

ART MARKET MONITOR

Pre-Existing Conditions in New Haven



Tom Burr is working out his hometown's social and political controversies, as well as his own personal struggle, inside the Marcel Breuer-designed, IKEA-owned, abandoned building sitting by the highway in New Haven, Connecticut. The exhibition Burr has assembled in the former Armstrong tire warehouse and executive offices is the first of Bortolami Gallery's Artist/City projects in which the gallery rents spaces in various locations around the country for artists to transform.

Burr's choice fell on his native New Haven, a locale deeply engrained in his personal history. The Breuer building, it turned out, was waiting for someone to make use of it. Regular commuters on Interstate 95 who drive by New Haven are accustomed to the sight of the imposing concrete structure hovering over the surrounding landscape like a giant Brutalist spaceship. In 1968, when the Armstrong Rubber Factory commissioned the modernist architect Marcel Breuer—a once-faculty member at Bauhaus and New Haven's own Yale—to design the building, it was positioned in a highly visible spot to be a gatepost to the city at the time of its mid-century urban renewal.

In 1988, Armstrong and its building were purchased by the Italian Pirelli Tire Company. In 2002, the edifice and the surrounding area were acquired by IKEA, which built a regional store on the site. You'd think IKEA would have an idea for repurposing the landmark structure. Alas, after chopping off large part of the building's foundation—to make room for more parking spots—IKEA left the rest intact but found no use for it.

The Breuer building was an obvious choice for Burr. It had been used and abandoned. It had passed hands. It had suffered violations and become a site of intrusions by the city's homeless and downtrodden. Burr saw the building as a body, with signs of aging, scars, and bandages he wanted to expose in the project entitled *Body/Building: Pre-Existing Conditions*.

The most painful scar is on the long wall opposite the entrance. The wall itself was transported from the far-end of the torn down warehouse to cover the opening left after the demolition. Dramatically highlighting the scar, Burr installed a narrow white banner along the length of the building ("Wide Wall Wound"), pointing to the cement seams below.

As a subversive response to the overbearing city safety codes requiring, among other things, to fence off several areas inside the building, Burr manufactured a steel protective railing with an engraved text of Jean Genet's 1970 May Day speech made in New Haven in support of the Black Panthers Party. Nearby, a print on aluminum featuring a photo of Genet is placed against the wall. Around the corner is an image of J. Edgar Hoover, the then-FBI Director who stood behind the counterintelligence program of police harassment and infiltration targeting the Panthers. Hoover is holding a big gun pointing in the direction of two bathroom doors, one of which bears a plaque that says "Gentlemen." The installation, entitled "Brutalist Bathroom," invites a long chain of associations linking the building's Brutalist style, police brutality, a decades-long campaign against homosexuals in the government, and rumors of Hoover's own homosexuality.

Another fenced remnant of a former restroom is dedicated to Genet. Aluminum prints of his photographs, as a youth and as an old man, are placed against the wall, separated by an original bathroom partition. Genet had a troubled youth, at one time making a living as a male prostitute in France. This piece harks back to Burr's earlier work addressing the demolition of public restrooms in New York in the 1980s as places of illicit homosexual encounters, to prevent the further spread of HIV. The work elevates individual struggle to a universal dimension, introducing an implicit dialog with another proponent of minimalist aesthetics in the realm of queer politics: Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

The only woman featured in the show is the artist Anni Albers, confined to the medium of textile as it was one of few disciplines females were allowed to study in her alma mater Bauhaus. Albers is referenced in two of the four patches of tiles in the space. Each of them contains a print based on a photo of her textile design. Although the two installations wittily touch upon female aspects of modernist practice, they leave one wondering why Burr could not find more women to fit his narrative.

A link between personal identity, class and professional affiliations is explored in a triptych of clothing racks with an arrangement of a white shirt, a trench coat of Burr's father—a former Yale dean, and blue shirts, respectively. With the boxes of class, gender, race, and age ticked, Burr completes his list of crucial pre-existing conditions determining the intensity of restrictions affecting human existence.

Burr's sheer effort of obtaining the space against all bureaucratic odds, to showcase its obscure architectural features by placing the associations-heavy work around them is a feat in itself. The show resonates with the irregularities of New Haven—a jumbled architectural landscape of public housing projects, mid-century modern structures, neo-gothic relics and industrial decay. Looking at the Breuer's building, a shell of its former self, one wonders how long New Haven's one-time symbolical gate will remain closed due to pre-existing conditions.

Tom Burr/New Heaven, Body/Building: Pre-Existing Conditions continues at 450 Sargent Drive, New Haven, Connecticut through November. It is open by appointment only.