Full House: Gerard & Kelly Shake Up Johnson's Glass House

The performance art duo take over Philip Johnson's Glass House for their mischievous "Modern Living" dance series, which tackles relationships, architecture and the closet.

By Fan Zhong | May 12, 2016

According to Philip Johnson, the man who can—and if he were here likely would—take the lion’s share of credit for bringing Modernist architecture to America, one of the explicit influences on his famous Glass House was the Parthenon.

“The Parthenon!” the artist Brennan Gerard said last week, smiling in disbelief. We were having lunch with his partner Ryan Kelly, with whom he makes up the performance art duo Gerard & Kelly. “But you can never trust Johnson on his historical references—he also claims Malevich as a reference for the Glass House! He made a lot of claims. It’s him both revealing and disguising autobiography.”

Johnson did make reference to Kazimir Malevich, not to mention Le Corbusier, Ledoux, the Acropolis, and much, much more. (There are pages of citations in his 1950 essay on the Glass House in London’s Architectural Review, published a year after the house was built.) It’s a strategy that politicians of all stripes are still using to great effect today—obfuscation by way of reams of mundane if amusing revelations. What Johnson was hiding in plain sight, however, was his homosexuality: He lived with his partner, the collector and curator David Whitney, for over four decades in what must have felt at times like a transparent glass closet. (Johnson eventually came out in 1994.)
The alternative history of domestic spaces is what Gerard & Kelly, working with the nine dancers of the L.A. Dance Project, are exploring in their dance performance series “Modern Living,” co-produced by Art Production Fund and arriving this Friday and Saturday at the Glass House, the semi-transparent, glass-skinned illusion on the hillside of a 49-acre estate in New Canaan, Connecticut. The fact is that even Johnson, whose Teflon reputation survived revelations about his Fascist sympathies with disconcerting ease, could likely not have lived down being outed in his day.

“It was a queer strategy of survival,” Kelly, who was born in 1979, said. “Yes, to hide is a painful experience, but to be revealed could discredit you, ruin your career, diminish you. So sometimes it did seem like Johnson’s tactic was to give you an abundance of information”—or to offer a house with nowhere to hide as rebuttal—“which end up obscuring any truths.”

“We have this idea that the closet is bad,” Gerard, who is a year older than Kelly, said. “That celebrities should be out, that gays should hold hands in public. And all that’s great. But the closet is a complicated performance that works by telegraphing yourself to an internal world while hiding something from the larger one. It may have protected an intimacy among queer people that may not be possible anymore. The kind where no one asked what you were doing …”

Kelly interjected: “Or how you live …”

“Or your situation is!” Gerard added. They both laughed—at me, mostly. In the interest of journalistic bad manners, moments earlier I had asked what their, well, situation is, to which they both responded with Johnsonian deflection. (Last September, Out reported that the pair “have been involved in each other’s lives creatively and romantically for more than a decade.”)

Gerard forked his spaghetti, which was a shade of green that was the pasta equivalent of kale juice, a drink order Kelly attempted to place before Gerard and I shamed him into switching to wine. “Look at this color,” Gerard said. “I feel like I’m still in Los Angeles.”

Years ago, the duo, whose backgrounds are both in dance, moved to Los Angeles from New York, where Kelly had worked with Benjamin Millipied at the New York City Ballet when he was younger. The duo have collaborated with Millipied’s L.A. Dance Project on “Modern Living,” which they first activated in January at West Hollywood’s Schindler House, an experiment in communal living Rudolph M. Schindler designed in 1921 for himself, his wife Pauline, and another couple. The arrangement didn’t work out, exactly: Pauline Schindler, a socialite and independent thinker, had an affair with John Cage, moved out to Ojai, became a lesbian, and eventually moved
back in to live with Schindler, companionably but in a consciously uncoupled state, until his death 10 years later. “A lot of people called it a failed experiment, but I’m more interested in the fact that the experiment existed,” Kelly said. “I wanted to return to the idea that there were these two families there. A dance company of nine individuals is like a young family. They’re structured by these lateral sibling-like relationships, which is kind of like how the Schindler House was structured.”

At the Glass House this weekend, the nine dancers will move in and out of sync with one another in movements (“relationships are measured by time and synchronicity,” Kelly said); they will wear Repetto shoes and dark, custom suits designed by Uri Minkoff (“we wanted to conjure this masculine, gay meeting place that the Glass House was’’); and they will be backed by an updated version of Stravinsky’s Symphony in Three Movements, which the composer wrote in 1945 after witnessing German soldiers goose-stepping in the streets during World War II. “We wanted to pose this question about Johnson choreographically,” Gerard said of the architect’s Nazi-sympathizing past, which rears its head every few years. “But there’s no use in wagging a finger at Johnson, or spanking him—which he probably enjoyed.”

Gerard & Kelly, who have also created works at L.A.’s Hammer Museum, the Guggenheim and the New Museum in New York, and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, are looking to bring their “Modern Living” series to Houston, to the Modernist home that Johnson built for Dominique de Menil. It was a structure that shook the antebellum mansions of the tony River Oaks neighborhood in 1950, but it also created controversy within Johnson’s camp, when de Menil hired Charles James, whose tastes are not exactly in line with Johnson’s, to do the interiors and the furniture.

“It was these two fags and Dominique de Menil!” Kelly said, clearly delighted. “Another strange set of relationships in architecture.”

“But the goal is to really open up these sites through videos and other works that will come of this that we can show in a gallery,” Gerard added. “To reclaim these sites for all of us who deviate from the norm, to open these queer spaces up—and not just to architecture aficionados.”

He laughed.

“But by the way, we’re not architecture aficionados,” Gerard said. “We just want to know how people live now.”
