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The Art World Gets Political—And Wet—At the Annual Art Production Fund

By Stephanie Eckardt | March 14, 2017



L to R: Cleo Wade and Stacey Bendet at the Art Production Fund's 2017 Bright Lights, Big City Gala at the Landmark Rooms, formerly the Four Seasons restaurant.

Though it was bustling with A-listers for over half of a century, the Four Seasons restaurant in New York's Seagram Building has laid almost entirely dormant in recent months, having closed its doors and forced its elite list of regulars to head elsewhere for their power lunches. On Monday night, though, the space came back to life with a splash—literally—when three men and one woman found their way into the pool at its center and stomped around sans shirts in front of dozens of well-dressed diners, who reacted to the space's sudden resurrection with complete silence.

It was just another memorable moment at the Art Production Fund's annual gala, a benefit for the arts nonprofit that's not exactly known for playing by the rules. While last year it coerced the likes of Ryan McGinley into—gasp—making the trek uptown, it didn't have nearly as much trouble convincing a crowd including Huma Abedin, Nicky Hilton Rothschild, and Inez & Vinoodh to preview the former Four Seasons before it officially opens up as the Landmark Rooms next month. Indeed, art-world names like Dustin Yellin and Klaus Biesenbach already flounced around like they owned the place (even though the latter comfortably showed up nearly four hours late).

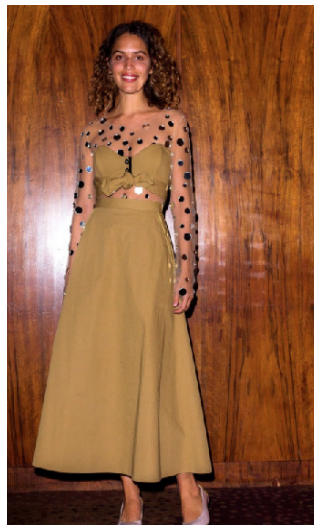
Missing, however, was Miuccia Prada—despite the fact that, along with the artists Elmgreen & Dragset, she was the night's honoree. Her schedule may have gotten in the way this time around, but the designer definitely came through back in 2005, when she handpicked 40 pairs of shoes and six handbags for the European duo, which they then placed in the middle of the desert near Marfa, Texas and, with funding from APF, transformed into a standalone time capsule of an installation that's not only weathered the past 11 years, but attracted the likes of Beyoncé.

“Both are still supporting art in the way the government...may not be doing, and it’s a really important and significant moment to celebrate that,” the group’s cofounder Doreen Remen said of both the artists and the Fondazione Prada, hinting at the political subtext unavoidably underlying this year’s festivities. Though most of the evening’s talents carried on as usual—Joana Avillez did live illustrations, Mia Moretti DJed, Gary Simmons provided temporary tattoos in the shape of record players and \$100 bills, and professional high-society wallflower Jessica Craig-Martin took her signature flashy portraits—another duo, Gerard & Kelly, addressed the Trump administration and its threat to public art most explicitly. The topless dancers from the L.A. Dance Project didn’t just splash around the pool: they also whispered, and then shouted, a quotation from Citizen by the MacArthur “genius grant” winner Claudia Rankine: “A state of emergency is also always a state of emergence.”

“I feel like everyone feels like they’re in a state of emergency right now, and we’re trying to figure out what’s next,” Ryan Kelly said after the performance.

“We were thinking a lot about self care, and how we need to take care of our bodies to put them into action for social justice,” Brennan Gerard added.

It’s not the first time the pair has addressed these themes: the performance, which was created especially for that night and venue, was actually the latest in their series Modern Living, which investigates ideas of space and intimacy in modernist sites by turning them into “queer spaces”—including another of Philip Johnson’s designs, the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. This edition marked the first time it took place out of a home, though—and, even though it was in a cavernous dining room, definitely the time it got the most silent. “But that makes sense, because it’s APF,” Kelly said with a laugh. “And only serious arts patrons come to an APF benefit.”



L to R: Nicky Hilton; Cleo Wade; Elmgreen and Dragset



L to R: Inez and Vinoodh; Ryan Kelly and Alysia Reiner ; Jessica Joffe. Photos by Zak Krevitt