

The New York Times

Artists Reveal a Dark Side of the Bourse's Crowning Glory

Gerard & Kelly reverse the message of a 19th-century frieze in 'Panorama,' a video of emancipation at Marian Goodman Gallery.

by Joseph Giovannini (November 16, 2022)



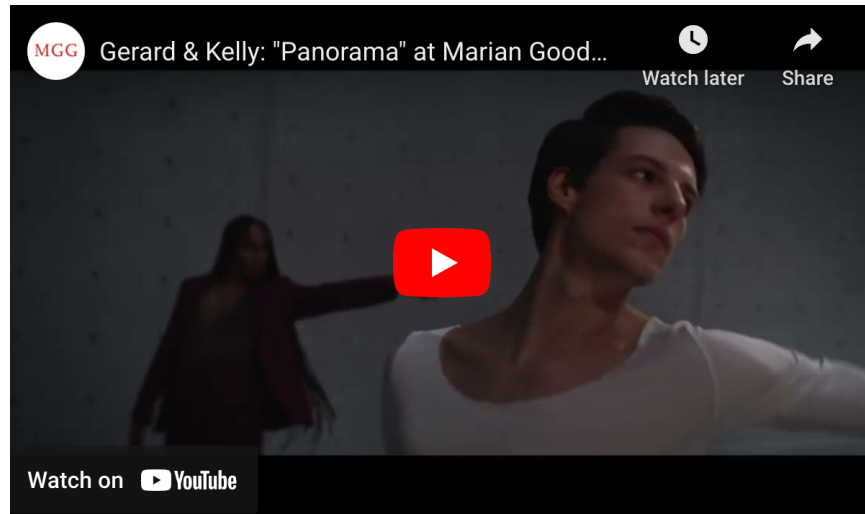
A still from Gerard & Kelly's video "Panorama," 2021, inside Paris's Bourse de Commerce.
Credit: Gerard & Kelly and Marian Goodman Gallery

Beauty sometimes has a way of thwarting scrutiny, and the sheer artistic bravura of the mural that circles the Bourse de Commerce in Paris, just beneath its glass cupola, usually reduces connoisseurs to puddles of rapt admiration.

But in their 22-minute video, "Panorama," now at the Marian Goodman Gallery in Manhattan, Gerard & Kelly, a Paris-based American team of artist-directors who interpret architecturally significant buildings through dance, took on the intimidating grandeur of the mural, lifting the veil of its mastery. And they found disturbing attitudes lurking in the beauty.

When architects of the Bourse de Commerce designing in the Enlightenment, conceived the circular, open-air wheat exchange around 1763, the center still held. Everything in the three-story, classically ordered building had a place generated from the central point in the interior courtyard. In an 1889 remodeling, the monument acquired a panoramic 360-degree frieze about initiating trade with natives abroad, at the apogee of French academic painting and the height of France's commercial empire. Industrial capitalism drove a globalizing economy. Non-western peoples of the world, depicted in the mural as exotics, had a subordinate place in a new colonial order under the spell of Europe's "civilizing" role.

The heroic frieze was France's Sistine Chapel, only God here was replaced by a Caucasian accountant sitting at a table officiating over intercontinental trade.



https://youtu.be/X7IXFhrCE_E

The civilization exported by industrial capitalism was not so civilizing. The artfully but naïvely biased mural aestheticized the racism, social inequality, and power inequities of colonial enterprise, a picture of what the scholar Edward Said called “orientalism.” When they weren’t painted as noble savages in the nude, the colonized peoples were portrayed as happy campers decked out in colorful robes.

From its 18th-century origins as a marketplace, the Bourse went through many incarnations of form and use, including futures trading, but in 1998, the computerization of the futures market left the monument without a use.

In 2016, the ravenous French collector François Pinault leased the building as an exhibition space for contemporary art and hired the Japanese minimalist Tadao Ando to convert the building. The architect confirmed its concentric character by nesting a 30-foot-tall cylinder of concrete inside, a circular monument within a circular monument. His plain, palette-cleansing wall created a clean, well-lighted backdrop for art and performance, one that privileges the mural above by framing it from below.

Enter Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly. In their other site-specific performances, usually in domestic buildings like the Schindler House in Los Angeles and Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye outside Paris, their choreographies interpret the architecture like texts, peeling back appearances to reveal meanings. Where one episode in the mural represents North American Indians acquiescing to a white man in his pith helmet, the two artists create a counternarrative to dislodge such toxic images by collaging modern dance, classical ballet, avant-garde music, popular song and lyrics into performance. In “Panorama,” two dancers from the Paris Opera Ballet, Guillaume Diop and Germain Louvet, and one from the cabaret world, Soa de Muse, attempt to civilize the mural in reverse. The character played by de Muse, a native of Martinique, swears at an image of Columbus sailing in the clouds above the scenes, patriarch of it all.



The dancers performed in the Bourse, beneath a panoramic 360-degree frieze installed during an 1889 remodeling. In it, non-Western peoples of the world, are depicted as exotics in a new colonial order under the spell of Europe's "civilizing" role. Credit: Julien Mignot for The New York Times

The performance liberates the "natives" from the top-down colonial structure of the mural. The abstract artistic language of the choreography and script allows the artists to slip past the literal depictions of the mural into elliptical dance fragments. With jump cuts, oblique camera angles, and a telegraphic style that short-circuits sequential narrative, Gerard & Kelly achieve parity with the mural, but not dominance or erasure: Video and mural comment on each other, two sides of a coin. The artists don't use 21st-century abstraction to mock 19th-century representation.



Germain Louvet, Soa de Muse and Guillaume Diop at the Bourse de Commerce in "Panorama."
Credit: Gerard & Kelly and Marian Goodman Gallery

Rather the building and mural are the necessary stage and trampoline for the critique. The cast of three dancers — Black, queer, and trans, at center-stage, perform a male pas de deux and then a pas de trois. In an intersection of abstraction and representation, the dancers excerpt 19th-century classics — “Swan Lake,” “La Bayadère” — to a score by a once-marginalized American composer, Julius Eastman — himself Black, gay, poor (and eventually homeless). The tableau dansant reframes the mural — and ballet, dissolving some of its social hierarchies. The two ballet dancers might never step outside their usual gender roles in the Paris Opera Ballet to dance with each other, nor partner with a cabaret dancer who sings in her native Creole (created when France colonized the native language).

Declaring intellectual independence, the Martinique dancer raps, “A civilization that chooses to close its eye to the most crucial problems is a damaged civilization ... moribund ... decadent.”

As in a Godard film in which the director cracks open the story by showing the filming of the film, the directors of the video shout “cut,” and the dancing stops and the crew films the dancers as they playfully conflate the served-and-servant roles from the mural, equals in an act of social courtesy and friendship.

An allegory of emancipation, “Panorama” shakes subservient, marginalized figures free from the power structures painted into the mural. The video culminates in a cathartic storm in which the centered building and the mural’s social hierarchy lose their dehumanizing grip, freeing both the dancer and the dance.