

In Broken Light: Artist Talk at Spadina Museum

Ry Van Der Hout in conversation with Adrien Sun Hall and Adam Harris Levine

Ry Van Der Hout: Yeah, I just wanted to thank Spadina Museum so much for having me. This exhibition has grown over the months, and they've really been welcoming in seeing that grow. So I want to thank Alexandra, Hyesoo, and Kate for really working with me to make this all come together, as well as the interpreters who've done an amazing job of bringing these stories to life. I also wanted to thank Tiber, who you all got to meet, and who really kind of introduced me to the museum for the first time, and created this real connection that I felt to the space and that I've been building for the last several months. The Toronto Arts Council: this exhibition happened because of the Toronto Arts Council, and the support that they provide is really amazing. And Adrien has done so much work. I just wanted to thank you so much for getting everybody here, making everything so clear, and really bringing beautiful words around the exhibition. And the United team, for doing so much work behind the scenes to support events like this and my practice. And Adam, thank you so much. Your conversations over the last, I guess, almost a year or so have really reached the bedrock of my practice and changed the way that I make art. So I'm really excited to be in conversation.

Adrien Sun Hall: Thanks so much, Ry. I just want to echo Ry's gratitude and thank you all for being here. This has been an amazing project to work on, and I'm very grateful to Ry for inviting me into the fold of your amazing vision. And thanks also to Adam for being here. So Adam Harris Levine is the associate curator of European art [at the Art Gallery of Ontario], and Adam is a specialist in medieval art and has had a continuing conversation with Ry about this body of work, which is why we've invited Adam. I'm going to be guiding this conversation today, and we'll have a short amount of time at the very end for questions.

So you've all seen the work throughout the house in five chapters. We're really envisioning the house as this kind of container for stories, in the same way that a book may be. And so I was thinking, Ry, that it would be nice for you to start out just talking a little bit about what drew you to this house, to Spadina, and how this project began to take shape, and maybe if you could talk a little bit about your experience of going on tours.

Ry: Yeah, for sure. So before receiving the grants to do this exhibition, I went on a tour to kind of familiarize myself and to think about what my personal connections would be to the house. And I was lucky enough to be on Tiber's tour, and everybody got to hear their amazing story about how an object drew them and connected them to the history of this house. And I felt really connected to that story of how an object can kind of guide you, and how you can become

embedded in history through objects, and how we learn about our present through history. It felt very visceral to me, and really kind of drew me to want to be here.

And then I had an amazing opportunity to talk with so many people who work here, who are embedded in conservation, who are descendants of the Austins. James, thank you so much. And it formed all these stories. And I was at a residency in Banff, and these stories were kind of swirling around my mind. And I realized I had just read this book by Hanya Yanagihara, *To Paradise*, which charts the story of a house on Washington Square over the course of 200 years in three different stories. And I just felt like this house is that book. It was all kind of laid out there, and as soon as that catalyzed the exhibition, it just came right together, and it felt like every piece knew what it wanted to be.

Adrien: Amazing. I deeply appreciate how salacious the stories are, and I think it really speaks to this idea of the historical record, and which stories are told. And Tiber's is very different than other historical interpreters' tours. And so history is, you know, written by the victors, as they say, or written by the interpreters.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about this process of rupture and repair. So the breaking of the glass, which you've all kind of witnessed, and then this painstaking repair of the glass using Tiffany stained glass techniques, which was very much in fashion during the 1920s and 1930s, in which the upstairs of the house is preserved. So you've been working with this process for about two or three years now, and I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about what keeps bringing you back.

Ry: I think this rupture, repair, or shattering has been with me for as long as I can remember. When I was a little kid, the first piece of art I remember making was this chandelier made of light bulbs. I would stay up late at night, and my parents had no idea what I was up to. And I gathered all the light bulbs in the house, which I got in a whole lot of trouble for, and I hot glued them together into this kind of amorphous chandelier. And as the light bulb, which was plugged in at the centre, heated up this kind of orb of light bulbs, they kind of one by one fell and shattered. And I just remember this feeling of the wholeness and the brokenness, and this kind of back and forth happening. And then I kind of came to stained glass as this medium that held kind of wholeness and brokenness. It's only made possible through its many broken parts. And so this repair as kind of an almost spiritual act has, I think, been with me from the beginning.

Adrien: That's great. I think I may have talked about this with some of the groups, but a lot of these works, you've also been referring to the language of Christendom, of stained glass in chapels. And I heard you both having a very interesting conversation about the history of brokenness in stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals, and Adam, I wonder if you could share a bit about that with the audience.

Adam Harris Levine: Sure. So one thing that's really fascinating about a cathedral: when we picture Gothic cathedrals built in the 12, 13, 1400s, we picture these big soaring windows filled with colourful stained glass. And even being able to build structures with windows that large really is a result of technology, architectural technology that comes about in the 1200s. All of a

sudden, we're able to build buildings that are much taller and have less masonry and more openings that contain these heavy glass windows. And breaking, brokenness, is embedded in the very history of it. Cathedrals would set aside a budget every year to have someone live on the grounds, and their full-time profession was to repair windows, because they were constantly breaking. So it's built into the very design and structural function of a cathedral to have a full-time glazier. And that can be any number of things, like ordering new glass to fit into those spaces, or sometimes reusing earlier glass. And we see this with the Narcissus piece. Ry cited this really explicitly. Around the outer edge of Gothic windows, there's kind of a white stripe that runs around the perimeter, and sometimes we actually find these broken sentences or bits of text from earlier windows that appear when they're replacing broken parts. So breaking is just intrinsic to medieval stained glass. And I think that's so interesting, that you came to that kind of naturally, like inherently, in working with the material. You found this fundamental material truth that we see over hundreds and hundreds of years with the medium.

Ry: I think I came to it out of this fascination. If you look at very early medieval stained glass, the bodies are very strange. They look kind of broken, and there is this kind of style even within the paintings. But when you look at the glass, it's fundamentally strange, especially within the bodies, and often the border imposes this sense of control on the body. And so I had started making these pieces that had really lush ornamental borders in that style. And before talking to you, I thought that the artists were just like, "No, we're doing weird stuff, and we're gonna do these weird bodies, but we're gonna show that we know what we're doing by having this very geometric border." And so I was really interested in that relationship between control and fragmentation, or falling apart. And it was only in talking to you that I was like, oh, this is actually the centuries of repair, of this ongoing role that repair plays in our lives, of never being the same and kind of constantly changing. But the bodies must be much harder to hold intact than the border.

Adam: Well, if it's okay, I think the weirdness is worth sitting with for a second, because to me, medieval art history professionally is just full of queer people, right? And being interested in medievalism in general is a very queer thing. And I think that weirdness, the strangeness of how distant it feels, how otherworldly it can be, is probably one of the reasons that queer people are so drawn to the Middle Ages. There's just an interesting fantasy that we can project upon it. And then the thing that I would mention also is revivalism, right? Gothic revivalism is a very queer thing too. Horace Walpole, who's regarded as the first real figure in Gothic revivalism, wrote the first Gothic novel. He lived in this place called Strawberry Hill, which is regarded as the first Gothic revival building. He was very, very gay. And the stories that you unpack in this show really strike me as deeply embedded with that: the longing, whispers of possible queerness, rumours, hauntedness, longing for someone that is dead, a body transfixed in death, and undergoing some form of gender reassignment. All of this is very, very Gothic revival. And so, yeah, I just think your work belongs here, right? It just feels embedded in medieval stained glass and queerness and a structure like this, and where it fits in our imaginary today.

Adrien: Yeah, that's amazing. I did not know there were so many queer people in medieval studies, but I should have known. It's certainly interesting. Ry, you drew a lot on not just the stories of historical interpreters, but James Thompson, who's here, who's a descendant of the

Austin family. Even if there is not overt queerness, there's certainly queer affect, maybe we could say, present in a lot of these stories, and you really made them visible.

I kind of want to go back to the place of the body, because actually, Ry, in a lot of your recent works prior to this show, the body is very central: the body going through transfiguration and kind of disassembly and reassembly. You often have portraits of queer people, people in drag, trans people, self-portraits. And the body is interestingly, I think, kind of absent from a lot of these works, with the exception of the piece *Tiber*. And I think, in a way, to me, these sculptures really represent this movement towards being freestanding, and really the sculptures being figurative in themselves. And so I wonder if you could speak just a little bit about that relationship of photography and the figure to this movement into sculpture.

Ry: Yeah, I think most of the portraits that I've made are self-portraits, as well as my closest friends and people who I love. And I fell in love with these stories. But I think in representing them, there wasn't a need to include the body, because they were so bodily. It didn't need to be done twice within the work. And the body of the viewer becomes very, I think, visceral through the use of mirrors, but also through the use of mirrors that really break you up, fragment you, and that don't show you. So you're constantly kind of thinking about your own absence, in a way. And so that breaking up, which I've been thinking a lot about in terms of personal transformation that I've been going through, gets done both to the house, through the reflection, as well as to the viewer. And it felt like it didn't need more.

Adrien: Yeah, I think it's very interesting also that you made a lot of references to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work, like with the piece down here, *Orpheus, Twice*. The body is very central to his work, which was often in tribute to his partner Ross, who died of AIDS in 1991. But they're not figurative works; they're minimalist works that involve the viewer's body, and so I think some of your work does that in very much the same way.

I wanted to speak a little bit about your kind of fascination with sacred objects, and as a Jewish person, also engaging with this history of really ornate ornamentation within Christendom that is very different from histories of ornamentation within Judaism, and maybe where some of that fascination has started from. And Adam, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

Ry: Yeah, we had a conversation about this a few months ago, about why Jews end up so fascinated by this, but also are often the historians writing about these things. And I think that the aesthetics of Judaism can sometimes be restrained, sometimes intentionally. And Christendom had this real system of auratic response to space in order to bring people in. And I think just as a young person, you're slightly on the outside, and you're just kind of looking around, and you're like, there's something there that feels kind of special, but not quite mine. And so there's a bit of voyeurism to these objects that I've just always, from as young as I can remember, been fascinated by. But I'm so much more curious about your history of that, and your relationship to other people who are doing this professionally.

Adam: Well, yeah. So much like queers in medieval art history, there's also a lot of Jews in medieval art history, and yeah, I'm in that Venn diagram overlap. So one issue is that because

of the historic itinerancy of Jewish people, it can be very difficult to construct a visual culture history of Jewish people, because we're constantly dropping everything, moving over and over again out of one town until we get kicked out of the next one, and accused of causing the plague in the next one. And so there's something just materially meaty about Catholic or Christian visual culture, because you have buildings, you have paintings, you have sculptures, you have books. And, yeah, I don't know. Growing up, the parts of Judaism that I loved the most were the ones that honestly felt the most Catholic: lighting a havdalah candle, smelling the spices at havdalah, the ritual of processing the Torah around the sanctuary. These are deeply medieval things, right? They felt strange to me growing up. They felt so unusual; they stand out from modern or postmodern life. Whereas this is the bread and butter, right, of Catholicism: incense and shiny things.

So to go to what you were talking about, the absence of the body: that is the central challenge of Christianity when you're trying to kind of sell it as a religion, is that the Godhead ascended after his death, so there is no body to worship. So we end up with things like the host standing in for the body. You're just dealing with this absence. There's nowhere to direct your veneration.

Adrien: Yeah, I mean, the figure is so present, though, in the history of Christian art. There's so much figurative art in stained glass, which Ry is referring to, but also in the veneration of the body, like looking at reliquaries and relics, and that's so absent from Judaism, which I think is really interesting. And something I think is really interesting about your piece *The Shattering*, Ry: I was thinking a little bit after this conversation we had about how text is the thing that is venerated within Judaism. So, looking sometimes at Torah cases, there's something maybe there with the piece *The Shattering*, and how you're taking this story, this creation story, and creating a vessel around that.

Ry: Yeah. So pre-temple, pre the destruction of the temple, Judaism was very ritually based, and the rabbi who you hear speaking in that story, Rav Jericho Vincent, is kind of conjuring that back in their work, in a kind of movement that's happening in New York right now. And I think that there is this meatiness that you said, in experiencing visceral ritual that takes you out of your body and out of your head and places you in direct relationship with something beyond you. And so I think that's what that piece was conjuring: looking to this story of creation that I never grew up with, and I don't think a lot of people necessarily have heard of, but that feels so poignant to our times, and feels like a way to understand where we're at now, and then to kind of transform what that vessel looks like.

Adrien: Just to go back to the idea of the reliquary, I think perhaps the most obvious reliquary is the piece *After-breath*, which is in the drawing room on the second floor. So that piece is very influenced by Bertie Austin, who passed away quite young of tuberculosis, perhaps through this narrative of being made into his father's image and being pressured to take on the family business. And you work with the figure of the reliquary a few times in your work, and I'm wondering if you could just speak a little bit about what keeps you returning to this form.

Ry: So what I keep coming back to is this kind of frame-object relationship that happens in reliquaries, where you have this gross 400-year-old hand that may or may not be from a specific

saint, and then this gold frame that's bejewelled, that isn't actually the valuable thing. The valuable thing is the 400-year-old hand, but the frame bestows this sense of value upon this thing you wouldn't otherwise want to even cast your eyes upon. And there's this back-and-forth relationship of power. And so often when I'm thinking and working with reliquaries, I work a lot with absence at the centre of them: the thing that's meant to be there isn't there, has fallen out, or can't be controlled by the frame. And so here it's really the breath, this loss of breath that happens from tuberculosis, but was also something that I was experiencing at one point, at a hard point in my life, having panic attacks and feeling like my breath was always behind me, something that I couldn't quite hold on to. And so this lack of control over your body, or pushing a body to a point that it can no longer handle. But I think that often reliquaries become read through our own meanings and the meanings of the makers, and they don't always speak to what's inside of them, which I was really fascinated by. There's one in the AGO that you showed me that's being researched right now as to what's actually in there, because the story is separate from what's inside.

Adam: So, basically, 100%. Relics and reliquaries have this really interesting symbiotic relationship, because they cannot function without each other, right? A reliquary without a relic is just a gold cup, or a fancy bejewelled object, and a relic without a reliquary is functionally an abject object, right? It is just a fragment of a bone, or worse yet, a skull, or a shrivelled-up organ. And in medieval Christianity, theologians believed that reliquaries basically allowed lay people to see the relic for what it really was. They gave this abject object a kind of skin, a beautiful skin, that would make it easy for anyone to see the inherent majesty of this shrivelled-up finger or tooth inside of it. So it's a beautiful concept, right? That it's really just there to help you to understand what's really there.

A fascinating thing about reliquaries is that, starting from maybe the 1300s onward, they often start to take on anatomical shapes, like hands or feet or heads, and there is no real correlation between the shape of the object and the part of the body the relic inside comes from. So when you see one of those gilded feet, it doesn't necessarily mean that the thing inside is a big toe. It could be a hand or something. And hands are really interesting. We've got these great hands. They often come with an arm, and they're making this gesture, and that's because a bishop would carry it in the procession and would basically extend his arm in this blessing gesture. These objects allow saints who died hundreds of years before to walk the earth again in their reanimated form, and they also visualize the promise of Christian resurrection: that one day, if you enter heaven after the second coming of Christ, everyone's bodies will become reanimated, and they'll have this beauty again. So it's a way of visualizing that promise of Christianity.

And yeah, so I just think that your engagement with them is so spot on, right? This hope that the family has, completely dashed by their son dying in Cairo, and then the hopelessness that the family feels about what the future could hold, and then that nearly saint-like status, and then even this magical reproduction. If you walk around Spadina House, the same photograph of Bertie appears over and over and over again. At one point, it's transferred into an oil painting, but otherwise we see the same photo, multiple versions. It's like an icon. It's like a Christian icon. The image of him starts reproducing and spreading all around as the cult of him grows. So it's very, very theologically spot on.

Ry: Yeah, I think that was one of the early things I was really drawn to, in touring the house with James, and him talking about how the shattering at the centre of the family, and really at the centre of this house, is Bertie's death, and that the house almost becomes like a reliquary for these portraits. Maybe that's backwards logic, but they're kind of spread everywhere, and they ornament this small portrait, and it really draws us into this specific loss.

Adrien: I mean, what you just said, the house as a reliquary, is an interesting idea, and I think that is a way to think about this whole house, and especially the ornamentation that's been preserved from this specific period of the 1920s and 1930s, which is very much also designed to indicate the wealth and status of the Austin family that lived here. So for that to be also preserved in time without the inhabitants, I think, is a very similar kind of relationship. And I think in a way your sculptures, Ry, have really brought this sense of presence, or point to the absence of real living presence within this house, which was quite a beautiful thing.

I want to switch gears away from the past to think a little bit about the future, which I know is something that influences a lot of your work: ideas about queer futurity, queer utopia, and this idea of a queer utopia always being just out of reach. We've talked a lot about that, coming from the writings of José Esteban Muñoz, who's a queer theorist, sadly departed. And this is really evident to me in your piece *Open Wing Death*, which we saw on the third floor, which is on the screen right now, which really acts as a portal. And similarly, the piece *Orpheus, Twice* also has this sense of a portal. And so there's this threshold that I think is being created in a lot of your sculptures, and I wonder if you could speak to the place of futurity and portals in your work.

Ry: Yeah, I'm in real time drawing connections that I haven't fully put together before. But I think I grabbed onto that text by Muñoz. I found it early in coming to my own queerness, which happened relatively late in life for me. I was almost 30, and there was this real kind of undoing that had to happen, and also this feeling of being late, which is also written about a lot in queer theory: lateness, and feeling kind of behind. And I think that this idea of utopia, or even selfhood, being a projection of the future, or something that's always in the becoming, felt quite grounding to me in that lateness: that I wasn't doing it wrong, and I wasn't not where I was meant to be. And yeah, I think that book was a portal to me, actually. I think it was something that I was able to step through and feel okay about myself. And there's a lot of back and forth around how people feel about that text and its utopianism, in a way. I don't think that it's actually that utopian, but there's a part of that. But I think that belonging in that, and the knowing that we're not here yet, felt personal as well as about us as a people.

Adrien: Yeah, the sense of "we're not here yet." I thought about the moth and the butterfly. They're two animals: one is really kind of demonized, within conservation certainly, as a bringer of entropy and destruction, and the butterfly is often this beautiful symbol of rebirth. But of course, they're two sides of the same coin. But this sense that our most fully realized versions of ourselves might not be here, I think that is a really beautiful message in your work, and some of the lives that were lived in this house, perhaps they did not get to be here yet, in their fullest selves.

I want to talk a little bit, attached to futurity, about your inquiry into space and space research. The piece *Open Wing Death* also, to me, looks like an '80s time machine, and I would just love to crawl inside it. But previous work of yours looked at a Japanese satellite model that looks very much like a disco ball. So if there ever was a symbol toward your futurity, space might be the way. And you've also used a bit of sound research from NASA. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that in *The Shattering*.

Ry: Yeah, so I think the Ajisai satellite that brought me to that piece, *To Reflect Everything*, which basically looks like a disco ball mixed with a satellite, which is a real object that's still hovering around us today, really also felt like this magical object finding me. It was exactly the thing that I was trying to say, and all I needed to do was reproduce this object that's never been on Earth while I was alive, and so I made basically a scale replica of it. But yeah, I think the disco ball is this space of transformation as well as utopia. Muñoz writes about how you go into this dark, sticky room and you shine one light on the disco ball, and it transforms it into utopia, and then it also conjures the bodies within that room. But I think I lost part of the original question.

Space. So, space. I think space had been in my work for a while. It was something that keeps weaving in and out, and I think maybe, yeah, it's a desire to look at things from far away, to dissect things not from our own vantage point, maybe a non-human vantage point as well, and to think a bit beyond ourselves. I think that there's a lot of darkness right now in the way the space programs are happening. It's very concerning. But there is this glimmer of something being beyond us within it as well, which I'm drawn to, which kind of echoes throughout.

Adrien: Did you talk about the audio in the installation?

Ry: Yeah. So the audio is of Rav Jericho Vincent telling this really amazing story of the beginning of the universe, but then the background is sonifications of the black hole at the centre of our galaxy, done by NASA. So they take images of space and they calibrate what they would be through sound, and so that's what's echoing throughout that. And then the light projected onto the vessel is images of space as well as our planet from the European Space Agency. So those become kind of shattered around the room.

Adrien: And maybe, just as a closing thought, Adam, I'm wondering what you think about the role of futurity in your own investigation of art history, and how that's present within Ry's work.

Adam: Yeah, I have to admit that I spend more time thinking about the now than the future. But I think maybe I would be interested in thinking about paradigms like the glazier who works for a cathedral, whose job it is every day to just replace little things that break. And I think that there's something really beautiful there. There are these figures in the Middle Ages, and that's why I find it so romantic, and retreat into it, in a kind of way. But yeah, I don't know. I think I'm interested in what future roles there might be, like that glazier who gets to do a job like that, where it's just their job to care for something beautiful, and when it breaks, not freak out, and just replace a little piece of glass, and maybe modify it in some way. And I think rather than

trying to build something grand and new, maybe in the future we might just be more drawn to that kind of instinct to just tend beautiful things. Is that okay?

Ry: Yeah. No, I think that's, you know, after hearing that story a few months ago about glaziers working, I kind of project myself in there a little bit. But I've always been working with my own breaking and my own choices. And I was just in residency at MASS MoCA, a month ago, I guess, and these three 12-year-old girls broke into my studio, and they shattered the glass in my studio. And I woke up the next morning to this text: "Oh, Ry, so sorry that all your work got broken." Which I was really sad about, because the *Tiber* piece was there, just finished the day before, and I was worried about what might have happened. But they broke mostly clear glass. And even then, I didn't feel like, oh, this is something terrible that's happened to me. I kind of set about repairing my glass. I felt like, oh, this has been my work and will be my work. And I got to think about these girls and what they're going through, and there's more conversations that are happening there, because it was quite an event. But I think the uncontrolledness of that breaking felt like it found the right studio.

Adrien: I think that's a beautiful place to end. Just looking for a little round of applause. I'm told we have very limited time, but for two questions.

Audience member: I'm sorry, it's probably going to be a very pedestrian question after all of what you've been talking about. But could you talk about maybe just some of the challenges of working within a historical building, as opposed to a commercial gallery?

Ry: Yeah, I mean, you can't really touch anything in a permanent way. But actually, I worked as an installer when I was right out of my undergrad, and so I got this deep sense of how you move around spaces, how you care for spaces, how you think about everything that could possibly happen. And so I think the fact that all these pieces were made for here ended up being really important, because their anchor points were thought about in their making. And so, you know, nothing affects the house in any way. But building a piece like the one on the third floor, and making sure that it feels integrated without actually touching anything in a way that affects it in the future, just required a lot of care. And I think that care is basically at the centre of the repair that I'm doing in my practice, so it felt maybe natural to do. And I just felt honoured, honestly, to be here, so I really wanted to care for the spaces that I was in.

Adrien: Okay. With that, I think we'll end. I'm just going to pass the mic back to Alex.

Alexandra (Spadina Museum): Great. Well, sorry, just getting a little tangled up there. I really don't want to keep people a long time, but I want to echo a lot of the thanks that we've already had, because I think it's just been such an incredible evening, and we are so delighted to have the work here at Spadina. It's been a wonderful journey that we've been on with Ry. So I think the first thanks really go to Ry, for creating the incredible work, and to Adrien, for curating it and giving both the team at Spadina and all of our visitors such a wonderful experience as a journey around the house. And I think, as you've seen, the work just feels like it belongs here in so many different ways, and that's not always the case when you bring contemporary art into a historic space like this. So an incredible thank you. Thank you so much for the conversation this

evening. It's been fascinating, engaging; I think we've all come away with so many things that we've learned. So a big thank you, Ry, Adam, and Adrien, for that. A big thank you to Rebecca and Mel and the team at United Contemporary for putting this event together for us. A really big thank you to Tiber, to James, and to Bo, for those conversations that inspired the different pieces and led to those layers of meaning at Spadina. And we're really grateful to the Toronto Arts Council for funding this program stream called Animating Historic Sites. This is such a great example of how it does exactly that, and allows people to see new spaces in fresh ways. And then lastly, to end with an enormous thanks to the Spadina team, for sharing this exhibition with our visitors through the tours, as Ry has mentioned, and to all of those colleagues in Toronto History Museums who were involved in getting the exhibition set up and ready, especially Hyesoo and Kate, and our colleagues Janelle and Mark from the collections team. And then a big thank you to all of you for making it out on such a grey and wet evening. I hope this has brought a little bit of colour and light and joy into your week. Thank you so much to everybody.