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What Every Art Fair Needs: A Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell

"The Bell, Mannahatta," which has popped up at NADA, is artist Eric Wesley's homage to Google postmodern architecture.



Eric Wesley with *The Bell:Mannahatta*, presented by Red Bull Arts New York at NADA NY

In 2016, Eric Wesley was driving through Cahokia, an Illinois suburb just over the Mississippi River from the St. Louis Gateway Arch. His destination was the Cahokia Mounds, the site of a 13th-century Native American civilization, but he was waylaid by another monument: a forlorn 1980s Taco Bell, dormant and isolated in a strip mall parking lot.

Wesley called Bortolami, his gallery in New York, and signed a lease for the space, a low-slung standalone building across the street from a still-operational Pizza Hut. He paid less for the entire parcel of land than the median rent for an outer-borough studio. Keeping the exterior architecture largely intact, he reopened it as *The Bell*, at once a gallery space (he showed circular abstract paintings intended to evoke burrito cross-sections), a readymade work, and a year-long formalist intervention into the American psyche—a Prada Marfa but with chalupas instead of pumps.

For NADA New York this year, Wesley revisits the empire that gorditas built with *The Bell, Mannahatta*, an installation in the entry of the fair at Skylight Clarkson Square that splices the familiar architectural codes of each restaurant (Taco Bell's ersatz Mission-style kitsch, arched windows, and the modern iteration's minimalist frieze motif; Pizza Hut's cuneiform facade and Google electrical plug roof). A crucifix formed by what resembles HVAC tubing, one of which is filled with marble cake which may or may not be sliced and served with a samurai sword during the run of the fair, is suspended through it, bisecting the structure and giving it the effect of a postmodern religious altar to suburban banality and Middle American anomie.

The sculpture is ringed by three architectural scale models on Perspex pedestals: a bronzed Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, imported from the Cahokia space, and a newer addition, in aluminum, of what Wesley says is a KFC, the third entity in the Yum! Corporation trinity, but which looks more like an exploded Futurist relic, Boccioni's Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, served extra-crispy. "I like to think that postmodernism has returned from whence it came, which is architecture," Wesley told GARAGE.

Wesley is interested in how the familiar architectural cues of these chains create a national non-place, and the way laws in this country consider bodies and corporations interchangeable. There are some ideas on consuming the body of Christ at play, too, on the McDonalidization of global society, and on fast-food culture as America's primary contribution to humanity. The Bell, Mannahatta also extends the original project's look at the subsuming of Native American legacies (Taco Bell being, after all, a distinctly fast-and-loose American interpretation of ideas that predate it).

Wesley doesn't deny a fascination with semantics, however: "I thought a lot about the term 'eat your cake and have it too,' as opposed to 'have your cake and eat it too' and the differences, grammatically or semantically, and arriving at an answer of, 'eating your cake and having it too' means that there's two of something, while 'have your cake and eat it too' is just one," he pondered. The Bell, Mannahatta allows Wesley to do exactly this, both distilling and punctuating the Cahokia project's representation of complete nowhere-ness, while extending the idea to art fairs themselves, which, to Wesley, "seem kind of dessert like, kind of delicious, and short and sweet, not like a meal."

You can be excused for thinking The Bell, Mannahatta assumes an ironic, anti-capitalist pose. "My art dealer was in here and she said that this is America," Wesley said. "And I think that it can be America and the hope of a more intelligent America. It epitomizes America without the sarcastic element. The work is not sarcastic. One's read of it can be very sarcastic, I might come off sounding sarcastic, but I'm not. It's an honest, formalist sculpture, and in a way, that's the beginning and end of it. Everything else is just dessert."

He continued: "At the moment a lot of people feel like rejecting America. So if there was any political statement being made, it's more just like, relax, have a taco."