

Strauss Bourque-LaFrance



“In The The Spring,” 2012. Exhibition View, KANSAS.

Strauss Bourque-LaFrance’s work is often driven by formal decisions, though each gesture is latent with subversive qualities. This mechanism predates his 2010 MFA thesis show, “Rotten Sun,” but these moves can be seen here—perhaps most explicitly. Thesis exhibitions that year at Tower Projects, a factory warehouse-turned-gallery in the Northern Liberties neighborhood of Philadelphia, used the size and character of the space to their advantage, of which Strauss’s work was a prime example. In a piece titled *Black Rainbow Gets a Free Ride*, three tropes (a Carl Andre-like wooden sculpture, being straddled by a black/fecal rainbow, and a 1970s gay biker hat placed conspicuously on top of the wooden sculpture) bring sobering straightforward art-historical (evoking Minimalism)/historical (evoking Stonewall) presence to a room that looks like the aftermath of a late ’80s coke-driven SoCal occult gay party gone awry.

Appropriately at the opening, a male body slow-danced to Lenny Kravitz’s “It Ain’t Over ‘till it’s Over” near a pole on the brick-covered wall of the gallery across from the deflated party tent.

Preexisting memes and those of his own creation co-mingle. Cats and magic eye posters (reminiscent of animated GIFs) are among the borrowed. Mikhail Baryshnikov (and other ballerinos), ghost faces, ghost

people, and punctuation marks developed out of his own lexicon are neither figural or literal, but function as emblems. Their message is not a direct call to action, at least not any specific action, but more to a series of actions that starts with developing new symbols and changing or expanding on the meaning of old ones. Commas (sometimes read as teardrops), slashes, and colons function similarly, as sign, or meme (within SBL'S oeuvre) but they also refer to a common language: they are punctuation marks shared and understood by a range of cultures but they all refer to the space in between two distinct points.

Provocative Feelings and Sculptures, a dance choreographed by Strauss and performed at Judson Church this past November as part of their Movement Research series, functioned like an awkward collage with moving parts:

In the beginning dancers move back and forth across the stage like ghosts, zombies, or minstrel-show dancers in slow motion. Dragging each other, carrying each other like baskets, moving back and forth across the stage with stiff and slow movements, breaking into a trot, and then back to a pointed stride, the dancers look like scared kids chasing the dark. They regain composure only for the sake of shared goals acting as a team to inspect the properties of their hands and tricking the audience—provoking applause before the performance had really ended—practicing group movement.

The acoustics and the architecture of Judson were paired perfectly with the music in the second half of the performance (the only noises in the first half are those made by the dancers' bodies)—sounding something like the music from a '70s movie about the exhumation of Cleopatra, followed by what sounds like the music playing during consummation between lovers in the last scene of a mystery romance movie. And it is while this music plays that all four dancers face the audience in summer clothes, white tees, linen pants, and ripped blue jeans, evoking yet another kind of scene—young love, summer love, a pack of teenagers bound together by an unknown breach, or a group of grown-ups, a pack of outsiders, connected by their longing for the former.

As the last song plays out, the third dancer in the lineup flashes black and white photographs—some recognizable forms, others not—adhered to cardboard, picked up one by one, on tempo, held in front of the dancers face, and presented to the audience like cue cards in a series of movements that mimic the silent, crying thrashes from the beginning of the piece making the intentions behind each, seemingly disjointed, section come full circle.

In an earlier piece, *Black Environment*, slides are projected onto a black canvas painting. Similar in tone to the ending of *Provocative Feelings and Sculptures*, the slides interchange between formless abstract paintings (painted on the slides, projected onto the painting) and androgynous self-portraits recalling Marilyn Monroe's last pictures. The formlessness of the abstractions and the subtlety of his femininity here is disarming. It is disarming in the way that harks to our most basic instincts and images—an almost prenatal craving for amoebic environments and inter-sexuality.

Provocative Feelings and Sculptures, and many of the new works shown at his recent open studio on Crosby Street in Soho seem to be about love in one way or another. It's not *cupiditas*, an insecurity of losing the object of desire, or a passion that excludes reason. Nor is it solely a *caritas* or *deus caritas est*; love of God, or a general sense of charity, but instead something in between, or something that expands out in many directions. It is a love that is based on differences, requires training and organization and evokes multiplicities. It is closer in meaning to *Agape*, the Greek word for love, which is vocational and thoughtful and passionate. This kind of love, as described by Michael Hardt, co-author of *The Empire Trilogy* in Hardt and Negri's third book in the series *The Commonwealth*, is integral to his concept of *the common*. The book addresses the "political project of instituting the common, which cuts diagonally across false alternatives—neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist—and opens a new space for politics." There is a caveat proposed in their idea of the common: not all forms of wealth [love] offer liberation. Hardt and Negri see today's practices of commonwealth as created by neoliberalism and existing only as corrupted forms, such as the nation state, the corporation and the family. It is with this last form that both SBL and Hardt see a possibility, or an opening for collective self-transformation, that starts with thinking of love as a political concept.

Hardt argues that love is destroyed by having boundaries that enclose it only within the family, or that limit it to the idea of unity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), or national or ethnic identity. And furthermore, he contends, the idea that one loves least those furthest (emotionally, geographically) away from the family causes the destruction of difference and is the kind of love (corrupted love, or evil) that spawns racism and willful negligence to global and national issues that don't directly effect us. What Strauss's work does most is to use abstract forms, materials from the everyday, symbols and icons, to map out the beginnings of a cultural language that is connected to the past (the way that queerness creates inter-generational families), but is not routed in identity politics. His work guides by example; creating yet another form of new abstraction, one that is neither purely academic or sublime. He shows us how life is

dancing, and that our movement through space, all of our decisions, have intention that relates to our person, to the political space we inhabit, that they should not be thoughtless or shameful. So when Strauss cuts two perfect ovals in a sheet of sunshine-colored vinyl and calls it *Glory*, we know that no glory hole has ever been so optimistic, but perhaps he's suggesting it should be.

Freud tells us that "[in] mourning [we mourn] not only the death of a loved person, but also the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal..." and to this Douglas Crimp, in his essay "Mourning and Militancy," asks: "Can we be allowed to include in this 'civilized' list, the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure itself rather than one stemming from sublimation?" There is a generation, for whom, the death toll of AIDS, and the lost culture of sexual possibility, have created an inherited guilt and mourning, but for something still veiled in false histories, a regressive backlash against polyamory—in favor of gay marriage instead, and a perceived safety and distance from direct harm.

Through SBL's dark thought process, his various appropriations, and the care he takes with their placement (i.e. isolated objects and forms; two heads detached from their bodies form the eyes of a nose-less face with lipstick for a mouth, or in *Think/Like/A/Man*—a bent black tower held to the wall by a framed photo of a dancer in an open-legged kneel, with matte board forming three windows—again evoking a ghost face—the borders of which block most of the dancer's torso and his face, a husband-and-wife-united sculpture mocked by ghost-face graffiti) it becomes evident that phrases like *All Ways Us Living Love, Are You In*, and *No One/No Thing to Party for/ About* are characteristic sentiments of a still-ostracized, facet of the common for whom generally accepted definitions of love and family are ill-suited at best. Some works satirize the existence of that family unit and its trappings, others seem to mourn their own exclusion from it, while a third expansive variety offer these new, albeit abstract, solutions and definitions to problems with romance, and modernism.

Crimp reminds us that the role of an emblem within a movement is mainly graphic, though the phrase or sign must rely on real information pertinent to the cause, i.e. [*silence=death*]= [*talk about sex*]. While Strauss isn't specifically looking back to that generation and reexamining the usefulness of its rhetoric, there is something he has grasped—entirely—about the importance of design and love (as an open social concept) to a movement.