

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



A Performance Project That Brings Some Mystery to the Glass House

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The artist partners Brennan Gerard (left) and Ryan Kelly, whose new work “Modern Living” will be performed at Philip Johnson’s Glass House in Connecticut this weekend.

Forget throwing stones: A more pressing concern, for those who live in glass houses, is that it’s impossible to hide in them. Or is it? The Glass House, the architect Philip Johnson’s sprawling 49-acre New Canaan, Conn., estate and titular Modernist building comprising 1,800 square feet of four-walled, floor-to-ceiling clear glass, famously plays with the boundary between voyeurism and hiding in plain sight — a function tangled up in Johnson’s homosexuality.

“The closet is a very complex mechanism. Now we believe that everyone should be out. But it’s a dialectic — in a way, it protected something,” says Brennan Gerard, one-half of the performance and art duo Gerard & Kelly. The second installment of their performance piece “Modern Living,” co-produced by Art Production Fund, arrives at the Glass House this Friday and Saturday. “We were thinking about how the house sheltered and protected a queer subculture — mostly gay men and mostly artists, who weren’t totally out,” Gerard explains.

Ryan Kelly chimes in: “Johnson talks a lot about the ‘wish to be caught’ — that’s definitely been inspiring, the way the box is an invitation of voyeurism.” The Glass House, a leisurely residence for Johnson and his partner David Whitney, became a retreat of gay society soirees, and it’s still astonishing how the compound’s neighbors remained oblivious to the libertine carousing next door. But that may have been Glass’s intention all along, as Gerard explains: “The more time I spent in that space, I realized that the glass served to reflect, from the outside. As much as it’s transparent, there are moments in the day where it’s literally opaque. And this piece, in many ways, is a way of moving forward by looking back.”

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A dancer from Benjamin Millepied's L.A. Dance Project rehearses "Modern Living" at the Glass House.

The costumes, too, engage with the complexities of Johnson's life and work. The duo enlisted Uri Minkoff to create nine dark, uniform-like suits "in a fun, fetishistic way, but also a fascistic way," Kelly says, evoking Johnson's turn to the extreme right — including time spent in Germany during the Third Reich, a detail often glossed over in his popular lore. "It was not without risk for us or the curators for a project to deal with queer and politically problematic issues of Johnson," Kelly says.

This weekend's performance piece is the second in a series that debuted in January at Los Angeles's Schindler House — a 1921 construction that, like the Glass House, subverts the traditional domestic expectations of "home." (The Schindler House was built to accommodate two families who shared common space.) At the core of "Modern Living," Gerard says, is "looking to Modernist sites and reframing them as queer sites, and asking what they might be in terms of ruins. The function of so much domestic architecture is towards biological reproduction." Kelly elaborates: "This is why we made the project — how do you live queerly? Meaning not giving into convention." In preparation for the project, the duo lived in the Marcel Breuer House at Pocantico Hills as part of a residency that allowed them to delve further into their inquiry of queer domesticity. "Ryan and I lived there for two weeks — you can really feel the specter of the nuclear family, the space is highly gendered," Gerard says. ("We were traumatized," Kelly says of the house plan.)

Intimacy and the transmission of cultural history are at the forefront of Gerard & Kelly's practice, which exists mostly in performance but extends into dance, video and text. This time around, with nine professional dancers — a first for the duo — borrowed from Benjamin Millepied's L.A. Dance Project, the piece "distills this idea of relationships into ideas of rhythm, and then how rhythms interact with others, falling in and out of space," Gerard says. There's a looping quality to the work that Kelly compares to a GIF: "We were interested in the pleasure of synchronization, and asynchronization," he says. "There's a lot of layering, as a spectator you have to make choices about what you want to see, though you always have a sense or are aware of what's going behind you."