

MOUSSE



Eric Wesley, *OUCHI*, 2002

WEST SIDE STORY

by Luca Martinazzoli

Eric Wesley is a son of Los Angeles to his backbone, as he was born there in 1973, and there he has always lived. There he took his first steps, found a gallery to work with and a close friend in the person of the gallerist himself, Giovanni Intra. There he met his destiny, that of being hounded by the media, after Intra's death (which happened in 2002 in unclear circumstances) swept him away in a flood of suspicions and insinuations which still go on. Still in Los Angeles he saw his career take a leap, with his solo show at the MOCA in the spring 2006. An Ellroyan story, Eric Wesley's one, dirty and complicated; but at the end, just like in Ellroy's own biography, salvation breaks into it thanks to art. All of us that are endlessly far from L. A. restrict ourselves to support him and to visit his fall exhibition at the Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples.

Few months ago (January 15, 2007), the New York Magazine came out with a cover story on Dash Snow, restless artist that at the age of 25 finds himself having reporters clinging to him, eager to tell his dissolute life story. They want him half-naked and halfstoned. If you have a chat with those who populate the scene—big, rough, and damn beautiful metropolitan cowboys—you think that maybe they do it on purpose: they call it 'troublemaker strategy.' Parties and covers of magazines. But

the press is wicked, and the temptation to turn some figures into myths, making their borderline-living glamorous, often becomes a nightmare for those who live in a society that is terrified of junkies or just has reached the paroxysm of "private vices and public virtues." Glancing through the last catalogue published by Eric Wesley, you slide into a dimension like this. But we're in Los Angeles, and the glamour is stuck on the gloss of other magazines. He has a solo show at the MOCA; in the catalog we find a sequence of shots that portray him in his everyday life. Bedroom infested with bottles of beer and rifles. Mess. Street life and blurred snapshots full of melancholy. And the curator that writes an essay where he cooks up references to Nan Goldin. Bullshit, it's clear. Eric is in a tight spot. He plays the kid on the block, plays with a mythicized image of his person, with the media and the gossip that revel in it. And this catalog seems to be a reaction against the character created by the local rumors and by a bad story.

Let's take a step backwards, and let's try to understand why an African-American artist finds himself being so confused, torn between his own work, the market, and what people say about him. On December 17, 2002, Giovanni Intra's dead body is found. He's only 34 and the circumstances are kept hidden. On the same night, Eric Wesley's opening at the MetroPicture Gallery. His debut in New York City. His consecration.

Giovanni is Eric's gallerist in Los Angeles. And the hidden circumstances of the death suddenly turn into conjectures on the nature of their relationship. "Drugs," people say. Very well, then—drugs. It's still a mystery, but Eric is carrying the weight of conjectures on his back. Giovanni Intra was not only an art dealer, he was one of the smartest intellectuals of the art scene. He was a (very good) writer, editor for Art and Text and contributor for Semiotexte. His gallery, named China Art Objects, has changed the art geography of L. A. In a beautiful text that he wrote for the series of exhibitions titled Circles (Karlsruhe, Germany, 2001), he says: "Most days there's a lot of laughter in our gallery, and it often surrounds the perversion of the art system and our part within it." (I suggest you to recover the whole text, which is full of life and ideas.) His partner was Steve Hanson, who is still successfully running the show today. They opened in Chinatown, a district of L. A. that was first of all a movie set. A swarm of galleries followed them, creating what until a few years ago was the most interesting art district in Los Angeles. Around the China Art Objects artists like Jorge Pardo, Steven Prina and Pae White clot, together with many young artists just out of the college. At that time, Eric has already had a couple of shows at the China Art Objects. Giovanni was his mentor and his brother. But on December 17, they were not together. Eric wants to write a book, something like an investigation reportage aimed at reconstructing the facts of that story, at bringing truthfulness back, at setting off Giovanni's person. It's one of the many projects that sweep you away when you talk with Eric.

We talked about it at a bar in Echo Park. His studio is off limits; it's in a damn mess. He's working for an exhibition at the Morra Greco Foundation in Naples, and it's impossible to stay in there. The project he's working on consists in a space used both as an office and as a health spa. Two spaces, really. One in L. A. and one in Naples. However, we meet at this bar in Echo Park. The Little Joy. Hard drinks help us. I try to

make a story for this journal. He tries to make convincing stories for me. He's well-built. Monkey boots and Hawaiian shirt. A lot of military stuff. He's very 'working class hero.' The legend tells that he buys the white t-shirts and the black dickies when those he's wearing are dirty enough. Maybe. What I know is the first time I got into his car, an old Japanese purplish red pick-up, I saw that the dashboard had been removed, and the wires and resistors were frightfully uncovered. I'm not sure this is the best way to understand Eric's work, but I'm sure it can clarify his own relation with it, his investigating nature that leads him to keep removing covers and discovering workings.

He often talks about science, he's especially fascinated by the scientific process of reducing the world to categories and standards. And when I ask him what's the common ground between him and Piero Golia, whom he founded the Mountain School of Arts with, he candidly says: "Science." This enthusiasm in science also clears up the empiricism characteristic of his last works: what he wants to do is to demonstrate the correctness of certain suppositions and to explain how things work. And making art is meant as dealing with the inner nature of things rather than with the history of art.



Eric Wesley, *The Mall*, 2001

Even though he has a full knowledge of the history of art, his main references are artists like Richard Jackson and Paul McCarthy, who have always liked better to remain in the art-world's background (even if the market has never forgotten about them). To tell the truth, Eric is much more conscious of the art-system and of its market than his mentors were. But this consciousness often turns into impatience. In his works you can find pranks with a hint of grudge against society and its institutions; you can detect the paranoiac attitude of somebody who experienced— for the color of his skin, for his way of living, for Giovanni's cold dead body— how it feels to be left out. In recent times he's launched a business called FRIT ("French for fried, but pronounced like free, freed or freet"), which consists in a line of jewels that are actually

gold-plated junk foods (like french fries, onion rings, waffles). Eric intends to use the proceeds to fund the fight against the inhumane work conditions of African miners. He's looking for a partner to make it real, and—since market surveys report that the renowned Italian jeweler's art is fatally waning, especially for the lack of ideas—I hope there's somebody reading Mousse that has a finger in the pie. The reference to the issues of consumerism, fashion and race is obvious from the very first look. But this work, as well as the Mountain School of Arts, is based on the purpose to construct a complex structure that is effective and totally integrated in the system. And again his constructive spirit reveals his scientist nature. He has created his best-known work a few years ago. It's a bronze sculpture portraying the logo of Wells Fargo, the most influential finance company in the history of California. The symbol is a convoy full of securities that is pulled by six horses. Eric's reproduction is faithful, but it shows the convoy messed up/upside down, as if the horses had become restive or the Indians had launched an attack. Obviously, it hints in a mocking tone to the creaking of capitalism.

Mockery is in fact a constant element of his work. Not that kind of mockery which goes well with thoughtlessness: it's more about the beauty of failure, and the consciousness of being an artist because everything else you've tried could not be enough. This is why, I think, Eric promotes the admission to the Mountain School of Arts not only of young artists but also of people that are trapped in other professions. He's one of the few left that don't consider being an artist as a mere profession. Unfortunately, this awareness leads to disillusion, and the disillusion that his works are full.