

# frieze

## Tom Burr

The Pirelli Building, New Haven, USA



Tom Burr, *Body/Building (blue)*, 2017, used blue work shirts, metal clothing rack, wooden pedestal, 175 x 91 x 91 cm, installation view, Bortolami, New Haven. Courtesy: the artist and Bortolami, New York; photograph: © Jessica Smolinski

Have you ever wanted to have sex with a building? The power of some architectural spaces can inspire feelings close to rapture. Tom Burr's relationship with the Marcel Breuer-designed Pirelli Building in New Haven, Connecticut goes far beyond fetish: his site-specific project there, 'Body/Building', is a heady brew of desire, apocryphal obsession and melancholic nostalgia for the down-and-out town where he was born and raised.

Best known as the home of Yale, one of the most elite universities in the US, New Haven is a surprisingly blue-collar port town. Burr was born there in 1963, under the mayoralty of Dick Lee, a prodigious builder and lover of modernism. In 1968, Lee convinced the Armstrong Rubber Company to hire Marcel Breuer to design their corporate headquarters: an imposing seven-story concrete tower atop a long base, like a head on a recumbent body. Armstrong was bought by Pirelli, a tyre manufacturer, who later sold the building to IKEA; after demolishing its base, though, the Swedish megastore decided to set up shop next door, leaving the stripped Breuer behemoth abandoned for over 15 years. Now it casts an angular shadow onto a broad car park, abutting IKEA's garish blue and canary yellow box. It's not hard to see why Burr was drawn to the sleeping giant.

The late 1960s were a fraught time for New Haven, as for America. It's this history that drives 'Body/Building', part of Bortolami Gallery's Artist/City programme. Burr was only seven when Jean Genet delivered a May Day address on the New Haven Green in support of Black Panther Party chairman Bobby Seale, the subject of an FBI murder investigation ordered by the bureau's notorious founding director, J. Edgar Hoover. In order to open the Pirelli Building to the public, the City of New Haven required Burr to cordon off the rough edges of its naked interior with safety railings, the most prominent of which Burr has inscribed with Genet's speech, in full. His words ring true today: 'We whites are living perhaps in a liberal democracy, but the black lives, like it or

not, under a paternalistic, authoritarian, imperialistic regime.' Genet was legendary for his queer subversion of power and his fetish for domination; his face appears twice in the Pirelli Building's open-plan ground floor, printed on aluminium plates. Photographs of young and old Genet (*Bae Genet / Grey Genet*, all works 2017) rest on either side of a urinal divider, separated – or perhaps conjoined by – decades of sexual deviance.

Burr's sexological, scatological pun recurs on the other side of the space, where a photograph of Hoover inspecting a machine gun hangs beside a men's room door, ripped from its hinges. In an ironic jib, Burr has consigned to the water closet a man who concealed his sexuality from others while terrorizing his enemies for their own indiscretions. With his tommy gun cocked at the door's sign, Hoover is taking aim at us, gay men. The photo is also an ejaculatory joke: repressed J. Edgar relied on violence to get off, and so his weapon must stand in for a lesser manhood.

Like good sadomasochists, modern architects from Oscar Niemeyer to Eero Saarinen have known that tough materials can be sensual. The bulky weight of the Pirelli building's floors bear down with the dark mass of a policeman's boot heel – though that sense of pressure can feel perversely liberating, a severe aestheticism not far removed from the tactile violence of S&M.

Jim Morrison makes a cameo, too, in another photograph printed on aluminium, of a policeman dragging him offstage during The Doors' 1969 concert in New Haven (*Love me two times*). Burr has split the image in two, leaving the cop grabbing the rock star's disembodied hand in an oddly intimate freeze-frame – a tender reminiscence of Burr's boyhood crush. Morrison makes odd company with Anni Albers, whose geometric textile designs are printed on yet more aluminium panels, accompanied by a chorus of knockoff Bauhaus IKEA chairs (*Women Who Work*). On one wood-laminate seat sits a copy of *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (1993), referring to the paternalism that dogged Albers from Dessau to New Haven, consigning her to the 'woman's work' of weaving, while her husband Josef enjoyed top pay at Yale. The show includes one monumental textile: *Wide Wall Bound*, a white mesh vinyl banner that stretches across the back wall. Burr refers to the building's partial destruction as an 'amputation', but his bandage attempts to salve a wound that will never heal.

The Morrison and Albers works are both partitioned by railings whose rigid white forms reference modular sculptures by Sol Lewitt that, in turn, echo brutalist geometries. Burr cleverly conflates the kind of physical inaccessibility addressed by local codes and the lack of access Genet denounced in 1970. But if his project must accommodate diverse bodies, so too should the institutions it long represented – corporations and the state – which bear the greatest guilt for shutting them out. In a space of such personal poignancy, endowed with erotic charge, Burr's symbolic gestures reclaim and recuperate modernism's utopic aspirations from the failures of a racist and sexist past.