

# ARTFORUM

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## 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