

GRAY WIELEBINSKI

Donna Marcus Duke, 'I'm Trying to Maintain an Intense Ambivalence': Gray Wielebinski in Conversation, Frieze, 4 October 2023



Detail of Gray Wielebinski, *The End #1*, 2023, Photography by Charlie Littlewood.

Gray Wielebinski's exhibition 'The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low' explores the boundaries of public and private space, referencing sci-fi, the Cold War and Samuel R. Delany. Here, the artist discusses the work with Donna Marcus Duke.

Donna Marcus Duke Could you talk about how 'The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low' has consolidated your practice and offered you the opportunity to explore new avenues?

Gray Wielebinski The show at ICA moves towards a conceptual approach, which I feel excited about. I'm interested in tapping into things like power, displacement, surveillance and identity. Making Pain and Glory [2022], my encased mechanical bull at Bold Tendencies, was the first time I got to work on a scale that helped me think more about architecture, the body and space, and the public and private pressures to which they are subject. These insights come together in this show and the corresponding commission for Selfridges Art Block, 'Exhibition' [2023].

DMD How do you think of your work in light of the tension between identity-based practice and something a bit freer from categorization.

GW The themes I'm working with in this show include

paranoia, power and queerness. The show is an intentional and overwhelming interrogation of my feelings about what I need to survive the day-to-day. It's been an emotionally taxing and exciting show, and intellectually generating because of that.

DMD Is it important for your practice to be considered under the rubric of trans or queer art?

GW I think it's very important. As I use 'he/him' pronouns, I'm curious how I might be perceived by people who don't know me or the work. How I move in the world as a trans person, is either misidentified or obvious and present. It's an interesting thing that's always been a part of my practice in that it's part of me and I'm expressing it, so it feels like it's a totality of me. But there are also questions around translation and layers of either obfuscation or interpretation, too.

I found it frustrating when my work was only being read as trans work because it felt as if that was such a flattening, where people didn't engage in a deeper way. However, the most rewarding thing is to be able to present something with confidence and to receive people's feedback.

DMD Many objects in this show hold multiple references.

Could you speak about punning as a technique and how that relates to your interest in power and agency?

GW My work is so much about collating, interpretation, reinterpretation and cutting up references to collage meanings and new potentials. I'm trying to maintain an intense ambivalence and this idea of shimmering between meanings.

Humour is a tactic for me. Sometimes, it enables me to hold all these different complexities. It's also a way of translation or meaning making, but also an entry point, a way of taking myself down a notch. I think the works need to have a double or triple interpretation because that is their *raison d'être*.

DMD Could you expand more on the motifs in the ICA exhibition?

GW Samuel R. Delany has always been invested in cutting up the world, experiencing space, people, messiness and everything – not just accepting that the world is mediated by language. It clicked for me. His utopia is what we can potentially make with what already exists here – recutting it and recontextualizing it, remaking it, rather than needing to hope for what's not here yet. My ideology is cutting up what already exists into something new and not being afraid of intense ambivalence.

In 'The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low', there's a lot of repetition of suns, circles, windows, portals, doors and thresholds. The suns are from *Querelle* (1982), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's final film, which is very psychosexual, bizarre, very fake and saturated. I kept getting drawn to these suns.

The title is from a 1978 essay by Delany, in which he uses it as an example of a corrective process of reading science fiction. He writes, 'each new word revises the complex picture we had a moment before'. I felt the suns were a way of pointing to the linguistic construction of science fiction. And so, that's a way of thinking about world-building, which I'm interrogating. But also, they're very flat sunsets in a very queer film that led out onto the ocean, the horizon.

DM You mention Delany's notions of world-building and utopia. Could you talk to me about how apocalypse might beget utopia?

GW On a theoretical and a literal level, which apocalypse are we talking about? There's a frame in which one world is ending. I think again about world-building, which is a tool rather than a buzzword. It can be used in a genuine sense of community building, of queer spaces, of a dark

room at a club.

There's a frame in which the apocalypse, too, for ourselves may be dying or changing our mortality. For example, there's a whole genre of Indigenous American literature about the fact that, to those peoples, the apocalypse has already happened. There can be a perspective on when we see the apocalypse. I want to interrogate what that means to different people.

Many worlds have already ended, and many will be made and created, and I think that's the idea of utopia in a sense. I think of utopia as being a hopefulness, nonetheless. In some ways, the show has allowed me to feel intense connection, hope and gratitude that's very much within other people and, as trite as it sounds, within art. It has re-instilled many feelings of intention and connection, which I'm grateful for and overwhelmed by.

Gray Wielebinski's 'The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low' is at ICA, London, until 23 December. In conjunction with the show, Wielebinski will take over the Orchard Street Windows at Selfridges from September to November 2023. In addition, 'Exhibition' is currently on display at the Selfridges Art Block