

Gray Wiel

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David Wojnarowicz wrote in his memoir *Close to the Knives* (1991): “I also find comfort in seeing representations of my private experiences in the public environment. They need not be representations of my experiences—they can be the experiences of and by others that merely come close to my own or else disrupt the generic representations that have come to be the norm in the various medias outside my door.” London-based American artist Gray Wielbinski’s expansive practice sits well with these ambitions. With work ranging from sculpture to textile works to kinetic installation, Wielbinski addresses the nuance of power structures, gendered eroticism, historic politics, cultural queerness and subcultural architecture.

Underpinning everything Gray does is an interest in collage. Here this is not just a methodology for creating work on paper or with fabric—though Wielbinski does both those things with great success. Collage is also a way of rethinking identity—to be collaged. “I think, especially as a trans artist, to push it out of the liberal. Thinking more about embodiment in general and other ways outside of identitarian ways of thinking. I’m thinking more about power structures, and especially public and private and other ways in which bodies are controlled and policed and performed.”

This autumn is a big one for Wielbinski, who has an installation commission for the windows of Selfridges department store and a major solo show at London’s ICA. This multimedia exhibition equally addresses the aftermath of the Cold War, Looney Tunes, science fiction and college basketball. The show also explores the meeting point between two queer icons—writer Samuel R. Delany and film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Another central trope in the ICA show are references to the Cold War. At a moment when tensions with Russia have been revived, the reference is an interesting one. “I was born in 1991. Effectively when the Cold War was over. There are so many frameworks with which we talk about, like ‘you’re a ’90s kid’ or post 9/11. I’m interested in that. Of not having access to something.”

Wielbinski is prodding at the narratives that form cultural identity. “I’m interested in this idea of re-enactments and abstractions of violence. There’s this gamifying of the Cold War. What happens if you’re repeating these actions all the time? You become paranoid or you become part of that system. America also has Civil War re-enactments and this idea of acting and playing a part,” he points out.

Gray has been a presence on the London art scene for a number of years, studying at The Slade following a BA in Los Angeles. His breakout installation was a mechanical outdoor bull sculpture at Bold Tendencies, on the roof of a former carpark in Peckham. “I was thinking about how to create experience in space, the sort of spaces that have become precarious, during the effects of COVID and still now. Spaces that have been made precarious through policing or gentrification—saunas or clubs, and dark rooms, strip clubs, etc.”

That interest in space also feeds into the sculpture being exhibited at Selfridges. The piece could be defined as super-Victorian future gothic. A black patina bronze work doubling, mirroring and twinning security spikes into a kind of ghostly wreath. This is also a history reference to “deviant studies,” which predated queer research we know today. In particular, a story in an infamous book by Lord Humphries, a controversial post-war sociologist who would follow men home from cruising to discover their ‘real’ lives. “In Humphries there’s an anecdote where a man upon finding out that one of these bathrooms that he frequented to have sex was being demolished, was overcome with emotion and got a wreath, painted it black and offered it on this broken toilet like a mourning ceremony,” Gray observes. “I just thought that this was a perfect

encapsulation of a lot of the things I’m interested in—especially the emotional side of how we relate to space.”

Gray explores the erotic in public space, connecting to a historic narrative but in a very contemporary way. Interestingly, his work draws often from historic cultural explorations of male homosexuality. His studio in central London is covered with vintage paper bags from Abercrombie & Fitch and is adorned with photographs of buff male torsos shot by Bruce Weber. Reworked into paper assemblage, they still give off the atmosphere of a hot locker room. In Gray’s work, their original marketing function shifts. He taps into and succumbs to their power of enticement but shifts their purpose into a different arena. Here we consider the role of wider consumption of the sexualized male body. “They have a power to them that I’m also harnessing. It’s always an ambivalence, but I’m definitely interrogating my desire for masculinity. I am obsessed with it. I think that is something that I’m going to probably be interrogating forever.”

What is equally refreshing is the details and exactness of Gray’s trans experience—although obviously fundamental to him as a person—if not the subject matter of the work. “It’s relevant to every part of my life and my being,” but their work is more about a wider sense of being. The self reflected on to buildings, space, countries.

The artist has a sparse, abstract take on installation. References to Jenny Holzer and Félix González-Torres sit alongside airbrushed Looney Tunes logos like shooting targets, and references to the Russian and American culture wars of the last century. Yet nothing is obvious. “I like the idea of setting up a system for people in a generous way. The information is all there. Creating a game for them to play or to try and figure out or to make meaning.” There is an interactive very simplified gaming aspect to the show. “I was thinking about what is the role of the visitor or the audience in the museum and the artist and the museum itself. This meta-relationship. This linguistic relationship of home and visitor.”

Gray’s take on set design and installation is part pop, part abstraction. This is a conceptual take on a present tense, fictional possible mythic world. Where queerness is embedded into space.

It is interesting that so much of Wielbinski’s work is about his relationship to Americana, as a person no longer based there. “I think ambivalence is such a crux of my work in so many ways. These things I’m drawn to, and if not repelled by, really interested in and wanting to know why they are so ingrained in me. My education was very skewed. I went to a liberal school, whatever that means. You feel like you’re taught first and foremost to be an American. It becomes so interesting to me to see how it is about this mythmaking.” Hollywood or Texas shouting loud about what America is. Depending on your take on the country, here the cicadas either soothe you or make you scream.







