

Thomas Crone, "A Los Angeles Artist Has Transformed an Abandoned Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois into a Temporary Gallery," *St. Louis* (July, 2016): [online]

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As artist Eric Wesley tells it, a lot of happenstance was involved in his complete, though very-much-in-progress reinterpretation of an abandoned Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois.

For starters, the Los Angeles resident had to be connected somebody with ties in St. Louis; his girlfriend, the artist Alike Cooper, was taking part in a residency program here. While visiting Cahokia Mounds, they somehow found their way onto Camp Jackson Road and noticed a forlorn Taco Bell, sitting amidst a vast expanse of strip mall parking. After running by the place another time or two, they were seemingly now drawn to the space. Eventually, they “saw it for a third time and checked it out,” Wesley says. “We saw the ‘For Lease’ sign and I immediately called. The rent was unbelievable to me, being from L.A.”

He’d looked for a space to create an off-the-grid gallery and studio in places like “Berlin and all around the world,” but decided that the old fast food location on Camp Jackson was exactly what he’d been looking for all along. Redubbed The Bell, he found support from his home base, Bortolami Gallery in New York. As it happened, timing again smiled upon him, as “I got together with my gallery and they happened to be starting a program by which artists on their roster are being given the opportunity to start a room, or space, for one year, in conjunction with the gallery.” The caveats were that these emerging spaces had to be in cities other than their own, and they weren’t to overlap territories.

As luck would have it, only one artist represented by New York’s Bortolami Gallery (yes, Wesley!) was interested in creating an art gallery within an old Taco Bell in Cahokia.

A meandering conversation with Wesley inside and outside the space is a fascinating experience, as he frequently stops to notice little things, like a frog that’s popped under the small bit of shrubbery that The Bell offers; strangely, The Bell’s predecessor offered something green in what’s otherwise a sea of asphalt. He refers to the place as “an island,” in fact, and tries to identify what this area exactly... is.

“I’m trying to get to know the land, you know,” Wesley says. “I had an interesting conversation with a city planner, in terms of this place; about what is suburbia, quasi-suburbia, pseudo-suburbia. I came to the conclusion that proper suburbia is right outside of a city; affluent, mostly well-kept, and crime is low.”

Cahokia’s not exactly all those things, at least not in the corner of the town that The Bell inhabits. Not that it’s sinister, either. Camp Jackson has that thoroughfare feel; cars pass by this semi-filled mall at a fast clip and folks generally seem on their way to somewhere else. The flip here, of course, is that an artist with worldwide experiences would root down smack dab in the middle of a parking lot in a part of town that, he’s learning, isn’t known to many St. Louisans.

Wesley’s been checking out his environs with fresh eyes and a developing sense of the history of here.

“We went to East St. Louis’ downtown and it’s so f****d, it’s unbelievable,” says Wesley with the interesting candor of someone not tied down to local niceties. “But it’s very beautiful. This one building has trees literally growing out of it. My feeling—and a lot of this is what I’ve learned from Uber drivers—is that it’s been ignored.”

Jumping on down to the road to Cahokia...

“I’m trying to understand the village of Cahokia,” Wesley says. “I’d like to study the immediate areas surrounding East St. Louis. It’s almost like I was sent here, or something. I like to think that this is seen as as a violent place. There are strip clubs around. It’s a got a seedy, underground feel. I can sum it up with a story. Things here were really a mess, and I was working and got tired, and I took a nap on the floor, on my jacket. The doors were open, and I was worried about locals coming through the door, though it could’ve been police or kids or anything. So I took the nap and wondered if anyone would approach. I heard something outside and there was a pack of dogs running through this parking lot. I was not prepared for that. Kids, gangsters, police... I can talk my way out of something with them. Dogs, you can’t do that. It was very strange. To see those dogs... that summed this place up for me.”

At times, when talking about his vision for The Bell, Wesley might fix his conversational gaze on something small. Out there in that parking expanse, for example, there are little bits of wildlife. That lone frog, for example, bounces over a tiny patch of grass and into a bush; this grabs his attention and starts him on a story. Hanging from a gutter, a small bird’s nest still has life. While Wesley imagines having a sculpture garden on the roof—including pieces made from, or referencing the HVAC that’s been pulled down—he also imagines the nest remaining there. Out front, there’s a potential corn maze, allowing for an alternative entrance to the venue. At the time of our conversation, he’d hired a farmer to plant the corn. His plans for the old freezer, well, we’ll let you get that information directly from the source.

Out of the most impractical, but entertaining, notions comes from a drainage ditch that runs along Camp Jackson. There’s a thin tunnel that connects to another such water runoff across the road. The tunnel somewhat connects The Bell to a Pizza Hut, one that he riffs about having a fascist architectural vibe; he imagines scheduling art happenings there, too. (While Taco Bell has elements of brutalism, sees The Bell, harkening back to a 1700s-era California mission church.) Not content to just program art at a functioning, low-brow pizzeria, he talked about sending kids through that tunnel, with notes for attendees, passed between the venues. It was hella funny, perhaps a bit brilliant, as were other ideas and that’s exactly the kind of freedom Wesley’s enjoying with this space.

“There’s something intertwining me to this space,” he says. “At the beginning of my career, I had some success in Europe and New York and L.A. The kind of work I do, or did, was working in a European contest; success in Europe was a goal for myself and many artists. A lot of my teachers and mentors first achieved success in Europe. Success here meaning fame and money. You know, success. I was really concentrating on Europe, showing there and New York. And I thought about six or seven years ago that I wanted to go to the middle of America. It’s known to a lesser degree now, but it’s still a really ignored contemporary art [region]. I felt that six or seven years ago there wasn’t much going on St. Louis, Chicago, the Midwest. Now, this is six or seven years back. So I researched places in Missouri, Kansas, all around, with the idea to take a trip, but a piece of land in the middle of nowhere.

“At the time,” he adds, “I could have just afforded it and that would be it. That was the plan, a mission. What happened was that I found all of these other places online and this idea kind of passed as I was working on other art projects. I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t know why. But it really came back when we found this place. We were staying in St. Louis and there was this old brick garage that I could fix up as a kind of asylum; and that wouldn’t be specific to the terminology of an asylum as a place for mentally ill people, but as a political thing, a kind of sanctuary. I was going to revisit that idea, but when I found this place, I infused the ideology of what this place is and was.”

Well, it was a Taco Bell, purveyor of affordably priced, strangely tasty, if unwholesome food.

It’s now The Bell, a playground for an artist delightfully untethered to the traditions and mores of this place.

Wesley unveils the next phase of The Bell on Saturday, July 16 with a reception from 6 to 9 p.m. The exhibit will include two new glass sculptures, “facsimiles of the trapezoidal windows of the Pizza Hut across the street, as well as a sculpture made of HVAC ducts inspired by the many ducts on the roof of the building,” which is a space Wesley would like to transform into a small sculpture garden. Future additions to The Bell will include the corn maze mentioned above, to be installed in front of the building; performances; and a “reality television show” based on the goings-on in the space.

The Bell is located at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, Illinois. Open hours are Thursday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., and by appointment. Wesley will be planning exhibits and programming for The Bell through April 2017. For more info, visit bortolamigallery.com.