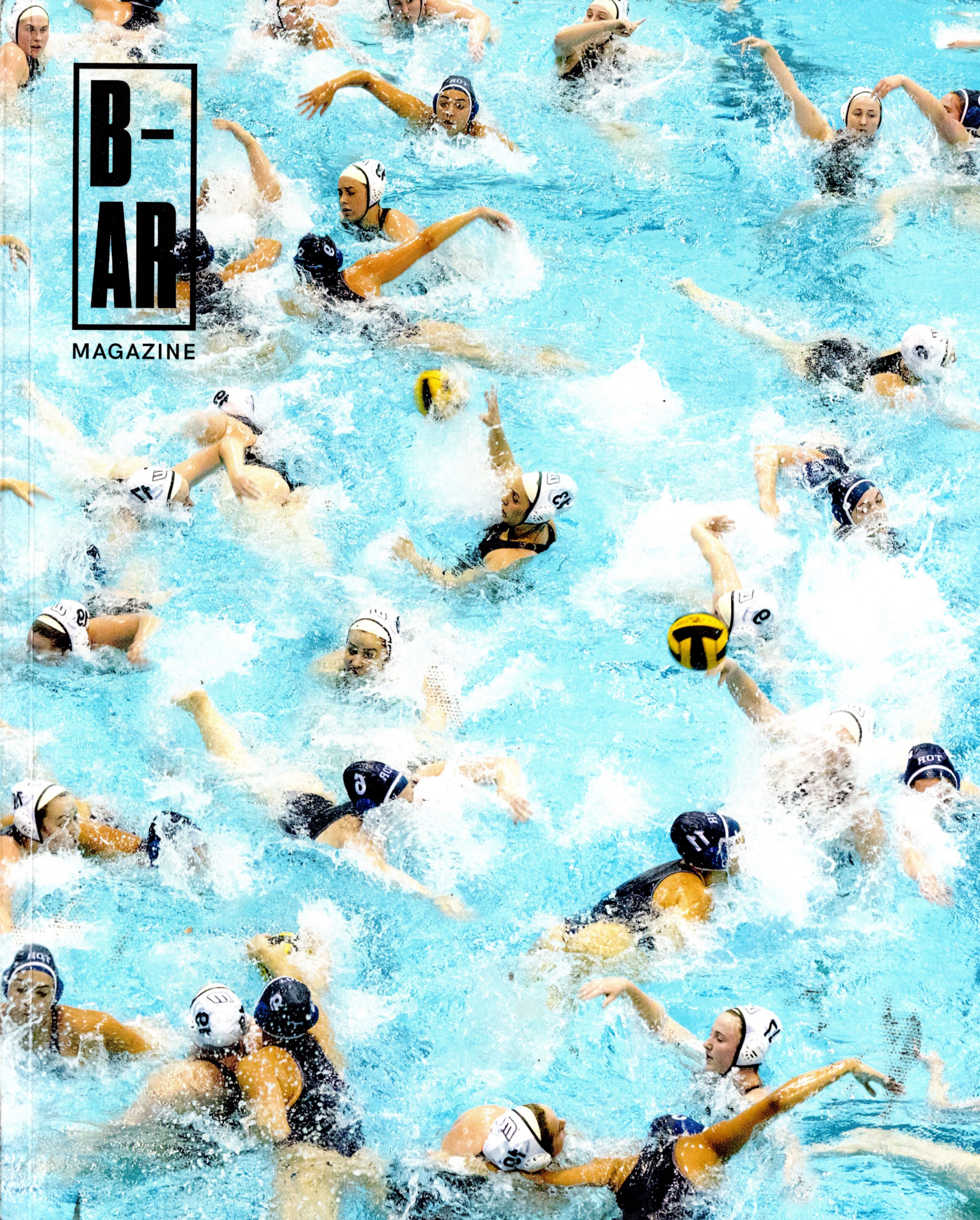


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# BOSTON — ART REVIEW

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**Cover Image**  
Pelle Cass, "Crowded Fields," 2018.

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# A RESIDENCY

A person is lying on their side in a dark, futuristic environment. The scene is lit with vibrant blue and red lights, creating a moody atmosphere. The person is wearing a dark, form-fitting outfit. In the background, there are some thin, vertical structures that look like reeds or thin poles. The overall aesthetic is sci-fi or cyberpunk.

# REFLECTION

Interview by S. Krum  
Wright with contributions  
from Maggie Cavallo

INTERVIEW



Castledrone is a one-and-a-half room gallery set deep inside an inconspicuous factory building in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Boston. To enter, you have to call the number on the front door before being ushered down a twisting hallway, wondering just what you're walking into. Founded in 2014, Castledrone is a DIY passion project by collaborative duo (and newlywed couple) Maggie Cavallo and Anthony Palocci Jr., who have been working as artists, teachers, and curators in the Boston area for over a decade. They envision it as a donation of space, assistance, and documentation to artists.

It is a notably contemporary gallery. The artists they work with are formally experimental and aesthetically diverse, yet united by an insightful sociopolitical engagement. Castledrone seems to center the notion of art as a radical act, presenting new pathways for artists to merge the political with sublime beauty. In a city that loves to claim to be a bastion of progressiveness while having a gallery district filled with mostly traditional, white, heteronormative, apolitical art, Castledrone's presence is especially important.

Their 2018 programming was particularly successful in these regards, presenting work with strong formal qualities that also hinged on a relevance to broader social dialogues. They began the year with "Visiting," a Kickstarter-funded residency program that invited School of the Museum of Fine Arts alumna and LA-based artist Creighton Baxter to create a series of performances and drawings on-site throughout January. Documentation of her resulting project "Vulnerable Evidence" was then exhibited in March alongside paintings by Steve Locke in the exhibition "Object of Dread." Cavallo and Palocci described the show as "critical studies of image-making, alongside a united rage, one that unfolds over time, through the body, studies of security, sexuality, and the processes and materials that connect the earth, blood, and flesh."

The year closed with "Visiting: Bashezo, Xray Aims and RRLEW," a trifecta of micro-residencies and performances that ran from November 10 to December 8. Bashezo's *Space With Those Without Names* transformed the white gallery into a dark, almost sightless space, covering the floor in soft black foam and the walls in roofing paper and wire sculptures. The artist, wearing a black morphsuit, moved around the room in a two-day durational labor that evoked ideas about experience and spirit—an external context, barely knowable but always present. *Xray Aims' Three* and *No. 98* presented investigations of trust, the body, and architecture. Using a technique of temporary piercing derived from kink culture, performers' arms and legs were pierced with hypodermic needles, each end tied with elastic threads that connected to another performer's piercings. They explored their newfound limited mobility, the strings making dancing shapes in the space between. The audience bore witness to pain, play, communication, and blood—which Aims situates as a challenge to society, where blood is mostly fetishized in violence. Rachel Lewallen, under the name RRLEW, presented a one-person play inspired by Aileen Wuornos. A lesbian sex worker, Wuornos was put to death in 2002 for murdering seven of her johns who attempted to, or did, rape her. As a narrative work it was, perhaps, the most explicit of the three performances. Yet as much as it was a searing indictment of homophobic, patriarchal rape culture, it was also a story about love, and an exploration of theater stagecraft in a gallery setting.

No piece was explicit in meaning, but rather as nuanced and intermeshed as the nature of these social and political implications often are. For all of Castledrone's shows the political is consciously wading beneath the surface, waiting to be seen, yet impossible to avoid. I sat down with Cavallo and Palocci to discuss this tricky balance, its intense reward, and the role of progressive art in Boston.



Krum Wright: It feels like each show in 2018 invested in progressive politics, seriously but not exclusively. What is the role of radically charged work in Castledrone?

Anthony Palocci Jr: I think that is maybe just by virtue of the people who were performing, and in having them perform in this specific space. Also the formal qualities of the work stand out. We've seen the artists' work in other contexts like a party or event, not a gallery where there is more of a focus on the craft and form of the work. We need—we want—to offer our space to see this in a more appropriate sort of all-encompassing context.

Maggie Cavallo: Right. And with awareness of the political nature of the white-wall, capital-G "Gallery" that our space itself performs, we hope to leverage that in a way that is not devaluing or dismissing the power of the work, or mistranslating it. Not all of Bashezo's work should exist in the gallery setting. Same with RRLEW's and with Xray's. It's not like [Castledrone] is the ideal context, but something about that work, in that moment, and in this context was right.

AP: Krum, you're saying that it's politically progressive, and what I get from that is that you mean in a larger societal context. Maybe because it's a personal thing to us, because we show work that we relate to and think deeply about and see as part of the larger community that we are operating in. Seeing those kinds of voices saying certain things in that way, it's something that we respond to.

MC: Yes, there's an affinity there that maybe is felt when you see all the works together.

KW: A common theme is a unique tension between the audience as witness and the performers who are evincing pain, corporeal and/or emotional. Conversely, there is also a part of each work in "Visiting" where softness, care, or love is especially highlighted. Is that a political dialogue with identity, especially sexuality and queerness?



Bashezo, *Space With Those Without Names*, 2018. Images by Dino Rowan Trait.



**MC:** I love that softness and care can exist right by critique, right by discomfort. That we can sort of name aspects of queerness as being tenderness and care is relevant in this work. It's about holding a couple truths at the same time. It's worth noting some of Bashezo's past work has been about creating spaces for queer, trans, nonbinary folks of color; that is 100 percent rooted in care and tenderness. It makes me think about Niv Acosta and Fannie Sosa's project *Black Power Naps*; it's a similar intention. Equally, other projects Bashezo has done are clearly institutional critique centered on a different audience, or maybe subject. I felt that the context of Castledrone for *Space with Those Without Names* potentially allowed aspects of both these intentions to occur subtly at once. With Xray's navigation of their relationship with the audience: are we participants, are we not? Are the pierced performers collaborators or not? The fourth wall is completely broken in a way that's progressive; definitions are blurred in a work about trust and boundary. Then RRLEW, who is literally creating a stage, a line on the floor, says [in the gallery talk], "I am responsible to entertain my audience." So they're all all engaging formally and experimentally at the site of a viewer's experience. It's inextricable from queerness because the works develop from, among many other things, queer embodied knowledges. What feels progressive is the role of the audience, that ambiguous interaction.

**KW:** For example, Bashezo's work, the audience is acknowledged and then literally engaged.

**MC:** They're coming up and assessing you, reading you; you are engaged in the work.

**KW:** I wasn't going to go up to Bashezo; Bashezo was going to come up to me, and then walk away when they were finished.

**AP:** We were thinking, how are [the viewers] going to know what to do—what are we going to do? Direct them? Do we corral them in a certain way?



Xray Aims, *Three*, 2018.  
Images by John Syzonenko



**KW:** What was Castledrone's role in the relationship with the audiences of these performances?

**MC:** This is where some sort of educational or host facilitation comes in. I oriented every person by asking if they were familiar with Bashezo and their work. There was a safety element due to the dark room and flooring, but I also felt that orienting the viewer might allow them to more easily enter and find some understanding of the work. There's going to be less anxiousness. With Xray's performance I was more direct: "Hey, this is the type of content you're going to see—some blood, some body stuff; you can leave at any time." With RRLEW, I warned about flashing lights. Making it clear that there was a host there who wanted to offer you this entry is something I take seriously in terms of curatorial practice.

**KW:** It's interesting, when I first experienced the performances I wondered if there was an ascending order in terms of explicitness in the work about a queer or countercultural identity. With Bashezo's work I felt hesitant to over-assign the political; Xrays' piece seemed more visibly queer considering the technique and nature of the performance; and Rachel's appeared extremely straightforward in its indictment of violent mainstream cultures. Was that intentional?

**MC:** That opens up an important question. I love to think "What is more queer than a shadow figure?" you know? The idea that an aspect of an identity like queerness is visible—

**KW:** You don't think it was in all three?

**MC:** We think we can read identity through visuals. We're constantly communicating who we are outwardly. What's more powerful is the way that our images are read by other people, so us making an assumption that a body in a black morphsuit is somehow less visibly queer says more about how we see than what the work or artist is. The piece that RRLEW did in past versions has been more explicitly about Aileen Wuornos. It illustrated Rachel's interpretation of that narrative. In [the gallery talk after the final show], she talks about reflecting on "Who am I to tell this story of a sex worker? I'm not a sex worker." And changing the work with that in mind. That's interesting and good she's thinking about that responsibility, and it's also interesting that the work's formal qualities were more successful because of an ambiguity or abstraction that resulted from her reflection. What

felt progressive about these performances was that they were processual. Nobody is making an argument for a cemented ideology; everything is still up for question. In the context of identity, it's all very relational and pluralistic. You leave with a question about what is, and who is, as opposed to knowing "this work is telling me about black" in a didactic manner.

**KW:** Right, all three of the shows had a clearly key element of mystery.

**MC:** But still totally political, totally engaged. It's progressive in that somehow it can hit both tones.

**KW:** Did you find that there was also some collective connection between performance art and progressive politics?

**MC:** To exist—that is a throughline for all of them—to exist is political, as these individuals, and as these artists. Especially in Bashezo's work, which I think is partly about the taking over of a space, the inversion of the ideology that is tied to galleries, modernism, whiteness, colonialism. I think they are interested in all five senses—six, really, the spiritual sixth sense is also accessed. Smell is an important thing, touch is a really important thing, but sight is not... If we think about the idea that identity, or existence, is visual, I like to imagine the work rejects that. You can't see everything that is there but maybe you can feel it. That is actually one of the most progressive elements that I took from Bashezo's work—you can't see them, but they're there. They're still real.

**KW:** By situating these works together, their formal styles of performance greatly contrast, while the similarities of their content is highlighted. What did you come away with after working on and seeing them as a whole?

**MC:** I do think that this collection of works, seen together, is under a framework of performance art that feels really relevant to me. Growing up in my twenties in Boston, I began to make a binary between performance art and theater, or other types of live art like dance or movement. I think that impulse comes from the marginalization of performance art, a need to define itself as different in order to exist. What I'm thinking about recently is how we might be limiting what we can learn by not considering the crosshairs of these practices. These performances would not necessarily be what every curator of performance art is looking for. That feels





RRLEW, *Untitled Performance*,  
2018. Image by Tom Maio.

progressive to me, that we could be challenging what counts and what is performance art, in a contemporary context.

**KW:** Given Boston's history with performance, or provocative art, it can be difficult to find a space for it. Who else do you think is focused on this type of progressive work, and how does this work fit into the larger Boston art world?

**MC:** If I had to look out and ping where else those conversations are happening, anything that Dell Hamilton does is equally as critical—"Nine Moments for Now" (at the Harvard Cooper Gallery), a different approach than ours, more thorough, and sensitive, and from another perspective, definitely work we need. Anything that Steve Locke is making, especially in public—*Three Deliberate Grays and Love Letter to a Library*.

**AP:** Considering the Boston art scene brings me to the show that we helped Creighton with at Boston University, "Under A Dismal Boston Skyline." The way that it contextualized the things that Castledrone does was very affirming for me. That feeling of being with your people, a like-mindedness or a part of a lineage. They made it visual. To realize the threads between the work that happened previously, in previous generations...being able to link my experience of this city, in this community, to theirs, that was a special moment.

**MC:** I absolutely agree. I looked around that room and not only saw artists that we've worked with (DEAD ART STAR, Steve Locke, Creighton Baxter, Genesis Baéz, Óscar Moisés Díaz), but artists from before our time here that contextualized what we are doing today. I felt held by that exhibition; it was critical. In an even more historical context, it always seems prudent to mention the cultural entrepreneurship of the Brahmins in Boston in the nineteenth century. Their process of developing the cultural institutions of the city—the library, the symphony, and the MFA—in order to do a couple of things. One, to protect their goods, so to speak, under the guise of education. And another, I think relevant to our conversation about progressiveness, to establish boundaries between ways of making that "counted" as art worth understanding in an intellectual way, or to be considered within a context of beauty. We are still experiencing, in the DNA of the city, the residue of these distinctions. When we look at works that challenge what counts as art worth seeing, that to me, in a Boston sense, feels very progressive.

*Krum Wright is an artist, writer, and art-worker born and raised in Boston. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design before being permanently sunburned in New Orleans. He is now back in Boston, can be found on [Krumcoyote.com](http://Krumcoyote.com), and is hoping that progressive artists will slide into his DMs @Krumssamdotcom.*