

ZERO...

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Tommy Malekoff

The Geography of Nowhere

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ZERO... is glad to present the first Italian solo show by Tommy Malekoff.

The Geography of Nowhere is inspired by strip mall architecture in America and the experience of traveling the country by car, a routine that consumes my artistic practice. In the past decade, I've probably driven across the United States on nearly ten separate occasions. Over time I started to notice how even the most banal-seeming roadside commercial buildings become safe havens for the traveler. What is actually a gas station, a fast food restaurant or a general convenience store often first appears as a beacon of light. These places fulfill basic needs - food, water, shelter, and human interaction. Though from the outside many of them look almost identical, tiny variations - whether the accents of the local cashiers, the brand names of the items sold - reveal the differences between the towns and regions in which they exist.

The silkscreen works were made this past spring in North Carolina, where I grew up and where I found myself confined for several months when COVID-19 first took hold in the U.S. As other businesses shuttered temporarily or closed early, convenience stores, gas stations and drive-thrus stayed open. At night, within a sea of darkened storefronts, these places, now essential, remained brightly illuminated. From a distance, they looked celestial. The emanation of light felt profoundly spiritual, like the guiding north star. I began imagining corner stores as churches and fast food restaurants as theaters. I thought of the way moths are attracted to artificial light and how certain structures had the same effect on people after sundown.

These encounters evoked a visual memory of a building that has stuck with me since my adolescence - a Hardee's fast food restaurant in my hometown that was sold and turned into a strip club called Southside Johnny's. The bright orange booths where I used to sit eating hamburgers with my family had been transformed into a windowless den that radiated lurid purple and white neon light, mystery and sin. Only the shape of the building itself was familiar. I imagined the old drive-thru window still functioning, like a portal into a forbidden world.

In May, I drove by Southside Johnny's for the first time in almost a decade. Passing a shopping center just afterward, I noticed the iconic shingled, trapezoid-shaped roof of a Pizza Hut, with the name and markings removed: it had been turned into a flower shop. This coincidence made me consider the surplus of similar buildings, and the potential second and third lives of their unique, yet ubiquitous designs. Maybe there actually was a church inside an old KFC somewhere?

For several weeks I returned to other familiar areas, photographing commercial buildings that stood out to me, both structurally and in other ways I couldn't yet explain. I wondered how such benign buildings could bring up so many memories from my own youth. I began to construct small architectural sculptures based on them. I worked without any scale or floor plan, and tried to rely mostly on instinct, memory and imagination. In the process of constructing *Roadside II* (the same building that appears in *Exit Shelter 01*), I realized that making these sculptures is an act of repossession, an attempt to own and preserve architecture that has a specific vernacular, monuments that are destined for either reincarnation or total destruction.

The silkscreens and sculptural works are the nocturnal counterparts to my video *Desire Lines*. *Desire Lines* is an exploration of the same strip mall settings, but it focuses instead on the vast parking lots surrounding them. From August 2017 to March 2019, I traveled to nearly every region of the United States, seeking out variations, idiosyncrasies, and different interpretations of these banal man-made landscapes. While surveying and comparing them to my own personal memories and found videos I had discovered online, I began inviting others to respond to the sites. What I had initially envisioned as a series of "acts", or isolated performances, ultimately became an infinite loop of human, animals and automobiles each reacting, in their own deeply individual ways, to the experience of freedom within a common non-place.

- Tommy Malekoff