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Eric Wesley's quest for high-art fame leads to a Taco Bell



"Maybe I want to be famous," says Eric Wesley.

The artist slouches in a metal folding chair on the edge of a nearly vacant parking lot in Cahokia, Ill., assuming a slightly self-conscious posture. "But then ..." he exhales a trail of cigarette smoke and quickly bats it away, an LA tell, "I also reject all that."

Wesley is wearing a white T-shirt, black slacks and aviators. A black blazer is thrown over another chair. The T-shirt, a promotional item for his latest project, features a grainy photo of an old Taco Bell, low-mission architecture that once signaled something different (tacos! burritos! enchiritos!) was within. In much the same way, Wesley's presence in Cahokia, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, signals something is going on in the building behind him, that same defunct Taco Bell on the T-shirt.

What is taking place at "The Bell" (Wesley's new name for the building, duly noted on the shirt) is part studio, part art installation, and definitely a work in progress. If high-art immortality is the goal, he picked an interesting place to chase it.

"This is the first picture I took of the place," Wesley says, pointing to the shirt. The sun is sinking behind the strip mall that rings the parking lot, putting a glow on the Dollar Tree store, the payday loans place and the interior of The Bell. Its front room is painted white and hung with several of Wesley's paintings — crisp, well-defined circles depicting cross-sections of burritos. Burritos have been an occasional theme in his work, which may partly explain why he is here.

Wesley's strange trip to Cahokia began in 2015, while on a visit to St. Louis. "We passed this strip, like a mini-mall," he says. "Most of the stores were closed, but I saw this Taco Bell out front, and I said 'Awesome, look at that!' and took a cellphone picture."

When he passed by again, he saw it was for rent, and was struck by a sense of artistic purpose, and good fortune. Wesley had been thinking hard about the middle of things: Burritos, artworks, the human body, and, as a natural extension, the middle of the country. Somewhere between his home base in LA and his gallery in New York, he figured, would be an ideal spot to create ... something. He had been perusing "land for sale" ads and thinking about a retreat where he could make art, and a space that would itself become part of the art. Into this fertile creative ground fell a squat, abandoned fast-food joint by the side of the road.

Centering a new art installation around a busted Taco Bell might seem like an odd notion, or a stunt. But Wesley doesn't fit the mold of the slick pretender. He grew up in LA, the smart kid of two social workers, planning to become an aeronautical engineer. "That didn't work out," he says with a grin. Instead, his fascination with science found expression in art. He built a successful career, participating in shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art PS1. He is repped by New York's well-known Bortolami Gallery, and co-founded the Mountain School of Arts in LA, which has gained attention as an alternative training ground for young artists.

"He has a sense of humor, but he's very smart and really thoughtful," says Evan Moffitt, an assistant editor at art-world powerhouse Frieze. "And the work he has shown has been taken very seriously."

That work has encompassed a broad range of media and subject matter, including one early installation that featured an "infinite burrito" being assembled in a gallery while viewers consumed it. "Originally, it was going to be an endless cigarette," he says. That idea fizzled, so "I started looking around for something else representing this kind of linear infinity. And I thought of the burrito. And then I thought, 'Well, a cigarette is boring. It only has one thing in there. A burrito has everything.'"

The burrito, oversized, Americanized fast-food staple, carried plenty of baggage for an artist to dig into: Stereotypes and culture? Check. Hidden realities? Check. Particle physics? Um, OK. Warhol had his soup cans, after all. "There's something about the big dumb burrito," Wesley says. "It's pop culture as a gateway to a deeper reality."

"It is a bit of a chuckle," says Emma Fernberger, associate director at Bortolami Gallery. "There's something ludicrous about looking at a painting of a cross-section of a burrito. But a lot of thought goes into it."

"On the other hand," says Wesley, "I'm OK with people stopping at a certain point and not going any further with it. I mean, at a certain point, you just wanna eat a burrito."

He has a touch of the apologist in him, and so was a little nervous about asking his gallery to underwrite The Bell project. "It's a kooky idea," he says, "and they are a serious gallery." He needn't have worried.

"It was kismet, in a funny way," says Fernberger. Bortolami's new Artist/City program, launched this year, aims to pair artists with spaces around the country, paying the rent to allow them to create and show art in those locations for an entire year, rather than the highly pressurized five weeks of a New York gallery show. The intention is not art-as-charity for out-of-the-way places, but rather a practical route to artistic freedom. "When you don't have to pay crazy rent on a New York gallery space," she says, "what you get is time. Time to work without all the pressure of having to sell art."

“The more the art world grows into an edifice,” Wesley says, “the more things start to fall off the edges.” Like an artist who finds his next work is hiring a crew to hang drywall in an old Taco Bell outside St. Louis.

The Bell opened in mid-June, and so far, the reception seems cordial. “It seems really appropriate for an LA artist with a sense of humor,” says Moffitt. “It’s something I would want to see.”

Cahokia itself is slowly discovering its newest public art. The town, which shares its name with the nearby Cahokia Mounds, a state historic site preserving traces of a prehistoric civilization, is home to surviving remnants of French Colonial heritage, including Illinois’ oldest courthouse, a log structure dating to 1740. But, amid a contemporary landscape of strip malls and suburban malaise, The Bell is a welcome departure.

“Everybody loves the idea,” says Wesley. “People are like, ‘Oh, cool, art! My cousin makes art.’ “ People occasionally drift through, checking out what new life has sprung forth in the nearly dead mini-mall. Wesley has held events including debuting a corn maze planted in The Bell’s front lawn and new sculptures (inspired by the windows of the Pizza Hut across the street and the HVAC system on the roof.)

He has big plans for his year at The Bell, including more events and new work (maybe even a roof garden.) He’ll spend time working on other projects, too, including an upcoming show in Minneapolis. “I’m a slow worker,” he says, “so a lot of that may look like me staring out this window here. I have my eye on that Pizza Hut.” New bronze sculptures will feature The Bell and the Pizza Hut; the already installed window sculptures, he says, are placed to represent an intersection of future and past. “It’s about time travel,” Wesley says, wincing a little. “I know. But what can I say? There it is.

“Time travel is a conversation stopper,” he continues, tracing his own thoughts, “but it really shouldn’t be. ... It’s junk science, but it’s not. Like fast food is junk food but it’s still food, there’s still sustenance there.”

“What could be more typically American than fast food?” says Moffitt. “It’s the kind of stuff contemporary artists love, actually. It has much more relevance to mass modern life than something unattainably beautiful and refined.”

An artist’s life is no exception: “When I’m in LA,” says Wesley, catching the early evening breeze outside the doorway, “I eat burritos all the time. There is an alchemy involved, where all the elements have to be right, and in balance. For me, it’s rice, beans, meat and salsa verde. Con todo — with everything.”

It’s dinner time, and across the street, the Pizza Hut is filling up. The artist is framed for a moment in the arched windows of The Bell, straightening papers on a white Saarinen-style table. Half a mile down the road in the shadow of the highway sits a new Taco Bell, a beige box of smooth, latter-day stucco. Inside, back-lit enticements for crispy, saucy and stuffed burritos cover the walls. Straggling customers stand and gape at the signs, shuffling their feet like kids on a museum field trip. “Next?” calls the cashier, but no one steps forward. The options, it seems, are infinite.