

Bold Tendencies 2022 Q&A with Gray Wielebinski

To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?

I grew up in Dallas, Texas and moved to Southern California to study at Pomona College. I then moved to London in 2016 to receive my MFA at the Slade. My work is preoccupied with power, taking it seriously and toying with it. The main way I do this is through storytelling, mythmaking, and world-building, which can allow for new ways of seeing and questioning what we take for granted to be fact and fiction. An ongoing practice of questioning the power structures of storytelling—both historically and contemporaneously—can force us to see ourselves and the world around us differently.

Growing up between the American cities of Dallas, Texas and Los Angeles, California — and now working and living between L.A. and London — how has this mixture of settings influenced your interests and practice?

I explored my relationship to the first two cities, Dallas and LA, in my solo show at Hales Gallery last year called *Oil and Water*, for which I used two natural resources—the mining of oil in Texas and the syphoning of water from the valleys in California to Los Angeles—as a starting point. Both of these cities were both built on a type of “original sin” that continues to live on physically, psychically and aesthetically in the cities themselves. There are parallels to the United States’ broader and deeper history of violence beginning with stolen land, genocide and slavery, cycles of violence that repeat because of our inability to sufficiently reckon with this part of our identity. Since moving to London almost 6 years ago, it has been eye-opening to see the U.S. with distance and ambivalence. It's been life-altering to be influenced and taken in by a new culture and community in the UK, and to observe the parallels and the divergences in the way the UK deals with its own histories and mythologies.

A central motif in your work is the question of mythology, and how gender, sexuality and performance intersect with other structures of power and identity. When did the

subject of mythology first become so important to you and why?

I was a really media obsessed kid, and brought that with me into adulthood and into my practice. My particular relationship to power dynamics, performance, myth making and identity is informed by and in response to growing up in the United States, and the particular region of Texas, which is steeped in recent history and is in a constant state of self-mythologising. I think, in part, one element of my work could be seen as trying to see and know myself as clearly as I can, warts and all (especially the warts), which includes where I've come from and what I've both been explicitly taught and what blindspots I am afforded in terms of what I take for granted to be true. My practice is part of what I hope will be a life-long process of peeling layers back, shifting perspectives, experiencing the myriad emotions that come with being wrong but finding out other truths in the process. This includes hopefully becoming a better audience to others when they are generous enough to show me their realities.

In previous works, you have focused this interest on areas such as sports, celebrity culture or cinema, referencing to the body language of baseball cards to science-fiction stories such as *Frankenstein* or *Solaris*, all the way to Akkadian myths about "Scorpion men". What is the driving force behind how you select and pursue certain subjects?

Combining and collaging different forms of art and narrative has always been very central to my work, both conceptually and materially. There's a tendency to ascribe hierarchies to different sources of media, particularly in the fine art world, and this can also influence how we make assumptions about what we learn from a certain story or work of art. It can be hard to approach pop culture with much criticality, precisely because of our lack of distance from it, so I find it really interesting to implicate myself and my worldview in a way that makes it just as precarious and vulnerable as any other.

Your new commission for Bold Tendencies 2022 is called *Pain and Glory*. Can you briefly describe the physical piece and its different elements?

The piece centres around a fully operational mechanical bull. It is enclosed within a tall steel fence patterned with spherical holes and coloured panels, adorned with spurs and butt plugs.

Everyone is welcome to ride the bull—it's slow enough that one can choose to ride without being thrown off—but watching from the outside as spectators is an equally important way of participating. There is an audio element to the piece, which consists of tracks I commissioned by the musicians TWEAKS and SONIKKU. The music is audible to spectators but, when you're actually riding the bull, fades into the distance.

Animals are something that have featured throughout your work, whether in the form of the “Sphinx-Scorpion figure” for your 2019 show, *Dark Air* — or more recently, the horse, for your recent solo exhibition at Hales Gallery. What do you find so powerful about using animals to explore mythology and our shifting relationships to the world — and why the bull?

The animal world has an integral role in all sorts of forms of mythmaking and identity construction, from ancient mythology, poetry, fables, fairy tales, national iconography, and propaganda to advertising, art, and fashion. Looking closely at these representations of animals tells us a lot about cultural desires and fears, especially by recognizing the difference between these anthropomorphised or metaphorical depictions of animals and the wild. There's so much about the animal world that we have no way of accessing and our impulse is to project meaning or map ourselves onto them, but I'm interested in sitting with the discomfort of what we can't know. There's awe and mystery to be found in knowing there will always be things that aren't for us, that aren't meant to be dominated or mastered or even wholly recognisable, and there are always myriad other realities and ways of being that coexist alongside us.

The second element I would like to ask about is the steel fencing and coloured panels. It is here that the contradiction between pleasure and danger, allure and control are most evocative. Which ideas and feelings were present for you during its design?

The piece as a whole is inspired by sensual underground spaces like clubs, bars, porn theatres, toilets—sites of cruising and intimacy. The holes in the fence speak to ideas of voyeurism, including the frustrated voyeurism that comes when your view is partially obscured. At the same time, they're meant to resemble glory holes, and in that sense evoke anonymous sex and the fragmentation of the body and the gaze. Choosing the

right colours for the panelling was extremely important. The shades of deep red and bright yellow recall bodily fluids, whereas the very pale blue is serene, like a swimming pool.

As your first public sculpture, how did this aspect of the work contribute to your conception of the piece? It is clear this has taken a significant place in your thoughts, not only in its physical interactivity but in how it evokes and plays with different ideas of who and where a public is or can be.

I was very conscious of the ways that Covid-19 has curtailed public life and particular forms of intimacy with strangers. In many ways, the pandemic has compounded the closures of bars, clubs, and other spaces that was already being fueled by gentrification and the policing of queer intimacy. I wanted the piece to represent that loss, while being a seductive, playful invitation to cruise, to perform, to watch each other, and to inhabit space in an intimate way.

The sculpture also features an original soundscape that was made specially for the piece. Can you tell us a bit more about the sonic element and what ideas went into its creation?

When commissioning the tracks, I told TWEAKS and SONIKKU that I wanted to summon that haunted feeling of an empty bar or club at the beginning or the very end of the night. I wanted there to be a hint of the upbeat euphoria of a dancefloor, but kind of distant and submerged, like a memory. I was honestly blown away by how both artists realised this vision, in quite different ways. The audio creates this really intense atmosphere that's also subdued in a way, because of the tracks themselves and because they are quiet enough to merge with the open-air soundscape of the rooftop.

Building on what you have said so far, how do you think about your new commission in relation to the programme theme of Love?

Spaces designed for fleeting, anonymous intimacy might not seem to have an obvious connection to love—in fact, they are often contrasted *against* love, the kind that takes place in monogamous coupledness or the family. But I'm invested in seeing these more ephemeral forms of intimacy as having an important relation to love. In making this mechanical bull, I was also thinking about the paradox of our desire to tame and

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control the things we love, a desire we can never really fulfil. I think there's a parallel to the way that humans domesticate and anthropomorphise animals, rather than letting them be the radically unknown beings that they actually are. I think the vulnerability of riding the bull, of exposing yourself to the gaze of others and of being moved in different directions by this machine, has an interesting connection to the experience of love.

What have you got planned for the rest of the year — are there any special projects in the pipeline?

I'll be publishing my first artist book with Baron Books this autumn and have some projects coming up in New York and Los Angeles which I'm looking forward to.