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Portraits by Tom Burr Propel MATRIX Exhibition Series at the Wadsworth Atheneum

Hartford, Conn. (May 20, 2019)—Connecticut-born sculptor Tom Burr’s expansive body of portraiture takes a different approach to the relationship between the built environment, material, subjectivity, and historical personalities. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the museum’s presentation of two other portrait centered exhibitions, Tom Burr / MATRIX 182 / Hinged Figures unites a selection of the artist’s reclining figures, several of which are portraits of individuals from queer history and American Modernism. Burr began the series in 2005, and MATRIX 182 constitutes the largest museum presentation of the reclining figures to date. The sculptures will be shown both within the MATRIX Gallery and around the museum, in dialogue with specific artists and architectural spaces, and also at the Austin House.

“I wanted to see the figures spread throughout the different spaces in the museum—spaces that resonate with the history of 20th-century art being shown—but also in other, less expected settings, such as Chick Austin’s house,” says Tom Burr. “I wanted to create a constellation of figures and sites that would engage, in a sense, the museum and the house as a total stage set.”
Burr’s sculptures combine Minimalist forms with figures and material attributes, such as books, magazine pages, notecards, tinsel, and Chanel dress. He is interested in the way certain figures shape and are shaped by the spaces they inhabit. In this MATRIX project, Burr directly addresses the Wadsworth’s prominent role in the history of Modernism in several portrait subjects, including former director A. Everett ‘Chick’ Austin, and two creatives, writer Gertrude Stein and composer Virgil Thomson. They were commissioned in the 1930s to make the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* to inaugurate the newly completed Avery Memorial and its purpose-built theater. Two 33 rpm records and album cover of the opera and are featured in Burr’s *Chicks*, 2008 (left).

*One foot in the grave (reclining)*, 2010 references photographer Robert Mapplethorpe whose career is embedded in the Wadsworth’s history. A MATRIX artist in 1984, Mapplethorpe’s work has also been presented in exhibitions in 1990, 2015 and will be included in *Be Seen: Portrait Photography Since Stonewall* opening June 22, 2019. Burr’s portrait of Mapplethorpe (right) includes a postcard featuring one of the photographer’s black-and-white flower images and a small pile of soil evoking a meditation on illness and the AIDS epidemic.

“One Tom Burr’s continual engagement with queer historical figures and Modernism identified him as a strong choice for an expanded MATRIX project this summer,” says Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth. “The personas his portraits evoke resonate with the Wadsworth’s history and their placement throughout the museum activates new dialogues.”

**Artist Biography**

Tom Burr was born in 1963 in New Haven, Connecticut. Burr has exhibited in group and solo shows throughout the world since 1988, in institutions and museums including the SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France; SculptureCenter, New York, NY; Skulptur Projekte, Münster, Germany; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; The New Museum, New York, NY, and the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. The works of Tom Burr are included in numerous private & public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; Lenbachhaus Museum, Munich, Germany; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.
Related Programs
*Tom Burr / MATRIX 182 / Hinged Figures* opens during Art After Dark, Thursday, June 6 from 5–8pm, and the artist will give a Gallery Talk at 6:30pm. A docent-led Art In Focus tour of Tom Burr’s *Chicks* (2008) will take place on Friday, August 21 at noon. Curator Patricia Hickson will lead a Gallery Talk on Thursday, August 29 at noon.

**About MATRIX**
Inaugurated in 1975, MATRIX is the Wadsworth’s groundbreaking contemporary art exhibition series featuring works by artists from around the world. From its inception, MATRIX has been a forum for art that is challenging, current, and sometimes controversial. Through clear explanation and thoughtful engagement with the viewer, MATRIX exhibitions call into question preconceptions about art and increase understanding of its possibilities. Many MATRIX artists, such as Christo, Sol LeWitt, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, and Carrie Mae Weems are now considered seminal figures in contemporary art.

**Exhibition and Program Support**
MATRIX 182 is generously supported by the Howard Fromson Exhibition Fund. The MATRIX program is supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum’s Contemporary Coalition. Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided by Newman’s Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council’s United Arts Campaign.

**About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**
Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth Atheneum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: Wednesday–Friday: 11am–5pm; Saturday and Sunday: 10am–5pm Admission: $5–15; discounts for members, students, and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5pm. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: thewadsworth.org.

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