

FRÉDÉRIC NAUCZYCIEL

Julie Meneret Contemporary Art is proud to present *The Fire Flies [Baltimore / Paris]*, a solo show of photography, video, and performance by the French artist Frédéric Nauczyciel. Throughout his art practice, he has followed an interest in the complexity of social life, be it rural or urban; his nuanced portraiture treats its protagonists in the contexts of their surroundings. His most recent body of work has been inspired by an encounter with queer black voguers in the ghettos of Baltimore and Paris, which has led him to branch out to film and performance in order to address the profound and shifting temporality of self in *ballroom* culture. *The Fire Flies* is built in two parts, Baltimore ("It's all about Omar") and Paris ("Paris Brûle"). Each photograph, film, and performance operates episodically to narrate an urban legend.

Voguing is a style of dance that evolved from queer black and Latino New Yorkers in the 1960s, morphing over time due to diverse influences from house, jazz, martial arts, ballet, and break dancing, as well as the dramatic, angular poses of models in Vogue magazine. Vogue balls are competitions where countless types of personas are performed. *Realness* is the ability to embody a persona, sometimes heterosexual, a skill that may be needed in daily urban life. Nauczyciel was drawn to this world for its expanded meaning of performance—the very ability to project yourself into the world is what makes you real. Useful in understanding this approach is post-structuralist Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in which gesture does not express interiority but rather continuously constructs itself through repeated activity. The radical aspects of voguing lie in the investment in this idea, that all contexts involve performing the self in different and variable ways.

Frédéric Nauczyciel built an unlikely but close connection with the performers in Baltimore and Paris. His fascination with the American inner city started from a desire to understand the Paris outskirts. He is interested in this urban culture not as that of a minority, but as the culture of the 21st century, a culture that looks beyond racial and gender divisions and embodies possibilities for the future. He is close to the vogue House of Revlon in Baltimore and a member of the Kiki House of LaBanji in Paris, and opened his own conceptual *House of HMU* that was recently hosted by the Centre Pompidou.

His research led him to incorporate the qualities of performativity and self-hybridization of voguing into his photographs and films. The performative pieces that Nauczyciel creates are neither voguing nor choreography but "*images vivantes*" that he considers an extension of his visual work. He is interested in the rendition of the *presence* of his protagonists. New pieces called "Solos" will be performed May 3, 4, and 5 at the gallery. These pieces are co-written with the performers, using choreographic vocabulary drawn from the body language of each performer and from different situations they experienced. Classical or Baroque music accompanying the performances is stereotypically highbrow, which began as a wry tactic to avoid police in Baltimore, and refers to Nauczyciel's European point of view, that voguing's flamboyance and codified mannerisms make it "the new Baroque."

The fireflies of Nauczyciel's title allude to James Baldwin's conception of sensuality in *The Fire Next Time*. Fireflies are also a metaphor used by Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini who wrote in 1975 about the cultural genocide of bourgeois consumerism, which was rearing its head in society as a new kind of fascism. "*La scomparsa delle lucciole*" is the disappearance of the fireflies, the unique spirit of the people. The metaphor goes back to Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVI, where the brilliance of paradise is juxtaposed with the little glowing phantoms of hell, the miserable beauty of the damned. Fireflies represent the small, flickering deviations, hidden and ephemeral strange beings, who still exist hopefully in the city's shadows, moving between total darkness and blinding light.