the beaten track of the art capitals and depositing his work in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, occurred to Wesley on the Alaskan trek. And the site that he chose is no more incidental than his selection of a car named Infiniti for his LA show.

Wesley has a long-standing fascination with fast food, which downgrades the idea of aesthetic experience to a short-lived pleasure followed by dyspeptic regret.

THE APPROACH to the space of *The Bell*, as the work came to be known, is critical to its function: Traveling south on I-64 from the city center of Saint Louis into

Above: **Eric Wesley, *Heseeus*, 2016**, mixed media. Installation view, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL. Right: **View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17**, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL. Center: *Burrito Painting #4 (Sesos)*, 2016.

Illinois, one must first pass through the industrial outback of Sauget, with its hydroelectric plants, mining companies, truck stops, and strip clubs. Then one turns onto Camp Jackson Road, which cuts a wide swath through Cahokia and gives us a drive-by view of a succession of commercial outlets competing for the attention of motorists with gaudy signage. The route puts us firmly inside the "architecture of entropy," as Robert Smithson phrases it in his seminal essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (originally published in the June 1966 issue of this magazine). Here, the ostensibly eternal momentum of Zeno's arrow collides with the dismally repetitive geometry of "discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. On the inside of such places are maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion," as Smithson puts it. In other words, oblivion, not infinity, is the fate of all temporal trajectories under such conditions. Yet this entropic zone lies at the epicenter of pre-Columbian Mississippian culture; the famed earthworks known as the Cahokia Mounds loom not far away. Contemplating *The Bell* (its alternate title is *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*) in this expansive, at once pre- and posthistorical framework prompts reflection on the extent to which Wesley's work as a whole can be situated in critical relation to post-Minimalism. His road trips and car readymades recall that movement's implicit stake in a postwar culture of automotive mobility, its vehicular mappings of America's unromantic ruins.

Wesley also has a long-standing fascination with drive-in fast food, which, when seen from the perspective of art, downgrades the idea of aesthetic experience to a short-lived pleasure, closely followed by dyspeptic regret. Now we arrive at the locus of ludic abjection in his work, namely, the burrito. This openly comedic and culturally loaded trope reaches far back in Wesley's oeuvre, being traceable to a show titled "Enchilada 'The Endless Burrito,'" first presented in 2002 at the Meyer Riegger gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany. Applying a logic that undergoes diametric reversal in *The Bell*, a space of visual contemplation was there converted into one of oral consumption. A wall erected in the middle of the gallery hid a makeshift kitchen, with only a small, glory-hole-like opening connecting to the front, through which the "endless burrito" was slowly pushed and incrementally segmented off on request from hungry guests. The 356 S. Mission Rd. exhibition, for its part, featured a circular stained-glass window depicting the contents of a burrito seen as a transversal slice, and this motif was reprised in a suite of five paintings, executed in a variety of styles, finally installed in the Cahokia location. At *The Bell*, these works' culinary content becomes context-appropriate, while the offer of immediate pleasure inherent in fast food is eternalized as art, but again not without irony: This is a "golden section" alarmingly tinged with bathroom humor, at once phallic and scatological.

At *The Bell*, there is nothing to eat, though one can imagine that some part of the clientele stopping in might want to do just that. From the outside, Wesley's building, with its reassuring Mission-style design, does not immediately declare its rarefied distinction from the surrounding businesses, which include an inordinate number of chain restaurants. There is in fact another, newer Taco Bell just down the street, closer to the interstate, that is in full working order—a "straight man" doppelgänger. The first clue that Wesley's restaurant is not "straight" is an absence of signage. The bell once set into the arch that rises above the roof has gone missing. Also, the small patch of lawn extending out from its facade is now planted with rows of corn that twist disconcertingly into a maze. These exterior alterations could be overlooked, but once inside, the experience turns openly anomalous. The tables and chairs of the dining area have all been removed, and in their place are two freestanding sculptural constructions both consisting of a pair of trapezoidal glass planes, heroic in scale (just over human height), that meet at a ninety-degree angle along their straight edge and fan out on the other side as they proceed upward. Art-savvy viewers might be tempted to conjure up precedents from the

Eric Wesley, *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, clear lacquer on Nissan Infiniti. Installation view, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo: Alexandra Noel.

West Coast Light and Space and Finish Fetish movements of the 1960s, but a glance out the window confirms the origin of these works in the design of the Pizza Hut right across the street. This franchise, in fact owned by the same parent company as Taco Bell, boasts dynamically stylized corner windows, which are here precisely reproduced in the absence of their support structure. Likewise perplexing is the appearance of the air duct above them, which is bent, unpragmatically but elegantly, into a tuba-like shape. The counters that would normally open onto the space of food preparation are neatly walled in, with three burrito paintings installed where the cashiers formerly greeted their patrons. Behind this is an empty kitchen and then another wall, sealing it off from the pantry. As in Wesley's Karlsruhe show, a small hole has been gouged, more roughly this time around, into this partition. Peering through, one makes eye contact with a crow, perched on a branch in a state of frozen vigilance. On a table near the entrance, the 356 S. Mission Rd. catalogue gives us the opportunity to retrace the steps that led up to this point: the former division of the Meyer Riegger gallery into a dining space of reception and a kitchen space of production, now including a supply room. In the terms of the complex psychosexual analogies set up so far between architecture and organism, we are here asked to travel backward from the zone of phallic extension through the testicular pump to a storehouse of genetic material. At the terminus of this passage, in an ominous showdown, we meet the logic of the gaze. The bird installed there was selected for its highly evolved sense of facial recognition, a fact emphasized in the ancient-sounding name that Wesley gave to his animal "father": *Heseeus*.

The assertive nature of the name—He-see-us—carries within it a question as to who the "he" that sees and the "us" that are seen are. Is it important to mention, in this regard, that Wesley is an artist of mixed racial background? Yes, but only on the condition that it does not come up first, as the overarching criterion for reading his work. Ideas about passing and about identity as a theatrically performed negotiation with an oppressive order (as explored in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Fred Moten, for instance) are evident in the structure of *The Bell*. Wesley's appropriation of a corporate property as a semicovert exhibition space is a gesture that points toward self-starting autonomy, and yet an awareness of perpetual surveillance is insistently factored in, precluding the possibility that this space could ever be romanticized as an aesthetic sanctuary. Further, we might begin to think of the project as playing on the opposition between integrationist and separatist ideologies, and, at the extreme, ideas about racial "purity" and fears of miscegenation.

SUCH ANXIOUS CONCERNS have always lurked as a subtext within Wesley's work. The clear coating on his Infiniti can be construed as a prophylactic, while the core-sample views of the "endless burrito" speak, unambiguously, to castration. As of this writing, he is at work to replace the missing bell of *The Bell* with one that makes the occluded vaginal symbolism of the original overt; once installed, it will silently peal out a call to nonconsummation.

Control over reproduction is a matter of biopolitics, perhaps its highest concern, and in Wesley's work it can be linked to a historical narrative of cultural containment. While the Cahokia Mounds stand to silently refute stereotypical views of pre-Columbian North America—that it was barely populated and had no dense settlements, grand architecture, or "advanced civilizations"—another nearby site, Ferguson, Missouri, exposes a different set of repressions and conjures other acts of historical violence, both physical and social. The 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown is an event that has barely begun to recede in public memory, and informed the controversy around Kelley Walker's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis this past autumn. *The Bell* is certainly impacted by these social developments, and yet it insists on a critical measure of distance, suggesting that the politics of representation are far too complex to be assuaged simply by making visible what was invisible, including what was excluded. For Wesley, it would seem, every stage of acceptance must be met with another round of refusals. The artist has repeatedly asserted that he wants to be both "underground" and "popular." These words are carefully chosen, suggesting a broader field of cultural engagement that could take inspiration from music, for instance, and a long line of genres from blues to techno to hip-hop that managed to smuggle marginal or subcultural content into the mainstream. For him, I believe, the tense two-sidedness of this equation is a recipe for troubling beauty, an impression corroborated by the fond nickname he gives to *The Bell*—"La Belle."

A sort of Salon des Refusés (whose precedents may be tracked through the subsequent succession of more independent minded efforts, from Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* to Donald Judd's sited galleries in Marfa), *The Bell* is at once a monument to the artist and an antimonument, as Smithson defined it. It would appear that on Wesley's intellectual map, all of these roads converge on this Midwestern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and now, swapping one place-name for another, we can ask the question that Smithson asked of Passaic, New Jersey, almost half a century ago: Has Cahokia replaced Rome as the Eternal City? Even when posed in jest, the query's implications are serious. Wesley's desire to link the endless to the everyday via an "underground" passage that could prove to be "popular" is one that cuts to the quick of identity, of the political economy of subjective formation and its representation. As long as his *Bell* remains in operation, the seemingly intractable power lines that run between the "ones" and the "others" will provide material for aesthetic undoing, with a formal joke that will not grant to any side the privilege of the last laugh. □

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell), Phase 3" is on view at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL, through May.

JAN TUMLIR IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO *ARTFORUM*.

Ghorashi, Hannah. "'This is not trash': Eric Wesley's Tribute to Miscellany at Frieze." *Art News* (May 14, 2015): [online] [ill.]

ARTNEWS

'THIS IS NOT TRASH': ERIC WESLEY'S TRIBUTE TO MISCELLANY AT FRIEZE

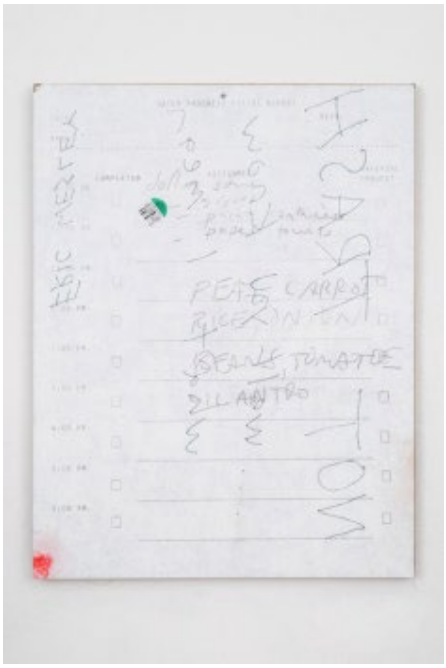
BY ***Hannah Ghorashi*** POSTED **05/14/15 1:55 PM**

On an outward-facing wall at the Bortolami booth, two works by Eric Wesley—*DPS #36 North American Center (Notes from my Mother)* and *DPS #34 This is not Trash*…well *you know what I mean*—hang, boasting a modest but wonderfully mundane appeal. Resembling blown-up scraps of paper (the back of a real estate ad, a "daily status progress report") featuring desultory scatters of notes penciled on the back, the works are actually painted on aluminum and mounted on linen.

DPS #36 North American Center (Notes from my Mother).
COURTESY ARTSY

"[Wesley] based them on scraps of paper that he's been saving, and he realized that the compositions just made really unexpected gestures," said Lola Kramer, associate director.

Smudges of paint or marker, eraser marks, hurried calculations by hand, names of cities, times, and a grocery list embellish the paintings ("BEANS, CARROTS"), encouraging the viewer to recall with fondness all those unloved, coffee-stained, ancillary pieces of junk whose virginal undersides have meekly born our frantic etchings and general rough handling. An oversized sticker, the kind you might have unpeeled from an orange, was included on *DPS #34*—a rather brilliant touch, I thought.



DPS #34 This is not Trash…well you know what I mean.
COURTESY ARTSY

Said Lola: "He put these pieces of paper on a lightbox, and when you see light shining on a piece of paper, you can see the light shining through and what's so cool is that he's accurately able to realize that moment when you see light shining through the page. So everything that was on the reverse comes through to the surface, but when you're looking at this it looks like you're looking at a semi-transparent thing, even though it's all on the surface."

On what appears to be the back of Wesley's daily report, the artist has scrawled "NOT TRASH," a sort of meta-cheer for this year's Frieze.

Kroeber, Gavin. "Eric Wesley Cahokia at Bortolami", *Art in America*, 9 March, 2017. [online] [ill.]

Art in America

Eric Wesley
Cahokia, at Bortolami

View of Eric Wesley's project *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*, 2016-17, at a former Taco Bell in Cahokia, Ill.

Fifteen minutes from St. Louis's Gateway Arch, just across the Mississippi River in Cahokia, Illinois, the Los Angeles artist Eric Wesley has been tinkering in the shell of a former Taco Bell. His evolving installation there is one of the first installments in the New York gallery Bortolami's "Artist/City" initiative, which pairs artists with spaces in different cities for a year each. Wesley's project is officially titled *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*, but he refers to it simply as The Bell.

Marooned in a vast and nearly empty strip-mall parking lot, the building is one of the kitschy "fauxdobe" huts that were once a hallmark of the fast-food brand. Images of the architectural readymade's prototypical, nostalgic, and ridiculous exterior dominate The Bell's promotional materials and press coverage, producing a sense of mystery about what might be inside. When the project opened last summer with a small suite of tondo "Burrito Paintings" (2016)—borderline abstract cross-sections of that Mexican-American fare—the willfully ham-fisted site-specificity was unexpected.

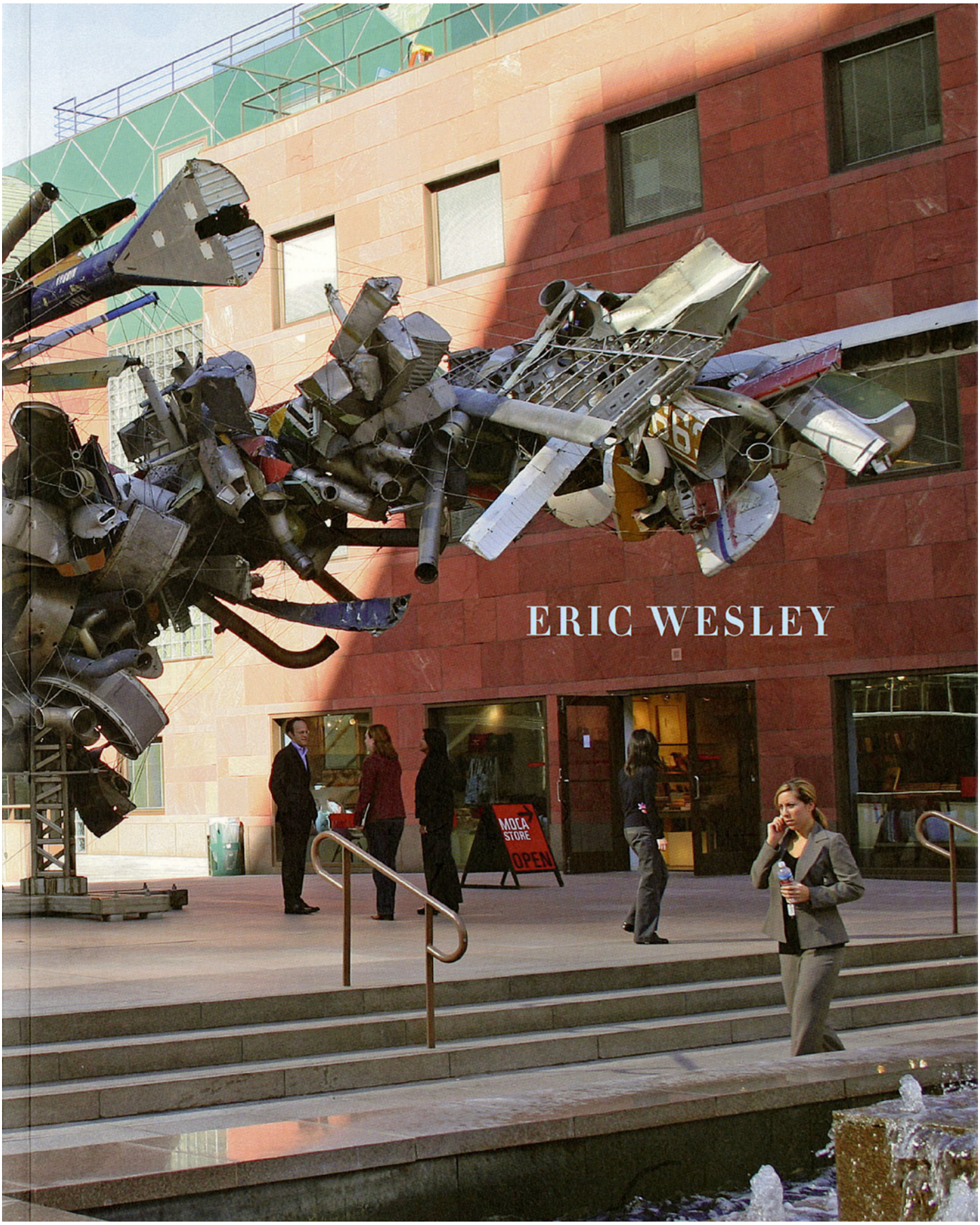
However, the "Artist/City" platform allows artists to work slowly and additively, and as Wesley's pieces accumulate The Bell is feeling less like a one-liner. Among the recent additions are his "Replacement Window" and "Establishment Corner" series (both 2016), bodies of work that duplicate and refract elements of the building and its suburban environs. Made from glass panes—some hung on walls, some laid across sawhorses, some freestanding—these sculptures reproduce the building's arched Mission Revival windows as well as trapezoidal ones on the Pizza Hut

still operating across the street. Small, bronze scale models of the two buildings (*La Belle* and *Campana [Establishment]*, both 2016) hang on thin wires from the ceiling and when viewed in the reflective surfaces of the glass works seem to hover in air. The result is a kind of fast-food Platonism, with banal landmarks of a twentieth-century commercial strip distilled into archetypal forms.

Wesley is reverent of place, but mostly insofar as the Taco Bell building represents a quintessential *non-place*. Various of his artistic transformations, like a small corn labyrinth cultivated in the grassy front lot (*Golden Maze*, 2016), a functional HVAC duct sculpture snaking across the ceiling (*Untitled [HVAC Installment 1]*, 2016), and a new bell hung in the belfry arch (*La Belle*, 2016), only subtly alter the standard features of the national chain's cookie-cutter template. Offering modifications that could be implemented at any number of interchangeable franchises, The Bell replicates the logic of its fast-food milieu while playing with its formal typologies.

Not every element of the project reinforces this modular, placeless quality, however. The converted front room (now a booth-less white-cube gallery) and the stuffed crow that provides a non sequitur in a back room (*Heseeus*, 2016) defy the building's original program. More important, The Bell's location requires most visitors to pass through a fascinating landscape (consisting of industrial complexes, levees, the strip clubs on Monsanto Avenue, and one of the only racially integrated neighborhoods on the Metro area's nearby East Side). The individual works, however, do not locate the project within that landscape or articulate a relationship to its inhabitants—they are quietly intent on being nowhere in particular. The locality feels incidental, and the project's site-specific structure feels in tension with its dominant tendency to abstract away from the particular.

Whether this tension is cultivated or simply unresolved is an open question, but such considerations of the in-person experience may be beside the point. Remote and temporary, The Bell seems destined to make its primary impact at a distance—as architectural photos, headlines, and objects displayed in conventional galleries (some pieces have already been shown at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis). Easily mistaken for a destination-art spectacle or even a social practice project, the evolving space feels most of all like a research station—a quasi-public studio where the artist is doing fieldwork with the door open.


ERIC WESLEY
MOCA
STORE
OPEN

Thesis Show

Cornelia Butler

For the last six years or so, Eric Wesley has been engaged in a raucous, performative, and often very funny kind of institutional critique that is part sculpture and part prank. His work most often takes the form of complex groupings of sculptures and drawings that document or map complicated and doggedly antiheroic interventions into institutional or urban economies that the artist finds worthy of subversion. Sometimes as light and instant as a visual pun, sometimes as serious as a science experiment, Wesley's projects are at once ambitious, whimsical, visually engaging, and weirdly handmade.

Wesley likes hovering between the playful ambiguity of a seriously heady consideration and a joke. Verbal clichés that become visual puns or sculptural riffs: this is where the artist is comfortable. What Wesley does not want to do is be conclusive. This catalogue—the artist's first—reads like a photography book, but Wesley is not a photographer. The snapshot quality of the pictures, their haphazard juxtapositions, their casualness bordering on studied informality in this part album, part club kid's photo journal cannot hide a personal

significance for the artist, in spite of the studied anonymity. All of the images circle around the idea of the thesis show. For the most part, they were made in the past year or during the course of preparing this exhibition. Inhabiting the role of amateur documentarian, Wesley shoots the project in the making. (In fact, Wesley is having a documentary made about the organization of this show.) With lens as close as Nan Goldin's, Wesley's light touch diffuses the archive of his recent art life as accompaniment to the project, what he refers to as his "thesis show." Like those in a university look book or community college brochure, the photographs are anonymous yet poignant.

The pictures offer clues. One oddly familiar image shows the artist taking a photo of himself in a bathroom mirror. The flash, of course, obliterates his face against the tiled walls behind him. We are reminded of Wolfgang Tillmans's off-kilter images or Rineke Dijkstra's candid photographs and video of the awkward vulnerability of club kids. Wesley's bathroom mirror image fits into a long history, from Brassaï's lolling dance-hall girls frolicking near the artist's reflection to Lee Friedlander's searching conceptualism, which often found the photographer in empty hotel rooms pondering the meaning of solitude and the absurdity of its representation. Wesley likes the generic and redundant quality of the bathroom self-portrait and other snapshots in this book. He chuckles with us but remains elusive behind the camera's flash. The images are part of how the artist negotiates the world. Always with his digital camera, Wesley shoots photographs that are a dime a dozen. Take the photo out of an airplane window, for example. Is he serious? And yet, perhaps it documents the first trip shepherding his work to some far away place; maybe the awe inspired by the snowy peaks below is genuine. Then again, the image also resonates with the contemporary

discourse around speed, globalism, translation, and transculturalism. With this image Wesley pokes fun at the now-familiar genre of travel photography, lazy depictions of airport ennui, and the privilege of art tourism.

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The image opposite the bathroom portrait is even more banal. It is like the throwaway shot of some disinterested inspector who missed vital information in the sterile medical office. Obliquely connected to this is the fact that Wesley is somewhat fixated, with mixed emotions, by the lawyer mom and doctor dad from *The Cosby Show*, who were the model of the rising black middle-class couple in the 1980s. These professionals—with their colorful sweaters and precocious children—represented the pinnacle of happiness and success. The tiled bathroom in the photograph represents, in some distant and abstract way, the cold white of a medical building and is juxtaposed forever in the artist's mind with the warm brown of a lawyer's paneled office. Both familiar and slightly horrifying for Wesley, these spaces are loaded with the expectations imposed on the artist as a young man.

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Fundamentally, Wesley is an artist who makes sculpture. He deplores the way his work is lauded for its touch and handmade quality, and yet he seems to love to render and tinker. His project at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), is, finally, a grouping of large objects meant to collide like elements in a riddle. The artist is interested in the branding of MOCA's three gallery spaces—Grand Avenue on Bunker Hill, The Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo, and the Pacific Design Center (PDC) in West Hollywood—as a campus of sorts. Each location functions differently in relationship to its surroundings, and the context of each is potentially everything in terms of the meaning of the work

shown. Wesley is amused by this, and it dovetails nicely with the notion of his MOCA Focus exhibition as a rendition of a thesis show (though a thesis show would typically include a group of artists); his first one-person museum exhibition becomes the culmination of the master's degree that he never got.

This work also riffs on the obsession in Los Angeles with youth and young artists as they emerge from graduate school. It is no secret that the international acclaim of Los Angeles as a hotbed of artistic talent is, in part, based on the social structure of the art school and its relationship to the economic structure of the gallery scene. Wesley is amused by this and wants to agitate the status quo as he sees it. Both part and product of this world, he also positions himself as an observer, making his way, as he is, without the conference of the golden thesis show.

It is worth mentioning Wesley's relationship to irony here. He is part of a generation of artists whose post-Pop sensibilities are sharp, honed on a diet of Marcel Duchamp and a genuine love of popular culture. For example, for the MOCA exhibition he has enshrined photographs of choice selections from his considerable collection of record albums in the same cheap acrylic boxes that also encase discarded onion rings and french fries. One might be tempted to suggest the same for the artist's impressive collection of T-shirts, which functions as a veritable archive of black music and political culture of the 1970s to the present. Wesley tracks popular culture voraciously, and his obsession is one of a genuine fan even as he adopts the role of critic in his work.

A related passion is his newly formed art school, founded with his friend and colleague Piero Golia, a conceptual artist from Naples, Italy, currently based in

Los Angeles. The Mountain School of the Arts, so named for The Mountain bar in Chinatown that serves as its primary site, is actually a program of lectures, studio crits, and semi-public gatherings for the young and restless. Wesley makes it clear that this is not part of his art practice, explaining that the school is real, whereas his art is not. This declaration by negation is typical of Wesley. As soon as meaning appears to stick, it is set into motion again. So, OK, the project is not located in the performative but rather in a genuine sentiment about what an art education should look like. Operating between something like a fabulous museum education program and a twenty-first-century salon, the Mountain School's ambitions are relatively nomadic. Wesley spends a huge amount of his time working out things like accommodations and studio space for students and coordinating visiting lecturers. Not unlike his Los Angeles colleague Andrea Zittel and her A–Z West outpost in Joshua Tree, 130 miles east of Los Angeles, Wesley is actually trying to create a new public space for discourse and, more broadly, to inscribe his own practice.

For Wesley and the generation of artists who emerged from the University of California at Los Angeles's undergraduate and graduate art programs at around the same time—Chris Beas, Liz Craft, Pentti Monkkonen, Ruby Neri, and others—a hybridized notion of community has come to stand in for the graduating class. In what might loosely be thought of as a permutation of post-studio practice, these artists construct a discourse that is simultaneously empowering and self-effacing, intellectually bold yet intentionally de-centered, and theoretically informed yet decidedly slackerish in its application. Like the miniature masses who people Wesley's junk sculpture aptly titled *Mall* (2001), these artists inhabit a landscape dotted with Michel Foucault, cigarette butts, oil paint, and

beer cans. Wesley and his friends are children of the mall—as at home in its architectural blandness as in any studio. Los Angeles is home of the mini-mall as multi-cultural agglomeration, famous for offerings ranging from art galleries and deluxe sushi bars to neighborhood dental offices and walk-in synagogues. Here new genres of contemporary art can only aspire to the moveable feast of attention-defying offerings generically doled out, block by block, in the urban/suburban sprawl of L.A. Like a riff on Donald Judd's eternal dictum for sculpture—"One thing after another"—Wesley is fond of saying "We're all just moving from one place to another."

Wesley selected MOCA's PDC space for his exhibition, attracted to it as the Westside, and newest, branch of the museum's three buildings. In the vaulted space of the PDC gallery, the artist has constructed a false floor designed out of plywood and built with the same elementary technology as that of a temporary gallery wall. Viewers are invited to walk on the platform, where they encounter two spinning discs embedded in the floor, a crashed motor scooter whose engine revs though it is anchored in place (much like Chris Burden's *The Big Wheel* [1979]), a translucent gas tank, and other seemingly disjunctive sculptural elements. If the scooter has a sculptural presence, much like the still hulk of Charles Ray's crashed car in *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997), the gas tank is Wesley's homage to painting. The tank is as thin as it can be, allowing for maximum translucency and for the beauty of the toxic liquid to shimmer as beautifully as any abstract painting. Wesley wants the smell of gas to permeate the experience of the installation.

As retrospectives often are, this "thesis show" is a constellation of both personal and collegial references. The scooter, run over by an ex-girlfriend in a fit of

rage but subsequently cleaned—its crashed state maintained meticulously by the artist like some monument to memory itself—runs periodically during the exhibition. Spinning sections of the floor reference the various pressures and expectations on artists as they enter a profession whose measures of success are elusive at best. Conceived to be a bit mystifying, this arrangement of objects and spatial experiences is typical of Wesley's sly parasitic universe of objects.

In previous works, Wesley has similarly toyed with ambition and failure. While he doesn't like to overemphasize the handmade quality of his work and resolutely states that this is a consequence of economics and nothing else, there is no question that each of his pseudo-heroic sculptural events is laden with the kind of formal and material expectation of someone who loves to tinker. The means justify the ends for Wesley and, just as his elaborate plans and drawings for projects often supersede the objects themselves, so there is a poignant obstinacy to his attempts to create whole parasitic ecosystems within the institutions he backs into. Previous projects have included, for example, a body of work exhibited as *Camper* (1999), the central element of which was a partially fictionalized trip to Alaska the artist made in a homemade camper. Occupying the gallery like a relic of the artist's own body, the sweetly lurking object was a combination living unit and prosthesis for an elaborate performative trip. Whether or not the trip was successfully completed was, in the end, beside the point. As of this writing, the artist plans to lovingly restore the motor scooter for a final ride from his studio to the museum. Again recalling Zittel's A–Z Living Units, which are also both functional and wildly impractical, Wesley's sculptural events embody the optimism of the readymade.

FEBRUARY 2017

INFINITE JEST

Jan Tumlir on Eric Wesley's *The Bell*

View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL.

ARRIVING FOR THE OPENING of Eric Wesley's survey-scale exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery 356 S. Mission Rd. in January 2015, visitors encountered a new Nissan parked at a rakish angle in the back lot, with its front doors ajar and music blaring from its speakers. That this was an artwork would surely never have occurred to many of those in attendance had it not been for the checklist, where it was designated *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, with materials given as "clear lacquer paint on Infiniti." The added finish seals the deal on the car's integrity as a sculptural proposition—an assisted readymade—and thereby advances its merely promotional claim on the infinite to the condition of an aesthetic promise, albeit one that proves decidedly ironic on reflection. As a found object that was in fact rented, the vehicle could also be seen as a monument to transience and ephemerality. After the close of the show, one had to imagine the automobile undergoing a further turn in this Duchampian game of contextual transposition, mingling inconspicuously with all the other non-art cars in the rental fleet upon return. Moreover, once replaced within its original context, Wesley's Infiniti can only be faced with steady depreciation, the fate of all uncollected cars. This is the crux of the artist's joke on the world: The infinite, the endless, the eternal are only available to us mortals as time-sensitive concepts. Yet precisely by withholding the punch line—on either side of the art/life divide, his car operates invisibly—Wesley dispatches our thoughts toward a black star of cosmic inertia.

A quasi catalogue raisonné prepared for the occasion of the 356 S. Mission Rd. show linked the works on view to the artist's past projects, detailing an evolution of thought around a consistent set of themes —concerning the history of avant-garde art, relativity, and *n*-dimensional thought. Included in its pages is the self-published book *West Camp Beans* (1999), which is described in an introductory blurb as a "travelogue recounting the artist's month-long journey from Los Angeles, California to Nine Mile, Alaska and back during the last solstice of the millennium." This was a road trip accomplished in "one dimension," as Wesley explains it—driving through shortening days toward night, and then back again, at the close of the twentieth century. It opens a paradoxical perspective on the multidimensionality of his *Infinity Project*—as well as that of his latest endeavor, which involves the repurposing of a disused Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois (just across the Mississippi River from Saint Louis), into a self-run and ideally permanent exhibition space for his art. The idea of commandeering a locale off the beaten track of the art capitals and depositing his work in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, occurred to Wesley on the Alaskan trek. And the site that he chose is no more incidental than his selection of a car named Infiniti for his LA show.

View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL. Center: *Burrito Painting #4 (Sesos)*, 2016.

THE APPROACH to the space of *The Bell*, as the work came to be known, is critical to its function: Traveling south on I-64 from the city center of Saint Louis into Illinois, one must first pass through the industrial outback of Sauget, with its hydroelectric plants, mining companies, truck stops, and strip clubs. Then one turns onto Camp Jackson Road, which cuts a wide swath through Cahokia and gives us a drive-by view of a succession of commercial outlets competing for the attention of motorists with gaudy signage. The route puts us firmly inside the "architecture of entropy," as Robert Smithson phrases it in his seminal essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (originally published in the June 1966 issue of this magazine). Here, the ostensibly eternal momentum of Zeno's arrow collides with the dismally repetitive geometry of "discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. On the inside of such places are maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion," as Smithson puts it. In other words, oblivion, not infinity, is the fate of all temporal trajectories under such conditions. Yet this entropic zone lies at the epicenter of pre-Columbian Mississippian culture; the famed earthworks known as the Cahokia Mounds loom not far away. Contemplating *The Bell* (its alternate title is *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*) in this expansive, at once pre- and posthistorical framework prompts reflection on the extent to which Wesley's work as a whole can be situated in critical relation to post-Minimalism. His road trips and car readymades recall that movement's implicit stake in a postwar culture of automotive mobility, its vehicular mappings of America's unromantic ruins.

Wesley also has a long-standing fascination with drive-in fast food, which, when seen from the perspective of art, downgrades the idea of aesthetic experience to a short-lived pleasure, closely followed by dyspeptic regret. Now we arrive at the locus of ludic abjection in his work, namely, the burrito. This openly comedic and culturally loaded trope reaches far back in Wesley's oeuvre, being traceable to a show titled "Enchilada 'The Endless Burrito,'" first presented in 2002 at the Meyer Riegger gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany. Applying a logic that undergoes diametric reversal in *The Bell*, a space of visual contemplation was there converted into one of oral consumption. A wall erected in the middle of the gallery hid a makeshift kitchen, with only a small, glory-hole-like opening connecting to the front, through which the "endless burrito" was slowly pushed and incrementally segmented off on request from hungry guests. The 356 S. Mission Rd. exhibition, for its part, featured a circular stained-glass window depicting the contents of a burrito seen as a transversal slice, and this motif was reprised in a suite of five paintings, executed in a variety of styles, finally installed in the Cahokia location. At *The Bell*, these works' culinary content becomes context-appropriate, while the offer of immediate pleasure inherent in fast food is eternalized as art, but again not without irony: This is a "golden section" alarmingly tinged with bathroom humor, at once phallic and scatological.

At *The Bell*, there is nothing to eat, though one can imagine that some part of the clientele stopping in might want to do just that. From the outside, Wesley's building, with its reassuring Mission-style design, does not immediately declare its rarefied distinction from the surrounding businesses, which include an inordinate number of chain restaurants. There is in fact another, newer Taco Bell just down the street, closer to the interstate, that is in full working order—a "straight man" doppelgänger. The first clue that Wesley's restaurant is not "straight" is an absence of signage. The bell once set into the arch that rises above the roof has gone missing. Also, the small patch of lawn extending out from its facade is now planted with rows of corn that twist disconcertingly into a maze. These exterior alterations could be overlooked, but once inside, the experience turns openly anomalous. The tables and chairs of the dining area have all been removed, and in their place are two freestanding sculptural constructions both consisting of a pair of trapezoidal glass planes, heroic in scale (just over human height), that meet at a ninety-degree angle along their straight edge and fan out on the other side as they proceed upward. Art-savvy viewers might be tempted to conjure up precedents from the West Coast Light and Space and Finish Fetish movements of the 1960s, but a glance out the window confirms the origin of these works in the design of the Pizza Hut right across the street. This franchise, in fact owned by the same parent company as Taco Bell, boasts dynamically stylized corner windows, which are here precisely reproduced in the absence of their support structure. Likewise perplexing is the appearance of the air duct above them, which is bent, unpragmatically but elegantly, into a tuba-like shape. The counters that would normally open onto the space of food preparation are neatly walled in, with three burrito paintings installed where the cashiers formerly greeted their patrons. Behind this is an empty kitchen and then another wall, sealing it off from the pantry. As in Wesley's Karlsruhe show, a small hole has been gouged, more roughly this time around, into this partition. Peering through, one makes eye contact with a crow, perched on a branch in a state of frozen vigilance. On a table near the entrance, the 356 S. Mission Rd. catalogue gives us the opportunity to retrace the steps that led up to this point: the former division of the Meyer Riegger gallery into a dining space of reception and a kitchen space of production, now including a supply room. In the terms of the complex psychosexual analogies set up so far between architecture and organism, we are here asked to travel backward from the zone of phallic extension through the testicular pump to a storehouse of genetic material. At the terminus of this passage, in an ominous showdown, we meet the logic of the gaze. The bird installed there was selected for its highly evolved sense of facial recognition, a fact emphasized in the ancient-sounding name that Wesley gave to his animal "father": *Heseeus*.

The assertive nature of the name—He-see-us—carries within it a question as to who the "he" that sees and the "us" that are seen are. Is it important to mention, in this regard, that Wesley is an artist of mixed racial background? Yes, but only on the condition that it does not come up first, as the overarching criterion for reading his work. Ideas about passing and about identity as a theatrically performed negotiation with an oppressive order (as explored in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Fred Moten, for instance) are evident in the structure of *The Bell*. Wesley's appropriation of a corporate property as a semicovert exhibition space is a gesture that points toward self-starting autonomy, and yet an awareness of perpetual surveillance is insistently factored in, precluding the possibility that this space could ever be romanticized as an aesthetic sanctuary. Further, we might begin to think of the project as playing on the opposition between integrationist and separatist ideologies, and, at the extreme, ideas about racial "purity" and fears of miscegenation.

Eric Wesley, *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, clear lacquer on Nissan Infiniti. Installation view, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo: Alexandra Noel.

SUCH ANXIOUS CONCERNS have always lurked as a subtext within Wesley's work. The clear coating on his Infiniti can be construed as a prophylactic, while the core-sample views of the "endless burrito" speak, unambiguously, to castration. As of this writing, he is at work to replace the missing bell of *The Bell* with one that makes the occluded vaginal symbolism of the original overt; once installed, it will silently peal out a call to nonconsummation.

Control over reproduction is a matter of biopolitics, perhaps its highest concern, and in Wesley's work it can be linked to a historical narrative of cultural containment. While the Cahokia Mounds stand to silently refute stereotypical views of pre-Columbian North America—that it was barely populated and had no dense settlements, grand architecture, or "advanced civilizations"—another nearby site, Ferguson, Missouri, exposes a different set of repressions and conjures other acts of historical violence, both physical and social. The 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown is an event that has barely begun to recede in public memory, and informed the controversy around Kelley Walker's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis this past autumn. *The Bell* is certainly impacted by these social developments, and yet it insists on a critical measure of distance, suggesting that the politics of representation are far too complex to be assuaged simply by making visible what was invisible, including what was excluded. For Wesley, it would seem, every stage of acceptance must be met with another round of refusals. The artist has repeatedly asserted that he wants to be both "underground" and "popular." These words are carefully chosen, suggesting a broader field of cultural engagement that could take inspiration from music, for instance, and a long line of genres from blues to techno to hip-hop that managed to smuggle marginal or subcultural content into the mainstream. For him, I believe, the tense two-sidedness of this equation is a recipe for troubling beauty, an impression corroborated by the fond nickname he gives to *The Bell*—"La Belle."

A sort of Salon des Refusés (whose precedents may be tracked through the subsequent succession of more independent minded efforts, from Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* to Donald Judd's sited galleries in Marfa), *The Bell* is at once a monument to the artist and an anti-monument, as Smithson defined it. It would appear that on Wesley's intellectual map, all of these roads converge on this Midwestern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and now, swapping one place-name for another, we can ask the question that Smithson asked of Passaic, New Jersey, almost half a century ago: Has Cahokia replaced Rome as the Eternal City? Even when posed in jest, the query's implications are serious. Wesley's desire to link the endless to the everyday via an "underground" passage that could prove to be "popular" is one that cuts to the quick of identity, of the political economy of subjective formation and its representation. As long as his *Bell* remains in operation, the seemingly intractable power lines that run between the "ones" and the "others" will provide material for aesthetic undoing, with a formal joke that will not grant to any side the privilege of the last laugh.

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell), Phase 3" is on view at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL, through May.

Jan Tumlir is a frequent contributor to Artforum.