Don’t let them clip your tiny little insect wings

Eric Anthony Berdis

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QUEER GHOSTS & CASTOFFS

Eric Anthony Berdis and Jessica Bingham in Conversation

Jessica Bingham: Your installations and performances tend to be playful. Comical drawings, colorful sequences, and participatory performances all allude to the idea of play.

Eric Anthony Berdis: My installations are a world, an exploration through drawing and placement of objects. In this exhibition, there are figurative ghosts with their own personalities. Their spatial distances create relationships—some together, some alone. The wallpaper drawing is a repeated motif that builds up an immersive pattern of floral and figurative elements that play with the landscape. As you get closer, you see the activity happening as well, informing how one sees the sculptural work.

Nelson Goodman writes in Ways of Worldmaking, “We start, or on any occasion, with some old version or world that we have on hand and that we are stuck with until we have the determination and skill to remake it into a new one.” My materials come from my experiences: old stained t-shirts, thrift store castoffs, and craft store treasures that made their way into my world. The materials are familiar, and some, through manipulation, become unrecognizable, queer in the separation from their previous life.

JB: You draw connections to LGBTQ+ artists in some of your recent work, both living and deceased, including David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, Zoe Leonard, Félix González-Torres, to name a few.

EAB: I started the research for this exhibition at University Galleries by looking at Félix González-Torres, in particular Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA). It is an allegorical representation of his partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1991. Comprised of 175 pounds of candy, corresponding to Ross’s body weight, the work is a poem, “Go play on the railroad tracks.” Faux flowers have replaced the oranges on the shoulders of giants who fought for my previous life.

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JB: In a similar vein you recently incorporated fresh oranges in an installation, which shriveled and diminished over time. The oranges were also an ode to Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (for David), Is there a reason you use faux flowers for this exhibition instead?

EAB: There are some logistical reasons for not incorporating oranges. Although I love bugs, I doubt the gallery wanted me to attract them. The work here is inspired by Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Sunflower Sutra,” in the poem, a sunflower is found growing from the railroad tracks, covered in soot and masquerading as a piece of machinery. The poem prompted me to be aware of the ways in which we occupy. My work is inspired from the experiences from the viewers are encouraged to take a piece from the pile. The diminishing amount parallels Ross’s weight loss and suffering: González-Torres stipulated that the pile must continuously be replenished, metaphorically granting perpetual life. This representation of a ghost is beautiful, poetic. It moves me to question how other queer works would want to be represented.

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EAB: I position this work to celebrate life and death, and the impact people like Mathew Shepard had. Memories of past individuals are so complex. I challenge that we try to perform. This exhibition also closely aligns with the tragic death of Matthew Shepard. Can you talk about those personal memories and how they impacted you?

EAB: Hi, my name is Eric, my pronouns are he/him/his. Sometimes I feel more than/ themselves. Either is fine. “What is your name?” “What pronouns do you use?” These phrases are part of my everyday language, name tags, and emails. Sharing pronouns is a gift; it’s like coming out to someone every time you speak. I don’t expect everyone to share, but I do expect that everyone is treated with respect. I aim to inform folks who have a different opinion to see where I’m coming from.

JB: You don’t tiptoe around this topic in your work at all. In fact, on the “About” page of your website, you hyperlinked this question: “Do you have questions about Eric’s pronouns?” I think that’s fabulous! The link prompts visitors to “ask” your pronouns without having to be present to do so, leaving no room for uncertainty while promoting self-assertion.

EAB: I send a lot of emails, and often Eric Anthony Berdis gets shortened to Eric A. Berdis, which if you read it incorrectly is Eric…thanks, Mom! This has made for a lot of embarrassing emails. I often reply, “Loc, that was my nickname in grade school, it’s cool.” But for some queer people, they are remaining folk of their identity daily, hourly even. It weighs on the spirit, body, and mental health. So, if I’m able to subvert one person into learning about why I share my pronouns in my email, or even better, help them to consider sharing their pronouns on their email, that’s a success.

JB: You begin almost every performance by introducing yourself with your name and pronouns, and then ask participants to do the same. That could be an uncomfortable experience for some. Has anyone ever refused to share?

EAB: I think normalizing pronoun sharing is important and I want everyone I encounter to feel valued and be referred to what feels best. Sharing my pronouns is a simple gesture that helps conversations and relationships. In my performances, I am often asking someone’s pronouns with a lot going on—I’m standing on one leg, in my underwear, riding a hobby horse. So, I understand when someone doesn’t comprehend our interaction 100%. Some folks might ignore the pronoun question, so I’ll repeat it. If it’s not forgotten, I ask it again. I do my best to reply with a new formative for me to make my work through my acceptance. It’s awesome and inspiring to be able to work with students along the spectrum of queerness and allow them to hone their leadership skills, as well as connect, laugh, and gossip about Eurotopia, Pose, and Drag Races. I feel like all we did when I was in gay clubs was cry, so it’s nice to see the bright side of things!

EAB: The performances change quickly, as they are naturally responding to the environment. I try to make sure that everything is safe, even. It weighs on the spirit, body, and mental health. So, if I’m able to subvert one person into learning about why I share my pronouns in my email, or even better, help them to consider sharing their pronouns on their email, that’s a success.

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EAB: None of my work is sexy, nothing about me is sexy. My craft is highbrow and heavy-handed, my performances are uncomfortable, and I’m a little clairvoyant. The work is sometimes ambiguous, but when you observe the messages and manifestations that are too often trampled. Those works have importance, but I try to bring humor into everything I do. I try to live authentically. I am fortunate to be able to be an artist, as well as to work with queer communities as a vocation. I am truly thankful for the ghosts and passionate people who did this work before me. It’s an honor to take the baton and run on my own path.