



2018 KRANZBERG EXHIBITION SERIES

# DAVID HUTSON

Memory & Desire:  
A Personal Exploration of  
Neon Art, Past and Present

SEPTEMBER 27, 2018—JANUARY 13, 2019

**LAUME/ER**  
SCULPTURE PARK



# A BUZZING GLOW

Neon light evokes a retro-futurist utopian-dystopia; Tokyo's Kabukicho district or 1950's Las Vegas rolled in with Blade Runner's "future" Los Angeles. Neon promises a good time to be had in the dingiest dive bars, diners and clubs. "Go downtown," as Petula Clark sang, "we linger on the sidewalks where the neon lights are pretty". Neon attracts the eye as easily as fireworks, polished to a glistened sheen, this light glides about the visual landscape untouched by mortal hand. "Let there be Neon," Rudi Stern exclaimed, "neon is sculptural, architectural and when done right, is highly aesthetic." Identifying this, a handful of contemporary artists like Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and Tracey Emin have exploited the medium. Recognizing its cross-over appeal, Laumeier Sculpture Park's 2018 Kranzberg series *David Hutson, Memory & Desire: A Personal Exploration of Neon Art, Past and Present* showcases a large-scale outdoor neon sculpture paired with Hutson's extensive collection of reclaimed and restored vintage neon signs, alongside, and in conversation with, a diverse grouping of sculptures from his current body of work.

Known locally for his neon sign conservation efforts, this exhibition sets the stage for Hutson to communicate his philosophy of this exclusive medium mixing rare earth gasses and fragile glass. "Neon has a kinetic feel, a seductive allure," and according to Hutson, a South St. Louis native, influenced by his commercial artist father, neon is grounded in place and history. Hutson developed a fascination with neon at an early age: "As a teenager I began scouring the nooks and crannies of my home city for neon relics of a bygone era." Part of that collection was seen at Laumeier in 1984 in the exhibition *Neon 1-2-3* when he was just 17. Since then, his budding fascination became a vocation, with an expanded collection and countless hours devoted to the painstaking fabrication process, he deepened his bond to neon, testing both concepts and technique.

While popular interest in neon seems to rise and fall like a roller coaster, Hutson's dedication and curiosity to the art form is unwavering and this is apparent in his own art practice. For Hutson, the words "memory" and "desire" resonate deeply within the work and have become the catalyst for the concepts forming the exhibition. "For so many people, vintage neon signs evoke strong feelings of nostalgia. It rekindles fond memories of childhood; an apparently 'simpler' or less complex life," notes Hutson.

Hutson's "tube bending" also casts a cool glow in the Park. Sited on a towering tree in Laumeier's *Way Field*, Hutson creates a significant text-based artwork that wraps around a trunk, cascading a quote from *The Mad Farmer's Poems* by celebrated American novelist Wendell Berry: "WHEN I RISE UP LET ME RISE UP JOYFUL LIKE A BIRD. WHEN I FALL LET ME FALL WITHOUT REGRET LIKE A LEAF." Hutson's work speaks both literally and metaphorically about connection to place, one of Berry's fundamental concerns, brought to life here through alchemy— a crafted language stuck to a symbol of life itself. Using the power and inspiration of nature, Hutson's piece becomes a delightful addition to our light-based sculpture collection saturating the outdoor galleries with moments of illumination.

Hutson's work *Z 54, 2015*, is a portrait of David Bowie's iconic fiery red mane, structured like an infinity mirror, a repetition of glam rock's most recognizable persona receding without end. Similarly, his work *Let Them Eat Cake (Qu'ils mangent de la brioche), 2015* features Marie Antoinette's quote set inside an animated guillotine using a series of ornate picture frames. In the 1930s, neon design was considered the epitome of high taste glamour, after World War II this slipped into seediness, a marker of the red light district, down-market and democratic. At the time, Antoinette intended that the royal staff at Versailles should feed the mob, but today the phrase has come to mean being out of touch. Either way, Hutson's "power driven" script is organized with the same beautifully grotesque qualities.

The exhibition's mixture of original work by Hutson and restored vintage signs is staged in a way to activate imaginations through this retro, yet timeless medium of bendy gas. Hutson's collection represents a flickering portrait of bygone days and defunct businesses in our region, but their reinstallation here provides a gleaming hope for the future. Each illumination littered the strip, attracting cruisers and tourists while pushing the limits of the medium, sometimes with gaudy grandeur. Included here are a series of storefront spectacles, *Big Boys Restaurant*, a jolly character presenting his customers with a hot roasted chicken;



[ this side ]  
David Hutson,  
*Let Them Eat Cake, 2015*  
mixed media, neon  
Courtesy David Hutson, St. Louis.

[ other side ]  
David Hutson,  
*Klund's Pastry Chef, ca. 1935*  
neon sign  
Courtesy David Hutson, St. Louis.

*Palace Bowl*, a behemoth billboard animating the perfect strike; *Klund's Pastry Chef*, the centerpiece to the Klund's Bakery storefront located on Gravois near Loughborough until its closure in 1986, is a linear masterpiece. These, among many others, have transformed Laumeier's galleries into an electric wonderland.

Artist Larry Rivers once said, "Neon has gaiety, joy, pageantry, circus qualities," and that "the canvas is the night. Neon is the simplest and strongest form of illustration." By presenting these two practices simultaneously, the exhibition illuminates spectacle, lays out the precise combination of decoration and messaging and highlights Hutson's exploration of his sculptural practice using a material that moves like luminous, science-fantasy.

Hutson's exhibition is local, like Laumeier, and goes straight to the uniqueness of our collection and our civic landscape, heightens our ways of looking, interacting and understanding. Hutson is an oddity in his choice of material as he continues to make new work that expresses neon's power. Exhibiting this work in parallel to reclaimed lighting highlights Hutson's desire to showcase the evolution, continued relevance and impact of neon art.

Neon is electric, it must be plugged in, and for Hutson, that's a limitation and a welcome challenge. Hutson's project is inextricably tied-up with inspiration, more specifically a representation of our local and regional creativity. Hutson's exhibition highlights our past and represents a possible future, simultaneously.

Dana Turkovic, Curator

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

David Hutson is a neon artist with a specialization in theater production. He has exhibited his artwork nationally and is a consultant for internationally renowned theatrical productions. Hutson lectures extensively about his collection of restored vintage neon signs and serves on numerous historic preservation commissions with a focus on the care and maintenance of objects related to Historic Route 66. Hutson is a key member of the Neon Heritage Preservation Committee of the Route 66 Association of Missouri. Hutson lives in St. Louis, Missouri and owns Neon Time in St. Charles, Missouri where he creates his own work and restores neon signs.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### COFFEE + CONVERSATION

Saturday, December 8, 2018 / 11:00 a.m.

Join David Hutson in conversation with local artist Bill Christman.

### COFFEE + CONVERSATION

Saturday, January 12, 2019 / 11:00 a.m.

Join artist David Hutson for a lecture on the history of neon in St. Louis.

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Engaging the community through art and nature



This series is generously supported by Nancy and Ken Kranzberg.