

Time Out

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Next Pretty Boy

Twentieth century box

Tom Burr recalls the good old days when Modernism was modern.

By Anne Wehr

The art world's places to see and be seen come and go: Cedar Tavern, Judson Memorial Church, the Mudd Club, Bungalow 8 and...Hartford, Connecticut? Back in the 1930s, the young director of the city's venerable museum, the Wadsworth Atheneum, transformed the nation's insurance capital into an unlikely social scene and far-flung fulcrum of modern art. A flamboyant dandy named A. Everett Austin Jr.—and known by all as Chick—stocked the Atheneum's stately galleries with some of the era's hottest, most challenging works, straight from the studios of Picasso and Miró. He kept the old-world museum trustees on their toes with a constant stream of avant-garde theater, music and film, and even hosted the international premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, an opera

with a libretto by Gertrude Stein and music by Virgil Thomson. Chick Austin knew everyone worth knowing, and when he threw a party, it was a must-attend event—even though it meant venturing beyond New York City limits.

"It was this experimental moment," says artist Tom Burr, who uses Austin as the departure point for "Addict-Love," his new series of mixed-media works at SculptureCenter. "Things were shown up in Hartford even before they were shown in New York City." (Perhaps it's no coincidence Burr became interested in Austin after his 2002 move to a Connecticut farmhouse, where he now works and spends much of his time.) Burr—whose own work centers on the human dimension of art, architecture, objects and public space—considers the cocktail-party shenanigans of artists and curators just as critical as the artwork itself. "I'm interested in that Brigadoon thing," he continues. "How something can be a cultural moment and then absolutely

disappear. And how personal relationships and affinities shape how art history is written."

Burr should know. Throughout the 1990s, he exhibited regularly at American Fine Arts, Colin de Land's unorthodox and legendary-in-its-own-time Soho gallery where artists like Jessica Stockholder, Cady Noland, Mark Dion and Mariko Mori also got their start. For his shows there, Burr created theatrical and elegiac installations that layered personal and social meaning atop pared-down Minimalistic forms—as in "42nd Street Structures," a 1995 exhibition of bare-bones wooden objects that paid homage to the neighborhood's already-vanishing landscape of peep-show booths and seedy movie theaters. "I started in the '80s when there was a lot of talk about images, the figure, AIDS and feminism," Burr recalls. "I was also interested in such things, but not in imaging them. So I used containers and structures instead."

For "Addict-Love," Burr ventures even further back into art history,

creating a series of abstract tableaux that address—albeit obliquely—the powerful personalities that made the mid-20th century modern. In conversation, he vigorously zigzags among various topics, cultural moments and art-historical movements with rapid-fire ease, so it's not surprising that he seems drawn to luminaries who made their names working in several different genres simultaneously. In addition to Austin, *International Man of Modernism*, Burr's pieces incorporate references to Gertrude Stein, composer Kurt Weill and poet and MoMA curator Frank O'Hara. (The show bears the name of one of O'Hara's poems). "Tom's works suggest that being modern is less about an historical moment than it is an existential condition," says Mary Cerutti, director of the SculptureCenter. "They suggest a sense of fragmented identity."

"I'm interested in how a cultural moment can disappear."

Made of painted plywood, industrial materials and a tantalizing array of found objects (vinyl records, old dresses, books, a psychiatric couch, red velvet curtains, ashtrays), the sculptures resemble stages, props and, at times, human figures. A trio of works that Burr describes as "the cocktail party" is part of a recent series of folding, hinged sculptures that are abstract yet have a distinctly figurative association, helped by titles like *Next Pretty Boy* (2007). "In making these objects, I thought about Disney's *Fantasia*, where the broom comes to life and starts to dance, or maybe Robert Ryman paintings or early Frank Stella's that jump off the wall after the museum is shut down at night."

Just as Chick Austin promoted performance art, Burr will give this exhibition its own element of live action with a reading and musical series on March 8 called "Sculpture in a Constricted Space & Other Stories." Burr hopes that when taken together, "Addict-Love" will create its own "Brigadoon thing"—only without having to leave the five boroughs to experience it.

Tom Burr's "Addict-Love" is on view Sunday 13 through March 30 at SculptureCenter (see Elsewhere).