



ADVERTISEMENT

ENTERTAINMENT

# Jason Lazarus, Angel Otero take divergent paths

Chicago Tribune • Published: Oct 05, 2011 at 12:00 am



A blank canvas usually looks like, well, a blank canvas — linen stretched tight across a wood frame. But sometimes a blank canvas can look like a large, white pyramid.

At 835 W. Washington Blvd., viewers can witness the results of two of Chicago's most inventive — and radically dissimilar — artists at work on the blank canvas of their choosing.

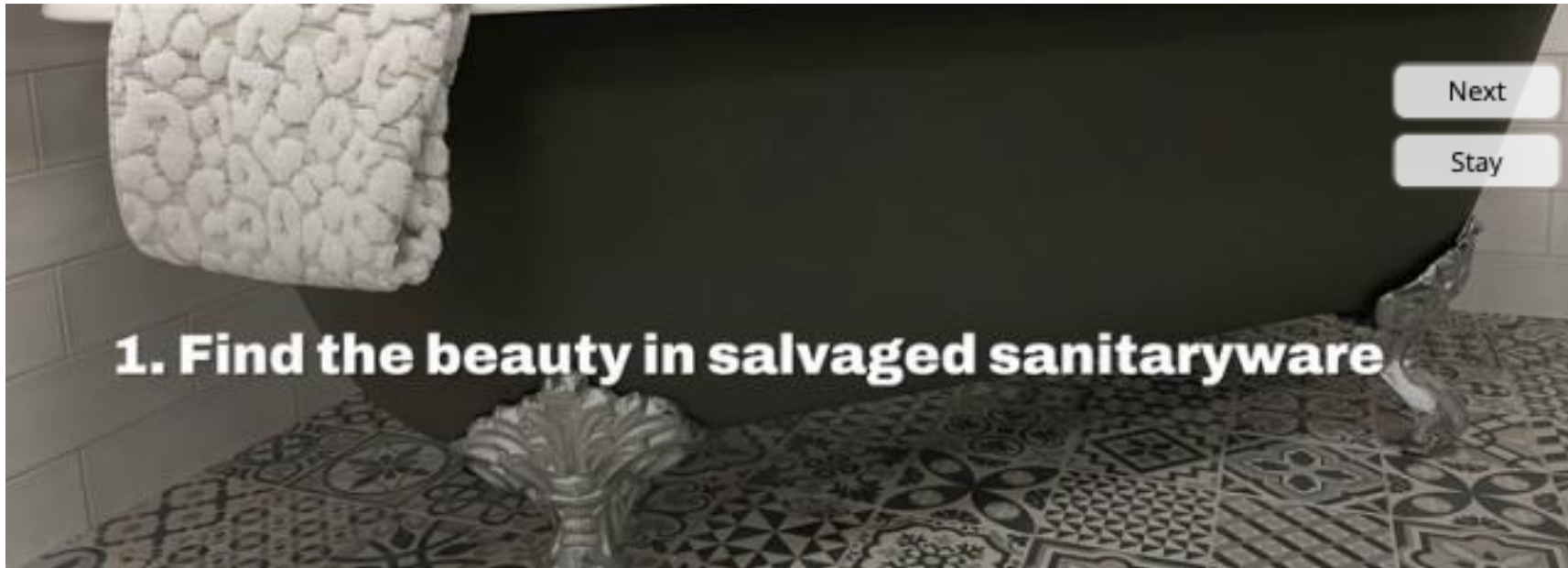
For "The Search," Jason Lazarus has filled Andrew Rafacz Gallery with a tower of white steps 24 feet long, 10 feet tall and 10 feet deep, inside of which hides an intimate room accessible only by ladder. Down the hall at Kavi Gupta Gallery, in "The Dangerous Ability to Fascinate Other People" — a swaggering but accurate title — Angel Otero hangs a series of dauntingly virtuosic, impressionistic pictures, sizable works made of bold paint applied in expressionist sweeps and daubs.

The two exhibitions share little other than an address. But their close quarters beg for comparison of such dramatically oppositional projects. Visitors to Otero's show are assured of finding his canvases bursting with color palettes that blind, envelop and stimulate. No matter the day, his paintings will be there, brimming with gestures ecstatic, loving and violent. They are, after all, conventional paintings, no matter how unconventional Otero's technique of gluing the loose, wrinkled skins of dried oil to a framed ground.

#### TOP ENTERTAINMENT VIDEOS

Top Videos: - 10 Bathroom Remodel Ideas | Real Homes





Depending on the time and date, visitors to "The Search" might encounter a full canvas or an empty one. Lazarus built his ziggurat as a platform for public events and private conversations, and dozens have been curated throughout the show's duration. Local musician Tim Kinsella recently orchestrated 10 drummers on each of the structure's 10 steps, turning it into a hypnotically percussive instrument.

Artist Carson Fisk-Vittori conducted a two-hour "object exchange" one Saturday, transforming the pyramid into a pedestal. Visitors set out coins, a plastic Lincoln head, a picture of Burt Reynolds, a toy soldier, a tampon and a pink-frosted doughnut, taking other equally random stuff in return for their offerings to the god of the gallery pyramid. Fisk-Vittori arranged and rearranged the articles into curious, cryptic groupings, photographing them so that their meaning might be further puzzled as a series of still lifes.

AD





Upcoming lectures by Brandon Alventia and Nick Wylie add to the public programming for the outside of this malleable, inspiring stage-cum-prop. But the structure also has an interior.

For "Klein Bottle," performance duo Industry of the Ordinary invited a young couple to spend two hours inside the pyramid naked. Their kissing and petting were broadcast via Skype to the audience who'd gathered on the outside; a second computer transmitted the audience in.

"Klein Bottle" reproduces intimacy today, or what passes for intimacy in a wired age. Starkly opposed is the core of Lazarus' curatorial lineup for "The Search," where what goes on inside the pyramid stays inside the pyramid.

The artist invited more than 100 art-makers, politicians, educators, scientists and philosophers to spend an hour with

one another in the close confines of the pyramid, in modernist chairs under soft lighting. The conversations occur out of the public view and go unrecorded, save for a log of names and optional notes. Perusal of the book reveals partnering between WBEZ-FM 91.5's "Eight Forty-Eight" host Alison Cuddy and artist Jan Tichy; curator Britton Bertran and sketch comedian Becky Poole; ThreeWalls director Shannon Stratton and mystery novelist Laura Caldwell. Only Stratton and Caldwell felt the need to share the details of their encounter, perhaps under influence of the writer's instinct.

What did the others talk about? Did they connect intellectually? Share recipes? Gossip about the artist? Muse over the art down the hall? Did they exchange numbers and agree to meet again?

"The Search," for all its openness to being used as a musical instrument and photo shoot backdrop, ultimately remains poignantly opaque. To be so insistently private — so publicly private — in the heyday of Facebook, Twitter and reality television is to hold some very old-fashioned values dear: the value of real intimacy, of physical presence, of unmediated engagement, of undisturbed quiet time with another person.

How good a work of art is "The Search"? I don't know. I can't know, without knowing how stimulating, how surprising, how awkward or how thoughtful those secret conversations were.

Lest that seem too radical, too inconclusive, reconsider for a moment Otero's work down the hall. It would seem straightforward enough to determine if his canvases merit accolades. But technical bravado aside — though there's plenty to relish — the paintings depend profoundly on whoever stands silently in front of them, the effect of the pictures vibrating deep inside. Where I witness the exuberant collision of Georges Seurat and Robert Rauschenberg, someone else might see rumpled floral bedsheets. Where I chill at the sight of so much flayed tiger flesh, another could cheer for crayon scratch art. What Otero titles "Mercury Passing in Front of the Sun" would for me more aptly be called "Cheap Tricks on a Dance Floor."

A painted picture in an empty gallery may as well be a blank canvas. But a bare pyramid might just whisper a few lost

words.

"Jason Lazarus: The Search" runs through Oct. 15 at Andrew Rafacz, 312.414.9188, **[andrewrafacz.com](http://andrewrafacz.com)**; "Angel Otero: The Dangerous Ability to Fascinate Other People" runs through Nov. 12 at Kavi Gupta, 312.432.0708, **[kavigupta.com](http://kavigupta.com)**; both galleries are at 835 W. Washington Blvd.

[ctc-arts@tribune.com](mailto:ctc-arts@tribune.com)

Twitter @ChiTribEnt

Sponsored