

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Placing Pieces of Local History in an Empty Marcel Breuer Building



The Marcel Breuer building in New Haven, currently the site of a project by Tom Burr and Bortolami Gallery (all photos by the author unless otherwise noted)

NEW HAVEN — Art has again unlocked the doors to this city's vacated Marcel Breuer building. Known for its Brutalist design that features a gaping hole where the third and fourth floors should be, the 1969 structure has survived thanks to the efforts of local activists, who got it listed on the State Register of Historic Places in 2000. While the towering executive offices still stand, the adjacent two-story wing of the former Armstrong Rubber Company and Pirelli Tire company was demolished by its new owner, Ikea, in 2003 to make room for 150 more parking spaces in front of a new store.

Since it was vacated, the building has become a talking point for many civic leaders, who fantasize about its potential uses as a destination hotel, a contemporary art museum, or an education center. But with the exception of its brief occupation in 2002 by hundreds of artists showing work in New Haven's annual city-wide open studios, the structure has remained empty for 18 years.

Until now. Thanks to the efforts of New York City's Bortolami Gallery, artist Tom Burr has created a new project that spans the entire first floor. Burr is known for his research-driven, site-responsive works that reference histories of power and access to illuminate how human bodies and buildings are sites of construction and projected desires. Titled Tom Burr/New Haven, or Body/Building, this is the third and most recent of the gallery's City/Artist initiatives, which give one artist 12 months of dedicated space and time to make and show work in an American city. Dealer Stefania Bortolami dreamed up the initiative as an alternative to the traditional gallery show, thinking, "What if you could do a long-term project that would give an artist an opportunity to explore an entire body of work?" Associate Director Emma Feinberger told *Hyperallergic*.

For Burr, the project offered a chance to return home and "lean into the autobiographical aspects of his work," said Feinberger. The artist was born in New Haven in 1963 and grew up under the visionary spell of Modernism, which saw the city attempt to increase the quality of life for residents through a government-funded building program that added highway connectors to inner-city neigh

borhoods and renovated so-called “blighted” blocks. (In fact, the effects were largely negative, and urban planners are beginning to remediate them today.) Burr lived next to renowned architect Kevin Roche, who was brought in to aid the building efforts of the time and gave the artist one of his first jobs. “He was a modernist, and my family was not,” Burr told Hyperallergic. “I loved that he only had black and white cars. In that time, Modernism was a style and lifestyle.” The romantic promise of Modernism also captured the imagination of Mayor Richard C. Lee, who embraced the urban renewal project with the goal of earning New Haven the reputation of America’s “model city.” Lee granted George F. Armstrong permission to purchase the land for his Rubber Company on the condition that he’d commission a world-renowned architect to design the structure. One year later, Breuer’s design was selected, and then built with a whopping price tag of \$7 million.

Coming into this show — which constitutes phase 1 of the yearlong project — I was eager to see how Burr would dig deeper into his past and risk placing himself in this body of visual work, perhaps by adding his own image, images of his childhood friends, or objects from his home. He has done this before in conversation and writing. In fact, in the current exhibition’s limited-edition artist book, he tells a tender story about his longing for a boy named James. In his descriptions of James, Burr recalls visits to several corner bars, including Partners nightclub, GPSCY and Ron’s Place, as well as Claes Oldenburg’s lipstick sculpture. The piece of writing confirms Burr’s intimate knowledge of New Haven, and it’s a shame those memories don’t make it into the visual work. Instead, Burr’s feelings about home are ventriloquized through a set of stand-ins, including the musician Jim Morrison, artist Anni Albers, philosopher Jean Genet, and former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. All of them have connections to New Haven, though they aren’t always explicit; without the exhibition’s press release and Tumblr page, which function as a necessary guide for the 11 new works, many of the associations might be missed.

Images of these figures populate *Body/Building*, where they’re juxtaposed with the forms of Brutalist architecture (Burr did something similar in his 2002 *Bulletin Board Series*, which also features New Haven). The most compelling part of the show is the way Burr has brilliantly staged each work in a hazardous section of the building that doesn’t meet the city’s code-compliant standards; rather than add stanchions, he has designed barriers that double as skins and frames for his art. One example is a steel railing that prevents viewers from stumbling into a shallow concrete pit; the full transcript of Jean Genet’s 1970 May Day speech given on the New Haven Green is engraved across it. As they read, viewers may notice themselves reflected in the surface, a metaphor for the way time bends, progress fails, and history often repeats itself. A few feet away, a large aluminum print of Anni Albers lies flat between two choppy sections of the building’s original tiles; in this way, her image both prevents viewers from stubbing a toe and serves as a symbol of horizontal power structures. In a far corner, a picture of Jim Morrison touching cheeks with a male bandmate while getting pulled offstage by New Haven’s police chief is tucked between a slalom of exposed pipes. The photograph flags a space of potential bodily injury and also connects poignantly with Burr’s aforementioned writing on corner bars.

Burr’s artworks here are smart and worth spending time with, but they’re also a bit slick for a homecoming. They lack the stylistic clunkiness and partial nudity of his writing; he could afford to loosen a button and add some autobiographical elements to his historical focus. Hopefully that’s what he’ll do as the show heads into its third and final phase, which is scheduled to include performance and film this fall.