

PRESS RELEASE

Chuck Nanney
Joel Otterson
Curated by Ugo Rondinone

April 23 – May 28, 2022

Opening on Saturday, April 23, 11 am – 7 pm

Artist Talk, 5 pm

With Joel Otterson and Philip Ortelli; Moderated by Ian Wooldridge

Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is proud to present an exhibition by the American artists Chuck Nanney and Joel Otterson, curated by the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. Sculpture, photography, painting, and textile pieces by Nanney and Otterson were originally brought together by Rondinone for a two-person exhibition at Martos Gallery in New York in the spring of 2021. Rondinone has now adapted the presentation of works to exist harmoniously in Galerie Eva Presenhuber's Waldmannstrasse space in Zurich. A third and final iteration of the exhibition will take place at Morán Morán in Los Angeles in 2023.

To introduce this traveling exhibition, Rondinone has chosen a candid and intimate conversation between the New York-based artist and writer Jarrett Earnest, Nanney, and Otterson, which began in May 2021 to mark the opening of the Martos Gallery exhibition. Part two of the conversation took place in March 2022 to further explore the decades-long relationship between Nanney and Otterson and provide new insights into the work on view in Zurich. A third part of this serial conversation will accompany the exhibition's final presentation in 2023.

What *isn't* queer art?

A conversation between Jarrett Earnest, Chuck Nanney, and Joel Otterson

Part one – May 2021

JARRETT EARNEST: As Lady Miss Kier once asked, "What is Love? (I think I know)"—or, rather: What is the most unlikely thing—film, album, artwork, or object, etc.—that embodies a "queer aesthetic" to you? How and when did it first enter your life?

CHUCK NANNEY: Oddly enough, the first thing that comes to mind is my first G.I. Joe doll—11.5 inches (29 cm) tall and fully poseable. My brother and I were avid cartoons and comic book fans, obsessed with superheroes. Superheroes were drawn with form-fitting costumes that were perceived by me, as a child, to be basically naked with loud graphics covering their bodies. So, my brother and I immediately disposed of our G.I. Joes' clothes, exposing their naked molded plastic bodies, which looked just like the drawings in comic books. We would then spend time formulating imaginary graphic costumes for each of them, giving them names, secret identities, superpowers, whole histories.

One of my G.I. Joe's was named George. George's superpower was that he could change into Gloria. I stole a few Barbie wigs from Sue Loveland, who lived down the street and crammed them onto George's head (a blond poof was his favorite). I fashioned dresses out of handkerchiefs and bits of fabric I found around the house. I cut up a rubber band into short lengths to make non-cancer-causing cigarettes for Gloria. I thought smoking was glamorous, but I didn't want to endanger Gloria's life. I was six years old. I had no real idea about sex or homosexuality and certainly no concept of being trans, but all of that seems to have been functioning intuitively.

My father had already begun berating me and beating me for acting queer (the very word he used). The only way I understood that was that I was queer as in strange and certainly going to hell. The idea of living safely through my imagination using George/Gloria/G.I. Joe as a conduit for an early unconscious expression of queerness is very dear to me.

JOEL OTTERSON: For me, it was a pair of underwear. It was kindergarten or before (I entered kindergarten at the age of 4). These were "tighty-whities" underwear, but they had a Bulldog's face printed on the crotch, across my dick and balls. I wanted to wear them every day because they excited me and gave me pleasure. My Mother would say, "You can't wear those again! They're dirty!" I didn't understand because, to me, the more I wore them, the better they got. Raunchy Bulldog Underwear at the age of 4... the die was cast very young for me.

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I have a G.I. Joe story in response to Chuck's... In 1992, I wanted to cast my G.I. Joe in iron and make him into a candelabra. My Mom sent me the footlocker that Joe lived in and, when I opened the footlocker, Joe was not alone! He was with a Ken, and they had traded outfits. Joe was wearing Ken's beach outfit, and Ken was wearing Joe's Army outfit. I'm sure that was the way I left them the last time that I played with them—maybe 7 or 8 years old. They were "good" friends that traded clothes and lived in the same box together...

EARNEST: Aside from the G.I. Joe connection, you both identified these childhood experiences of clothing—how do you think your relationship with clothing, both as a physical experience and as an outer appearance, shifted with your sexuality over the years?

OTTERSON: Clothes were always a way to say I'm different. My Grandmother one weekend took me shopping at Bullocks Wilshire (the Saks of LA) to buy a cowboy outfit. I had spotted a baby blue suit with short pants and, once I saw that suit, I wanted nothing to do with the cowboy clothes. I screamed, I cried, and I refused to leave without that little blue suit. My mother came to pick me up and said, "What happened to the cowboy outfit?" I remember my Grandma shrugged her shoulders and said, "He didn't want it! He wanted this instead!" *Thank God* I had a family that didn't force me into a preconceived idea of what a boy should be. I felt so elegant and dandyish in that suit. I was around 4 years old also. That blue suit and the bulldog underwear made me feel really special.

When I was 13, I read an article in *Rolling Stone* about where the rock stars got their shoes. It was a place in West Hollywood called Fred Slatten Shoes. I asked my brother, "Could you drive me there?" He said, "Of course!" I went there two times. The first time, I bought a pair of platform high-heeled cream pumps, which I customized with gold studs on the platform. The second time, I bought a huge pair of "wedgie" platforms, which I also customized by dyeing the fake woodgrain black. The next week, I saw Elton John on the *Cher* TV show with the same shoes! But not customized... Ha!

Just one more quick story... I would get into my Mom's make-up because all the rock stars were wearing it, from Mick Jagger to Elvis Presley! My Mom said, "Have you been in my make-up again?"—She was mad! "If you want to wear make-up, get your own and stay out of mine!" She drove me to the store so I could buy my own.

NANNEY: As a very young boy, I adored Twiggy and everything *Mod*. I envied the great looks available to girls. I started to think that if I could just turn into a girl, all my problems would be solved (my parents wouldn't hate me), everything would be just fine. When I said my prayers at night, I started asking God if he would turn me into a girl. I was told he had great powers, so I figured this would be a cinch. After I finished praying, I would lie in bed imagining all the new outfits I could wear when I woke up the next day a girl. The world would be right, and I would be right in my own skin.

Fast forward to early junior high and my first wet dream. In my dream, I was sitting naked in a chair. Just sitting there doing nothing, looking out through the bars of my cage. I was a specimen in a zoo. There were crowds of people, whole families, etc., strolling by fully dressed, stopping and gawking at me, some with interest and curiosity, some seemingly bored. I was awakened by the pulsing of my penis and rather alarmed and confused by the little puddle of semen in my underwear. I went from feeling whole in a red vinyl mini skirt to feeling erotically charged and weirdly in control by being without any clothes in public.

But the experience of clothing and the significance of presentation carries such a loaded question of class as well. Projecting desire, aspirations, hiding or revealing aspects of oneself. I grew up in a white, blue-collar, Southern Baptist family in Memphis, Tennessee. We didn't have money for clothes or much else, and I was keenly aware of what that meant as far as our social standing in the world. Years later, as a young adult, I found myself in New York in the late '70s. There was sex in every nook and cranny of the city landscape. I had sex everywhere at any time—subway platforms, subway tunnels, and cars, doorways, parks, cars, buses, department store dressing rooms, restrooms—you get the picture. I found I was turned on by blue-collar men, just like all the men in my family. I became obsessed with collecting and wearing work uniforms. The feel of the 65% cotton 35% polyester was like leather on my skin. It felt the same for me as someone wearing leather chaps and a harness. Only it was a green and orange NY sanitation uniform for me. I met other men turned on by the same fetish and would attend sex parties revolving around blue-collar get-ups. There was a whole underground network dedicated to working-class sex fantasy fulfillment. The military and police uniform people had their own scene. I didn't get into that authoritarian scene; it was a drag of a drag.

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It just dawned on me that Joel and I both moved to NYC to attend school studying fashion design. Joel went to Parsons (Parsons School of Design), later changing his major to fine art. I went to FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology). I dropped out and found my way to drugs.

EARNEST: What was the process of figuring out how to make something that might be “queer art”—not just at the level of subject matter, but of form? How has your sense of queerness in your work changed over your life as an artist?

OTTERSON: I don't think that my goal was ever to make “queer art.” My goal was to make it from a *homosexual* perspective. So early on, my subject matter was often the male figure (of Greek reference). Works were titled *Man on the Top* or *Male Venus* (1982).

It is hard for me to escape my childhood (and I don't really want to). Most work I do honors my parents. My Mom collected American Brilliant Cut Crystal and my Dad was a plumber and a builder. Every pipe I ever solder is in honor of my Father. Every piece of cut glass I might have appropriated for use in an artwork is a memory of my mother. It is using the best of both worlds, the male and the female. The sewing, quilting, embroidery, and crochet are always in honor of my Grandmother and my Mother (that is where I initially learned). This is where the queerness does come in; these techniques are traditional “women's” work. I wanted to break the stereotype. The only men that quilted in the past were damaged, either mentally or physically, from war. Guys just didn't do that kind of thing, much less make lace, crochet, or tatting. Tailoring is a different thing—that was done by men.

My goal has been to break down stereotypes of what a man and what a woman is supposed to be. My work is a conscious blending of the masculine and feminine. For example, sewing lace trim onto a Steel I-Beam that was the base for a Teacart in 1990. I make sculpture also because it is physical; it takes my whole body and every muscle to produce it. People would often say to me, “You must work out a lot!” My answer was always, “No, I just work!” There was a moment early in the '80s I made “totems” of baseball bats and Nehi soda. I forget the complete conversation, but I remember Ashley Bickerton's sentence that finished it: “Oh Joel, you're a lover and not a fighter! Look at those tall phallic sculptures you make! They are about love!”

NANNEY: I just made my work—it just happened to turn out queer. The process of making—I've always likened to a sort of excavation of the self. Intuition. So, I had no choice in the matter. I'm a fag. It's a fag. It's not always obvious, like the tree branch paintings—people don't always get that they're basically non-sites often based in and extracted from roadside rest area cruising landscapes. The sense of queerness in my work? It has waxed and waned through the years and the different bodies of work, I guess, but it is always present. The work grows from biographical details, memory, the self-excitation I mentioned above.

I think for a lot of queer artists from my generation—the AIDS epidemic having severely laid waste to innumerable friends, lovers, tricks, and acquaintances—there became a necessity to try and carry on a gay cultural legacy that we feared might disappear. Something for future generations of homos to get fired up about.

I think it's working.

OTTERSON: AIDS was a turning point in making art for me. I sat across from a friend that had full-blown AIDS; we were eating carp soup his macrobiotic chef had prepared (it was supposed to rejuvenate the brain). He killed the live fish over the pot, made soup, and we ate it. Stephen looked at me from across the table and said, “Goddamnit! While I'm alive, I refuse to be dead!” Inspiring to say the least. I knew I couldn't make tall thin sculptures that stood in the corner and were quiet anymore. It was a moment I decided that I needed to be loud and scream. I decided I didn't want to make monuments to dead people (the job of sculptors for centuries). I wanted to make work about living and what it meant to be alive. At that moment, I started working my way through the house. I started making everything in relation to human beings. The objects that make us human and make us comfortable as human beings. Tables, chairs, beds, rugs, dinnerware... For over 30 years, I have worked my way through the house and remade everything in it. I encourage engagement with the work—that is when it comes alive.

I also see that objects can have their own DNA inside, either historical DNA (style, era, a medium that comes with borrowed prestige) or the actual DNA of the person that owned it and treasured it. It is also curious to me how an inanimate object can be the trigger of emotion. I use things that were my Mother's and Grandmother's... it triggers feelings in me. Being HIV positive myself, given a death sentence at the age of 25 was quite shocking. Live fast, die

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young. It has made me give life to forgotten objects. It made me question what makes something have value, and that misplaced value was rampant. I never dreamed I would be alive today... but here we are!

I could go on and on...

Part two – March 2022

EARNEST: You two have known each other for almost 40 years. How did that start?

OTTERSON: Yes, to know someone for that long... It's somewhere between 35 and 40 because I might have met you in '85, but I also might have met you in '82. I don't know.

NANNEY: I met you in '82 because I had a crush on you.

EARNEST: It's all coming out!

OTTERSON: Where did we meet? Gallery Nature Morte?

NANNEY: Yes. And I was dating Nicolas Moufarrege.

OTTERSON: And I had a crush on Nicolas! I mean, he was adorable. And he did needlepoint.

EARNEST: How did the crush turn into an artistic conversation?

NANNEY: I was way too shy to in any way approach Joel with any kind of come on so that just didn't manifest.

OTTERSON: This is news to me. I kind of love it—it's filling in a part of the story! We had all the same friends. I would see you out and about at parties, but then there were those years you were in Paris where you wouldn't see Chuck, and then I'd see you on the street, and I'd be like, *Oh wow, he's back from Paris*. Would we stop and talk? I don't know. But it was in the early 1990s, we'd gone to an opening, and we connected. We started talking about glitter rock, and that was rare at that moment to find somebody that you could talk about Glam Rock to, and knew the Mott the Hoople version of whatever; it hadn't become mainstream. They weren't using T-Rex for Cadillac commercials then, so to connect on that level was amazing. Music was where we first connected. That whole culture, because growing up, Glam rock is what made us feel normal, that it was ok to be weird.

NANNEY: It was cool, to be weird and be gay.

OTTERSON: And to wear high heels and a little bit of eye makeup. It was amazing—as I said in our earlier interview—men hadn't looked like that since Louis XIV.

EARNEST: One of the things that felt so right about the timing of your exhibition in New York was that, after a year of Covid quarantine, we were not going out or seeing each other on the street. That helped me recognize my metaphysical belief in glamour—the experience of glamour as a force—and how much I missed it. It's a public service when someone looks amazing on the street. And then suddenly it's gone.

NANNEY: New York is full of it!

EARNEST: When I was looking at your show, I was thinking that there was a kind of life force of glamour that was playful and kind of homemade and the highest sophistication of it—do you relate to that in your work?

NANNEY: There was something that Joel said to me when I was hesitating about traveling. Over the past year and a half, I'd barely left my house in Oakland. I would go to the hardware store or art store; I'd been really sequestered. Joel said to me, "What a glorious way to exit quarantine. You've got to come!" I realized he was right.

OTTERSON: When the quarantine happened, I was worried about what kind of art was going to come out of it. When HIV and AIDS happened, I was like, *I don't want to see another black painting, I don't want to see another fucking depressing painting with the number of people who died of AIDS*—there was a moment where it was like, I can't do that anymore. My artwork has always been about joy or, really, sex and death, and I was so worried that, *Oh my god we're going to go there again*, and I'm so thrilled that the art that I've seen is people going nuts. They're not thinking of how it's going to be read, and it's really fun. There's a lot of fun gone from contemporary art. You look at it and it's like torture.

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EARNEST: That's why the glamour metric works. For example, NFTs—not glamorous, don't have to think about it. Sorry!

OTTERSON: Glamour is a way to enter it. Humor too. Humor is an open door, a way to enter it.

EARNEST: Do either of you remember the first time you saw each other's work?

NANNEY: I know the first time I saw Joel's work was at Nature Morte. The baseball bats and the dishwashing liquid bottles.

OTTERSON: My second show in 1987.

EARNEST: And what did it mean to you?

NANNEY: It was kind of savagely sexy.

EARNEST: Back to the crush.

OTTERSON: Well anything tall and pink is savagely sexy. And anything taller than it is wide is phallic... I don't know when the first time I saw your work was. The photographs I completely remember, I saw them at Shiffler. And the tree branch paintings. You made a whole body of photographs when you came to Kentucky with me for a while. I still have one, it's a house but it looks like a Donald Judd, this photograph, it's so beautiful.

EARNEST: In our emails, you both very acutely located your early aesthetic experience within a class position, or, rather, they are riven with class content. And, in this art world, almost never does that get explicated in the discourses we have about queerness and aesthetics. Though, it's so present in your work.

NANNEY: For me, for years, I was naive about it.

OTTERSON: You didn't realize it existed in the work?

NANNEY: I knew it existed in the work, but that kind of excluded it from being recognized in the art world. Peter Halley explained that to me. We had talks about color and images, and he kind of pointed out that the color palette that we both leaned towards was more like a blue-collar, working-class or, as he put it, "the backdoor entrance to the supermarket where the workers went in," as opposed to the people going in to shop. And suddenly, I was like, / *get it*.

OTTERSON: And you embraced it?

NANNEY: Well, kind of embraced it a little harder.

OTTERSON: Or did you embrace it consciously? For me, playing the high to the low, or the low to the high—I don't want the word "kitsch" used in relation to my work, but I love kitsch, I think it's the most meaningful stuff on earth. That is why I loved Jeff Koons, the porcelain teddy bear that says "Te Amo"—amazing! The world is full of rampant misvalue. The value of how does the little pinch pot that says "I love you Mommy" on the bottom end up at the thrift store? It was the most precious thing in somebody's home at some moment, and then it ends up forgotten. Reevaluating things, like what is supposed to be worth a lot of money but maybe is not. Rich people don't have taste—some of them do and some of them don't. It's like my friend Carlos says, "They have the money but we are the rich ones." The beaded paintings for me, they're a democracy. Everything is equal, there is plastic from China, but there are also real pearls in it.

EARNEST: I love that as a world view, concerning objects found in the world. How did your understanding of that evolve when you started bringing in this different kind of stuff to the work—something someone made you got at a thrift store and plastic beads, in relation to orchestrating it as a value shift as an artwork?

OTTERSON: I think everything has DNA. Not only do we have it inside ourselves, but objects have a kind of genetic code in them. The form of things—recently I've been exploring the vessel, like going from Greek to Roman to Byzantine to Renaissance—probably the Brita water pitcher that is in our refrigerator, you could trace the DNA back to so many objects for thousands of years. That is what's interesting to me, the history of these things. I'm curious about the future, I've always been optimistic, like, I didn't think we were going to end in a nuclear war. We'll be here.

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Although I'm not so much sure anymore. So, I look back. There is not a moment in history I don't like, I'm passionate about every single one of them. The bronze age cache of farm tools at the British Museum is one of the most beautiful things I've seen. It's equal to any other high art. I make no distinctions.

EARNEST: Agreed. I don't trust anyone in "contemporary art" that is not looking at old art—that means you don't fucking like art. You like a social dynamic. To shift for a moment: As came up in our previous conversation, Chuck, you are not the only friend of mine that has a sanitation worker fetish.

NANNEY: Who?

EARNEST: Look, I am not going to out Nayland Blake in this conversation but what I'm thinking about is that the sanitation worker is someone who is dealing with objects in their human relation, as this stuff is undergoing a transformation of value and position within the world. I want to know about your relation to the "stuff of the world." What I like about your photographs wearing clothes from thrift stores is that it's like you're taking on this stuff that precedes you, and may not have been made with you or a body like yours in mind, and seeing how it does or does not relate to your own physical body.

NANNEY: I started to collect the clothes before I took any of the pictures. One of the first experiences was going to a clothes-by-the-pound place in Williamsburg that doesn't exist anymore. There was one that was over by the river.

The building was unmarked. You walked into this huge warehouse space, into this vast room, and there were these giant four holes on four walls with conveyor belts coming through the holes. Clothes were heaped on the conveyor belts, and they were falling into the room on the floor and people were walking around shopping, picking things up off the floor when they fell and pulling things off the conveyor belts, and I was just like, *Oh my god, this is the best show ever*. It was incredible. Then there would be these workers with these giant roughly made containers that were like cyclone fencing and big timbers on wheels, and there were these big cages and they'd put these clothes in there and separate them and take them away, so there was this crazy performance going on there. A lot of things I would be attracted to some aspect of their shape or color and I would just fill my sack up and then later when I got home really examine what I had. I had started the work at the time when a lot of people I knew were getting sick and I was visiting people in the hospital during AIDS and there had started to get the sense, not really of replacing people but making more people. Or making some kind of tangible evidence of something, of people who were disappearing.

OTTERSON: That is why you started buying the clothes?

NANNEY: That is why I started taking the pictures.

OTTERSON: But did you start buying the clothes knowing you were going to take the pictures?

NANNEY: No, I was just thinking something could come of it. At first, I was just replicating the totem sort of things. I built a few and they were kind of my size, 5'10, and about width, then I put the clothes on, and then it turned around that I was taking photos in the clothes, and then I would put them in the receptacles.

EARNEST: There is this thing when someone dies, you're put in this situation where it's like, *what do you do with all the stuff?* And, in the case of clothes, it all gets donated somewhere or thrown out, or something. There is a weird dynamic to having other people's clothes. I remember reading somewhere that Cookie Mueller didn't want anyone else to have her clothes, that there was a kind of magic to it.

OTTERSON: DNA!

EARNEST: Exactly. And at the same time, our most ethical relationship with clothing at the moment is getting old clothes. We talked so much about clothing in our earlier exchanges over email, but when you started taking on clothing as an artistic material, how did it open to you? What are the valences of it?

NANNEY: There's no way to encounter a piece of clothing and not think about who that person was. Sometimes it does become a heavy sort of psychic reverberation because you can get this feeling like, *I know who she was, and I know where she lived, I know how she lived*.

OTTERSON: But that's not the clothes you were buying by the pound?

NANNEY: Yeah.

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OTTERSON: Oh, you would imagine that person?

NANNEY: Yeah. Especially when you put it on, you could step into someone's life in a really weird way.

OTTERSON: You had to be thinking about fashion magazines too?

NANNEY: Not so much.

EARNEST: At what point did you feel that that project had ended? Was there a marker, or did you just decide, *I want to stop taking photos of myself like this?*

NANNEY: Well, I was also doing it very bare. It was just me naked with the clothes. There was no makeup, no hairdos or shoes or accessories. I wanted it to be focused, and not go in some other direction. Like there was a dealer who was saying, *why don't you put on a wig?* That seemed like taking it in a direction I wasn't really interested in. I like that you brought up Nayland because there is something that I think about a lot that they said to me once, where they refer to themselves as being "gender gaseous"—that is so much more subatomic than being "gender fluid." It's a molecular thing that is always percolating and changing.

EARNEST: I also think of Nayland as someone who had such a gender presentation evolution, from being a super femme wraith to being a big dandy daddy, and that is documented in some ways in the work. And that is also part of the path that bodies take, and our being in the world can take. When you look at the span of your work brought together, from different points in your life, how do you experience these different selves juxtaposed?

NANNEY: We all contain multitudes. We all are full of contradictions. It doesn't have to be rationalized. Things permeate.

OTTERSON: But those people in those photographs still exist, they're still inside of you.

NANNEY: Perhaps. Have you seen them?

Chuck Nanney lives and works in Oakland, CA, US. Recent solo or two-person exhibitions have taken place at Martos Gallery (with Joel Otterson), New York, NY, US (2021); Bill Arning Contemporary Art, Houston, TX, US (2021); Fierman Gallery, New York, NY, US (2018, 2017); Jenny's, Los Angeles, CA, US (2016, 2014); and Debs and Co., New York, NY, US (2003, 2001, 1999). Nanney has participated in significant group exhibitions at venues including White Columns, New York, NY, US (2015); Martos Gallery, New York, NY, US (2014); MoMA PS1, New York, NY, US (2006); Le Consortium, Dijon, FR (2004, 1998); and Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR (1998, 1995). Nanney was the recipient of the Pollock Krasner Award in 2000; and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 1996.

Joel Otterson lives and works in Los Angeles, CA, US. Recent solo or two-person exhibitions have taken place at Martos Gallery (with Chuck Nanney), New York, NY, US (2021); Royale Projects, Los Angeles, CA, US (2019); Jason Jacques Gallery, New York, NY, US (2018); and a 2014 survey at Elizabeth Dee, New York, NY, US. Significant group exhibitions include the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US (2012); The Kitchen, New York, NY, US (1994, 1985); and the 45th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, IT (1993). Otterson's work is included in the permanent collections of the Broad Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, US; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US; the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH; the Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama, JP; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, IL.

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