SEPTEMBER 27, 2018—JANUARY 13, 2019

2018 KRANZBERG EXHIBITION SERIES

DAVID HUTSON

Memory & Desire: A Personal Exploration of Neon Art, Past and Present

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Neon light evokes a retro-futurist utopian-dystopia; Tokyo's Kabukicho district or 1950's Las Vegas rolled in with Blade Runner’s “future.” Los Angeles. Neon promises a good time to be had in the dingiest dive bars, diners, and clubs. “Go downtown,” as Petula Clark sang, “we linger on the sidewalks where the neon lights are pretty”. Neon attracts the eyes as easily as fireworks, polished to a glistening sheen, this light glides about the visual landscape untouched by mortal hand. “Let there be Neon,” Rudi Stern exclaimed, “neon is sculptural, architectural and when done right, is highly aesthetic.” Identifying this, a handful of contemporary artists like Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and Tracey Emin have explored the medium. Recognizing its cross-over appeal, Laumeier Sculpture Park’s 2018 Kranzberg series David Hutson, Memory & Desire: A Personal Exploration of Neon Art, Past and Present showcases a large-scale outdoor neon sculpture paired with Hutson’s extensive collection of reclaimed and restored vintage neon signs, alongside, and in conversation with, a diverse grouping of sculptures from his current body of work.

Known locally for his neon sign conservation efforts, this exhibition sets the stage for Hutson to communicate his philosophy of this exclusive medium mixing rare earth gases and fragile glass. “Neon has a kinetic feel, a seductive allure,” and according to Hutson, a South St. Louis native, influenced by his commercial artist father, neon is grounded in place and history. Hutson developed a fascination with neon at an early age; “As a teenager I began scouring the nooks and crannies of my home city for neon relics of a bygone era.” Part of that collection was seen at Laumeier in 1984 in the exhibition Neon 1-2-3 when he was just 17. Since then, his budding fascination became a passion that led to an expanded collection and countless hours devoted to the painstaking fabrication process, he deepened his bond to neon, testing both concepts and technique.

While popular interest in neon seems to rise and fall like a roller coaster, Hutson’s dedication and curiosity to the art form is unwavering and this is apparent in his own art practice. For Hutson, the words “memory” and “desire” resonate deeply within the work and have become the catalyst for the concepts forming the exhibition. “For so many people, vintage neon evokes strong feelings of nostalgia. It rekindles fond memories of childhood; an apparently ‘simpler’ or less complex life,” notes Hutson.

Hutson’s “tube bending” also casts a cool glow in the Park. Sited on a towering tree in Laumeier’s Way Field, Hutson creates a significant text-based artwork that wraps around a trunk, cascading a quote from The Mad Farmer’s Poems by celebrated American novelist Wendell Berry: “WHEN I RISE UP TO THE TOP OF THE TRUNK, I CASCADING A QUOTE FROM The Mad Farmer’s Poems...” By presenting these two practices simultaneously, the exhibition illuminates spectacle, lays out the precise combination of decoration and messaging and highlights Hutson’s exploration of his sculptural practice using a material that moves like luminous, science-fantasy.

Hutson’s exhibition is local, like Laumeier, and goes straight to the uniqueness of our collection and our civic landscape, heightens our ways of looking, interacting and understanding. Hutson is an oddity in his choice of material as he continues to make new work that expresses neon’s power. Exhibiting this work in parallel to reclaimed lighting highlights Hutson’s desire to showcase the evolution, continued relevance and impact of neon art.

Neon is electric, it must be plugged in, and for Hutson, that’s a limitation and a welcome challenge. Hutson’s project is inextricably tied-up with inspiration, more specifically a representation of our local and regional creativity. Hutchson’s exhibition over past and represents a possible future, simultaneously.

Dana Turkovic, Curator

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

David Hutson is a neon artist with a specialization in theater production. He has exhibited his artwork nationally and is a consultant for internationally renowned theatrical productions. Hutson lectures extensively about his collection of restored vintage neon signs and serves on numerous historic preservation commissions with a focus on the care and maintenance of objects related to Historic Route 66. Hutson is a key member of the Neon Heritage Preservation Committee of the Route 66 Association of Missouri. Hutson lives in St. Louis, Missouri and owns Neon Time in St. Charles, Missouri where he creates his own work and restores neon signs.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

COFFEE + CONVERSATION
Saturday, December 8, 2018 / 11:00 a.m.
Join David Hutson in conversation with local artist Bill Christman.

COFFEE + CONVERSATION
Saturday, January 12, 2019 / 11:00 a.m.
Join artist David Hutson for a lecture on the history of neon in St. Louis.