

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.