

HYPERALLERGIC

A 1,900-Pound Sculpture Pushed Through the Streets of Omaha, in Tribute to Its LGBTQ History

By: Karen Emenhiser-Harris

The solemn, four-hour procession closed out an exhibition by Cassils at the Bemis Center.

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Cassils, "Monument Push" performance stills, 2017 (photos by John Ficenec; all images courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art, NY)

OMAHA — Brute physicality and fugitive imagery lie within the heart of *Phantom Revenant*, a solo exhibition at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art that was bookended by two performances by Cassils, a gender-nonconforming artist and 2017 Guggenheim Fellow based in Los Angeles.

The exhibition came to a solemn conclusion on a drab and rainy April 29 as passersby in Omaha, Nebraska, witnessed a slow-moving and mostly silent procession of about 70 people. At its front, a 600-pound cart bearing a 1,300-pound bronze sculpture was, in a group effort, arduously pushed, pulled, thrust, and jimmied over the cracked sidewalks and buckled cobblestones of the city's Old Market neighborhood. Beginning at the Bemis Center, which organized the exhibition and performances, the four-hour procession stopped at six preselected locations for a quiet pause or short address by members of and advocates for the local LGBTQ community.

This was the world premiere of "Monument Push," the newest work by Cassils, a performance artist known for radically transforming their own body through rigorous, drug-free physical training in an exploration of identities unbounded by the rigid male/female binary. To create this piece, Cassils worked with Bemis curator Alex Priest and Omaha community members for six months, choosing the sites and acquiring the legal permits. The work performs a similar transformation upon the hidden and marginalized history of each chosen location along the 1.5-mile route, monumentalizing its symbolic import in a tribute to community resilience.



Cassils, “Monument Push” performance still, 2017 (photo by John Ficenec)

Some of the sites chosen marked locations of violence, such as the street where a 2013 gay-related hate crime took place and the Douglas County Correctional Center, where incarcerated queer youth are often placed in solitary confinement — allegedly for their own protection. One of the most moving moments of the procession came when the crowd gathered in front of the center and Dominique Morgan, a local social activist, R&B artist, and recipient of the NAACP Freedom Fighter Award, took a break from pushing to softly perform a song he had written while confined there in his youth. When he raised his voice for the refrain, it echoed off the walls of the center, amplifying his personal pain and trauma. Other sites marked points of resistance and celebration, such as the street where Omaha’s first gay pride parade took place in 1985.

The approximately 54” sculpture at the center of “Monument Push” is “The Resistance of the 20%” (2016), the title of which refers to a 2012 statistic concerning the 20% increase in the murder rate of trans people. The piece, which is wide at the base and tapers toward the top, is roughly reminiscent of an obelisk, that most ancient of monuments, but its entire surface records the imprints of

fists, knees, elbows, and feet: evidence of a furious and thorough beating. As I took my turn helping to push the 1,900-pound mass, I struggled not only against its weight, but to somehow gain purchase, to fit my own hand into the jagged imprints of that violence. It was a brief test of my own endurance and a profound experience of empathy.



Cassils, “Monument Push” performance stills, 2017 (photo by John Ficenec)

The beaten form of the sculpture was directly tied to the opening performance of *Phantom Revenant*. This was “Becoming an Image,” Cassils’s 14th performance of their now-acclaimed work. As with previous iterations, viewers were brought into a pitch-dark room and instructed to wait silently. Cassils soon entered along with a photographer — both as blinded by the dark as the audience. Suddenly, loud smacking sounds resounded as the artist began to furiously pummel a 2,000-pound clay block that had been placed in the center of the room. Grunts and heavy breathing were recorded. The camera flashed, momentarily illuminating the arresting sight of a large monolithic form under fierce attack by the ambiguously sexed, powerfully muscled, nude artist. The ruthless pounding continued, intermittently lit by flashes of light that burned the image, quite

literally, into the retinas of the crowd. The sporadic flashes provided the only light and the only record of the artist's performance, while the searing images implicated the viewers as witnesses. After 25 minutes, the clay monolith had been reduced to a formless mass and the performance concluded.

A few days later, I visited the room where the remains, as it were, lay under a dim spotlight, the clay still moist. A soundtrack of Cassils's breathing and the aural impact of body on clay looped loudly in the background, accompanied subtly by the pulsing of a disembodied heartbeat. Layered with the sounds of violence, a sense of defeat and vulnerability permeated the space. After a 2013 performance of "Becoming an Image," a similar clay remnant was cast into bronze. "Monument Push" marked its first public display.

The blunt materiality of fists and metal, the sculpting of both clay and flesh — these are the primitive tools and techniques employed by the artist to make manifest a global history of violence and trauma. In a brief interview, Cassils told Hyperallergic, "My use of boxing and bodybuilding queer my knowledge of physiology, body mechanics, and nutrition to express ideas about gender and blur the lines of what is possible." Given the plasticity of the body, the work speaks to the construction of identity. Cassils traces their interest in this back to 2003, when they were working as a trainer in Los Angeles with B actors who needed to look like soldiers in six weeks. "It became my job to construct the physicality or image of militarism on a body that had nothing to do with that but that represented its symbolic gesture," Cassils said.



"Becoming an Image," performance still, 2017 (photo by Cassils with Bill Sitzmann)



"Becoming an Image," performance still, 2017 (photo by Cassils with Bill Sitzmann)

Cassils's interrogation of the mediated image is paramount to their work and could also be seen in a six-channel video installation, "The Powers That Be" (2015–17), a juxtaposition of LA's industrial production of imagery with amateur videos. Cassils worked with a Hollywood fight choreographer to simulate a brutally eerie match, lit only by car headlights, between themselves and a phantom opponent. Cellphone videos made by members of the audience provide the only record of the performance, once again calling attention to the role of the viewer as witness.

That act of bearing witness, particularly to the staging of today's political reality, couldn't be more timely, particularly here in Omaha. "In the current sociopolitical climate, it is amazing to be asked to do this piece in the Midwest," Cassils said. "It is even more powerful here than in NY or LA. There was a women's march here — a huge women's march — and there is resistance here, and there is critical thinking here. The willingness to support this project is probably greater here than it would be in larger cities right now, and I think that is pretty wonderful."



"Resilience of the 20%" (2016), cast-based clay remnant from "Becoming an Image" performance, 1,300 pounds of bronze, 40 x 36 x 54 in

Phantom Revenant was on view at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (724 S. 12th Street, Omaha) through April 29.