

Queer/Architectural Passing in Wrightwood 659's "About Face"

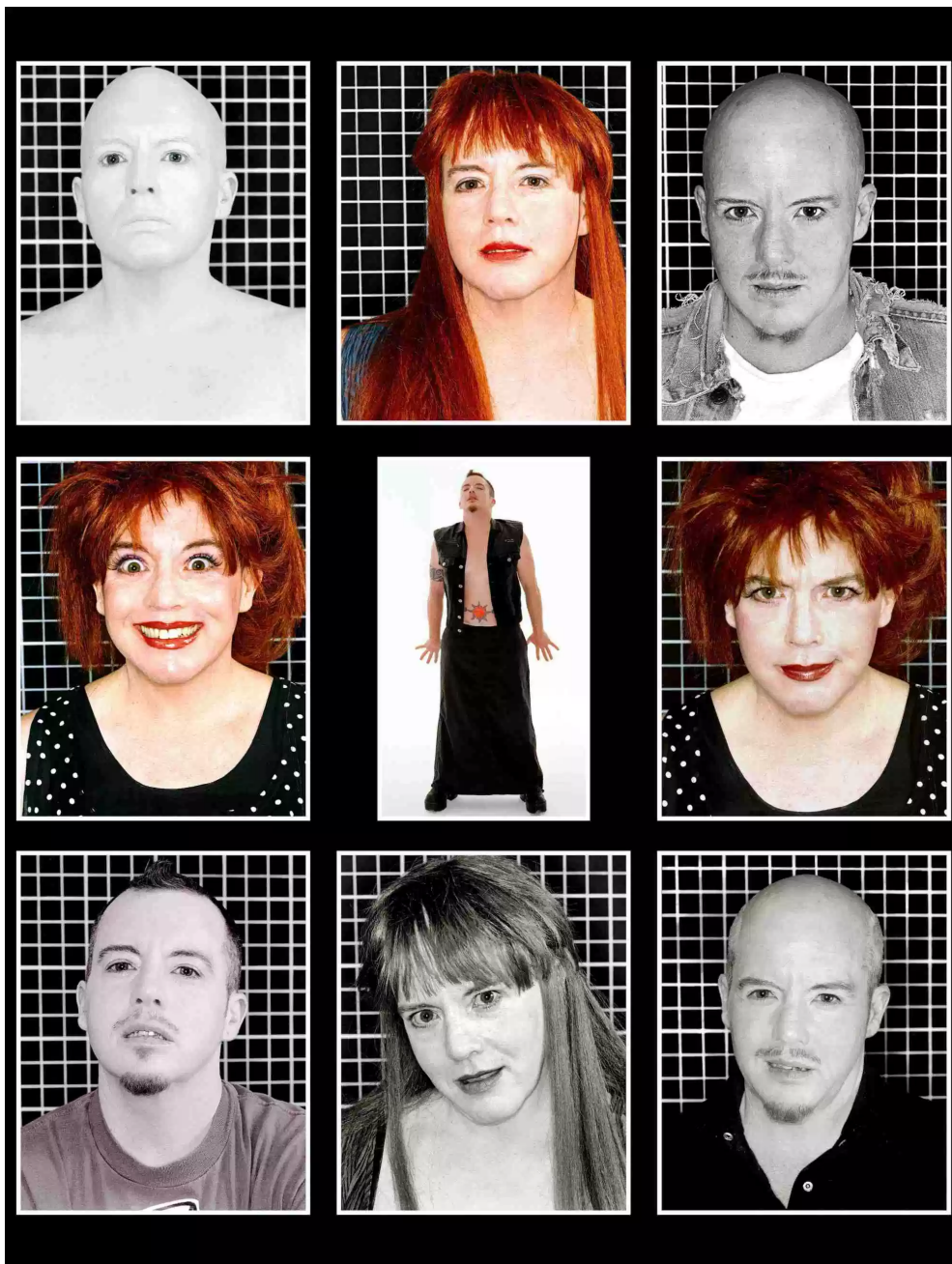
JULY 29, 2019 AT 1:00 PM BY GABRIELLE CHRISTIANSEN



Leonard Suryajaya, "Deafening Silence," Archival Inkjet Print, 2016, 40 x 50 inches/Image: courtesy of the artist

Midway through its fourth exhibition, "About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art," the Wrightwood 659 has become a permanent yet still covert fixture of Lincoln Park. Tucked between residences on Wrightwood Avenue, the Tadao Ando-designed museum opened in mid-2018, slated as an exhibition space for architecture and socially engaged artwork. "About Face" is one of several exhibitions commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riot, a symbolic beginning to the American gay rights movement. The exhibition takes Stonewall's anniversary as a point of departure, offering an intergenerational survey of queer artists who investigate, bend or wholly reject stable notions of sexuality, gender, race and personhood.

Curated by Jonathan Katz, director of the doctoral program in visual studies and a professor of global gender and sexuality studies at New York State University Buffalo, “About Face” reframes queerness as a tactic, as a way of seeing—a verb rather than a noun. Works by canonical artists such as Harmony Hammond, Gilbert & George and Keith Haring stand beside newer works by Leonard Suryajaya and Tianzhuo Chen, positioning contemporary discourse within a larger history of queer liberation movements.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "GENDER OPTIONAL: The Mutating Self Portrait," London 31st December, 1999, Giclée print, 134 x 111 inches/Image courtesy of the artist

As a self-proclaimed host for the presentation of both architectural history and social engagement, Ando's Wrightwood 659 design prompts us to consider how these two fields intersect—and in the case of the current exhibition, how queer tactics are embodied within the fabric of the art space, operating as a vehicle which reflects and supports contemporary activist discourse.

Negotiating between internal and external presentation, 659's galleries serve as a stealthily apt location for "About Face." Completed last year, the building was commissioned with the distinct goal of preserving the vintage Chicago facade of a pre-War apartment building which existed on the plot. Gutting the interior of thirty residential units while preserving the exterior shell of Chicago common brick, the design team reworked the space into four stories of steel and poured concrete. With the roof torn away for additional square footage, the fourth level contains another gallery, event space and an expansive terrace with unencumbered skyline views. Wrightwood 659 was founded by Alphawood Foundation president Fred Eychaner and architectural historian Dan Whittaker, and was the second project commissioned by Eychaner for Pritzker Prize-winning architect Ando. The first, a nondescript concrete structure next door to 659, is Eychaner's private residence (and Ando's first free-standing building design in the United States).

Creating a space which conformed to the architectural style of the surrounding buildings was always fundamental to the Wrightwood 659 project—as explained by Eychaner, "We wanted to respect the context of the mixed, residential street." And indeed, the gallery space succeeds at hiding in plain sight amongst the other pre-War buildings of Wrightwood Avenue—from the exterior, only the namesake metal address number and temporary exhibition advertisements make it identifiable.

The idea of architectural "passing" takes on new relevance in light of "About Face." In the long history of queer sociality, the concept of passing (as cisgender, as straight, as a particular race) has been a tactic of survival performed by marginalized populations as a means of evading personal and

state violence. Under the surveillance of prevailing notions of visual and social “normalcy,” the history of non-heterosexual and non-gender-conforming people is one of constant negotiation between how one looks, how one desires to look and how one is perceived as looking. Queer artists have, since before the days of Stonewall, pointed to the tensions between internal and external presentation—some exercising the right to hypervisibility, as in the public nude photography of Arthur Tress, and others working to question or obscure vision, as in Bill Jacobson’s ethereal portraits (both of which are featured in the Wrightwood’s exhibition). Using a variety of visual tactics, the works in “About Face” use the body and its sensorial capabilities in order to question how external presentation and identity work together or against each other.

In a parallel conversation between the exteriority and interiority of the architecture, 659 performs a normative aesthetic within the confines of Lincoln Park, offering socially engaged projects outside of the conspicuous housings of Loop-adjacent galleries. The architectural duality of 659 prompts a moment of reveal for the visitor—expecting an interior reflective of the early twentieth century facade, the spacious, clean modernism of Ando’s design is unanticipated. After a moment, however, Ando’s skillful unification of the two styles unveils itself—large spans of Chicago common brick can be seen from inside of the building, merging and navigating around newly poured concrete staircases. Rather than avoiding the vintage aesthetic of the facade, Ando embraces it as part of the internal structure, the two eras of architecture merging to create something that is distinctly twenty-first century, where indicators of different architectural philosophies might exist in harmony.

The act of reconciling between the external and internal realities of the space provides a meaningful physical context with which we might reflect on the works within “About Face” and on queer experiences more broadly. Often rejecting the idea that there is any singular visual indicator of a particular sexual or gender identity, the perspectives presented in the exhibition vary broadly: Del LaGrace Volcano presents images both of the aging nude body as well as a portrait of their young non-binary child, engaging the viewer with

images of non-gender conforming existence that lie on either side of young adulthood. Elsewhere, Rashayla Marie Brown creates an installation entitled “Domestication Effect (Before Olympia but after Venus),” which critiques the exoticization of work by queer black artists within art institutions. Leonard Suryajaya, raised in a traditional household in Indonesia, creates elaborate tableaux starring members of his family, who despite varying levels of disapproval in his sexuality agree to convey motifs of homoeroticism through props and poses.



Wrightwood 659 façade/Image courtesy William Zbaren

“About Face” presents hundreds of works which detail the range of human life under the LGBTQ umbrella, lives which refuse to be contained within expected and media-propagated conditions of queer visibility. The viewer is, after being confronted with the exquisite evidence of multiplicities of queerness, forced to reframe what constitutes a queer body, age, geographical location, race or style. At Wrightwood 659, bargaining between what is externally available to the eye and what lies within is not a question of physical detectability or apprehension of a hidden truth—rather, it is the nuanced relationship between presentation and identity which makes contemporary queerness boundless in its contexts, evasive in its definability, and magnificent in its variation. To question queer visibility is to call forth the stories of people from every corner of the earth and from radically different contexts—those currently fighting for the right to exist, those who pioneered the American gay rights movement at Stonewall and every queer lifetime before. As Wrightwood 659 settles into its neighborhood, the interplay between the artwork on view and Ando’s design gives us an example of how the social and the architectural might weave together, reframing our expectations of what queerness looks like. (Gabrielle Christiansen)

“About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art,” Wrightwood 659, 659 West Wrightwood, through August 10.