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This Queer Artist's Latest Work Shows Public Art's Complicated Link to Gentrification

The story of A. K. Burns' first public sculpture is one of controversy, manipulation, and capitalism.



BY ZACHARY SMALL

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COURTESY OF A.K. BURNS

At first, it's hard to see why [A. K. Burns](#) is in Cleveland, Ohio, making her first-ever public art installation. Burns has a certain level of anxiety about being here — not necessarily because she's uncomfortable as a queer woman in the Midwest, but more because the assignment has her contending with her work's relationships to gentrification and the big money donors who back public art in this country.

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specifically, FRONT tasked Burns with making a piece that addresses the history of a small district called Hingetown, which has rapidly transformed in the past twenty years from a working-class neighborhood with a vibrant gay nightlife scene to one of Cleveland's trendiest places to live. Just take a look at the neighborhood's [own website](#): its coffee is "unbelievably delicious" and its art museum is "kick ass."

The story of Burns' first public sculpture is one of controversy because the work engages how gentrification has led to queer erasure in the neighborhood. It's also a story about manipulation, one that shows just how vulnerable artists are to the financial whims of cultural institutions who often take advantage of their ethical brands.

The history of Hingetown follows a common gentrification narrative. "Hingetown" itself never really existed. That name was a marketing ploy created in 2013, a rebranding exercise to attract real estate investors to an otherwise undesirable location built alongside a six-lane freeway and a housing project called Striebinger Block, wedged between Cleveland's Warehouse District, the Market District, and Gordon Square. To visitors, this neighborhood must have looked abject and defunct. Speaking to *Vanity Fair* for a profile of the neighborhood in October 2015, Fred Bidwell, a leading player in the redevelopment of Hingetown who first moved to the area after making his fortune in advertising, described its transition from slum to something: "This place, which was a nowhere, toxic corner, has become a destination." A full year before Bidwell's comment, two officers shot [Tamri Rice](#) dead only a few blocks to the west of the neighborhood.

Surely, Hingetown's former inhabitants would beg to differ. Writing for *Belt Magazine*, Greggor Mattson, a professor of sociology at Oberlin College, describes how gentrification erases the overlap between queer people and working-class communities: "If the Striebinger Block was 'a corner of poverty,' it's because Cleveland queers are also poor. If we stood in the lots described by gentrifiers as 'missing teeth,' they reflected our own bodies." Although sometimes blamed for starting the cycle of gentrification by attracting artists (and later techies and bankers) to low-income areas, queer people are more often than not part of those vulnerable minorities at risk.

As an artist, Burns has had to think about gentrification for a long time. In 2013, she moved her studio from Industry City, in Brooklyn, to Maspeth, Queens. "There's no bus or subway to the studio. There's no train. No grocery store. It's all very unappealing for gentrification," she told me with a half-smile as we stood in her studio discussing her upcoming project for FRONT. Of course, these facts, along with the arrival of artists, make an area ripe for gentrification, and Maspeth has been no exception in recent years. "Every time I have to move my studio or home to be able to afford being an artist, I try to be as conscious as possible about where I place myself because I know that it's going to affect my environment."

Originally from a California beach town outside Santa Cruz, Burns moved to Oakland in 1998 after studying graphic design at RISD. Eventually, she found herself co-running a gallery there. But when she visited her old neighborhood years after finally making the move to New York in 2003, she noticed a rapid transformation of the area from a fairly unpopulated space into a shopping district with a sprinkling of galleries. There's a stinging recognition that her gallery may have fomented such a large change in the area. This lesson informs Burns' work with Hingetown, and how she sees queer culture within a narrative of gentrification. "I don't believe that queer culture was a thing that changed the neighborhood — the gay clubs were in cohabitation alongside other marginalized economies, like prostitution and drugs," she explained. "I believe that bringing the arts in created a space where others were drawn to the neighborhood, seeking culture. Even if the culture represented was that of marginalized bodies—museums and arts organizations claimed a cultural high ground that made previously existing cultures and economies incompatible to the new flux of visitors."

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Cleveland with his wife after a lucrative 35 year career in advertising and marketing in Akron. Establishing the Bidwell Foundation in 2011, he later bought an old transformer station and turned it into a contemporary art space in 2013, where he could support local artists and showcase his collection of photography. This was the same year that the neighborhood was rechristened “Hingetown.” Four years later, Hingetown gained Ohio’s first historical marker honoring its role in the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement as the rare space that catered to the queer community through bars and clubs.

Come mid-July, FRONT will have to answer for its role in eclipsing the queer history of the past with the shiny, millennial Hingetown of the future. Originally, FRONT asked Burns to bring her “UNKNOWN KNOWN” triptych of fences. This work riffed on Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous speech where he leveraged the ambiguity of the unknown to induce fear during the “War on Terror.” Traveling to Hingetown, however, Burns decided against bringing her old work to Cleveland. “Walking around the neighborhood and observing the sites under construction, I noticed that most were locked down with chain-link fences,” she said. Those fences became the inspiration for her public work, which brutalized the fences as a commentary on how gentrification can disappear bodies—particularly queer bodies—from local history. “I was reading a lot of Jane Jacobs,” explains Burns. “But it wasn’t getting me to the language or resolution that I wanted, which was a bit more poetic. In my frustration, I just wanted to crush the fucking fence. Which turns out is the poetics I was looking for.”

The Dispossessed is a mangled and ChromaFlair painted chain-link fence that Burns developed for the FRONT Triennial. Twisted into an unimaginable shape, the bruised fence almost resembles a crumpled up paper thrown into a waste bin like a discarded idea. The work stands like a gaping maw, whose negative interior space becomes a foreboding silhouette of local residents whose time in the neighborhood has come to pass during gentrification. The paradoxical presence of disappearance encourages the viewer to contemplate the vanishing of Hingetown’s queer community in recent years. But fences are also often used in the criminalization of people’s bodies, forming borders or delineating public space from private space. Seen in an area of rapid “redevelopment,” Burns’s work questions how the neighborhood’s previous residents will be treated in the new Hingetown.

Originally, Burns envisioned a series of fences scattered across Hingetown, standing in the lots marked for redevelopment and construction. Instead, she only has one sculpture defiantly on display in front of Bidwell’s Transformer Station. After nine months of theorizing and experimentation, FRONT informed Burns that she would not be receiving the funding she had initially requested. Therefore, she would not have enough funds to build multiple sites for the artwork and, by default, get no commission fee since funds were never separately set aside to pay the artist.

“They said I could sell the work, but I don’t have a record of selling large public sculptures,” the artist explained. “That’s a very particular collector base. That’s just not going to happen overnight.” In the end after paying to create the work, there would be very little by way of compensation for Burns, a situation she described as all too common.

Responding to the situation at Hingetown, Bidwell acknowledged the issues surrounding FRONT’s presence in a gentrified area, but avoided addressing the denial of Burns’s request for full funding: “It’s true to say that Transformer Station did lay the groundwork for Hingetown’s transformation which is generally perceived to be positive by the community. We are pleased that AK Burns’s sculpture recognizes the history of the neighborhood and the changes that have occurred here, creating a vital discussion around Hingetown.”

The irony of FRONT’s reluctance to properly compensate a queer artist for a sculpture confronting a queer-displacing gentrification catalyzed by the triennial’s executive director is not lost on Burns. A founding member, along with with multimedia artist A. L. Steiner and performance artist K8 Hardy, of WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), she has spent most of her career fighting for better economic equality between artists and institutions.

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“While there are problems with the gallery system, there is an economic structure to it. The problem is that a lot of artists exist primarily within the non-profit structure, which includes everything from small artist-run spaces to museums. It has no consistent economic structure to it,” Burns says. “There’s all this money moving around, but it’s concentrated in a 1% grouping of artists. How is any community supposed to sustain itself that way?”

You might think that Burns could count herself in that lucky one percent, given her résumé. The recipient of Harvard University’s prestigious Radcliffe Fellowship, Burns has exhibited internationally in venues like the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She has also co-edited *Randy*, an annual trans-feminist arts magazine and helped draft WAGE’s landmark [womanifesto](#). But FRONT Triennial’s reluctance to meet Burns’s price demonstrates how queer women artists are still being devalued by a system that predominantly skews straight and male. Even with a history of fighting for economic justice for artists, someone like Burns is just as easily discounted as the poor environs of Hingetown.

There is a special humor in seeing *The Dispossessed* sitting outside Bidwell’s Transformer Station. Half-realized and resembling discarded rubbish, Burns’ work serves Cleveland a similar notice to the one Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety* served Williamsburg back in 2014 when she installed her bleached sugar sphinx resembling a naked black woman in the old Domino Sugar Factory scheduled for demolition and redevelopment. Like Walker, who tied the gentrification of Brooklyn to the commodification of black bodies, Burns eulogizes a bygone queer neighborhood with her art. Still, there is another level of irony here that *The Dispossessed* will lure attention and tourism that might further gentrify Hingetown.

Which gets to the bigger question of why Burns agreed to come to Cleveland in the first place. Perhaps by working with the FRONT Triennial to develop their inaugural exhibition, she could create something ethical and responsible. Perhaps gentrifiers can acknowledge their footprint on displaced community and find a path toward development that doesn’t leave other bodies in its wake. Someone has to make the art. If not her, then who else? Unfortunately, it appears FRONT didn’t give the chance to native Hingetowners to be their own best advocates.

Burns sees it as an ongoing battle. “I’m part of a lineage of cranky lesbians who get agitated enough to do something. We have a history of this. It’s really our job.”

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