

Kunstmuseum Bern

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Press Release
Media Culture
Bern, September 10, 2008

"Im full of Byars". James Lee Byars – A Homage September 12, 2008 to February 1, 2009

Fantastic Prophet of Contemporary Art

James Lee Byars (1932 Detroit – 1997 Cairo) was one of the most extraordinary artist personalities of the twentieth century. The Museum of Fine Arts Bern is devoting an exhibition to a comprehensive show of works by this American artist. They will be exhibiting sculptures, objects, works on paper and film documentaries of his performances. Even today, Byars' works have lost nothing of their mystery and poetry.

James Lee Byars loved the fleeting moment, the ephemeral and the imaginary. His performances and activities were often of very short duration. Dressed elegantly at all times in black or gold outfits, Byars knew how to put the audience under his spell. He also had a flair for using beautiful, solid and gleaming materials such as sandstone, marble, glass and gold which he employed in his sculptures and objects. Byars was always searching for perfection ("The Perfect" appears in many of the titles of his works) and the spiritual.

An idiosyncratic synthesis of the arts

Byars lived consistently in a world of his own which obeyed its own laws. He saw himself as an autonomous outsider and declined to deal with the conventional. His ideas for megalomaniac projects were subject to almost no limits: thus he conceived of equipping the Museum of Modern Art with inflatable wings or sewing a dress for 500 people. Byars also wrote obsessively to his friends and acquaintances on all kinds of paper. Written in his inimitable handwriting, decorated with gold dust or containing philosophical questions, these letters and communications are poetic works of art. The films in the exhibition of Byars' performances, some being shown for the first time ever, are witness to his scurrility and originality. His life and his work are inseparably fused as a synthesis of the arts.

An American in Bern

Commuting between America, Japan and Europe, James Lee Byars had a particular relationship with Bern. Through his contact with Harald Szeeman who had invited him to the documenta V, he often sojourned in Bern for lengthy periods after 1972. From 1975 onwards, Byars was also included in the program of Toni Gerber's gallery and in 1978 held a large exhibition in the Kunsthalle Bern. Byars also held several performances before an audience in the Museum of Fine Arts Bern in the 1970s and 1980s. Bern was an important location for James Lee Byars and a point of departure for his performances and exhibitions all over Europe. Through donations from the patron of the arts Toni Gerber (who showed Byars' work in his gallery for many years), its own acquisitions as well as through the addition of purchases by the Hermann and Margrit Ruf Foundation, the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Bern has one of the most comprehensive collections of works by Byars; numerous loans from private and public collections will also be exhibited. Thus, the exhibition offers an overview of the work of an artist who was a dandy, magician and prophet, all at the same time.

Further showings of the exhibition

Milton Keynes Gallery, London (April 4 – June 21, 2009), Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (September – December 2009)

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With the support of:



Partner of the Museum of Fine Arts Bern

Annemarie Burckhardt, Basel / Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation / Alfred Richterich Foundation / Loeb AG / Prolith AG / Embassy of the United States, Bern

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The exhibition

Dates of Exhibition

September 12, 2008 – February 1, 2009

Opening

Thursday, September 11, 6.30pm

Admission

CHF 14.00/ reduced CHF 10.00
Reduced admission with Loebcard

Curator

Susanne Friedli

Heinz Brand – Here and There

There was an intense artistic relationship between James Lee Byars and the Bernese artist Heinz Brand which led to mutual inspiration and collaboration. One of the exhibition rooms is devoted to this artistic friendship.

Catalogue «Im full of Byars»



Contributions by – among others – Thomas McEvilley, Viola M. Michely, Peter J. Schneemann & Nicola Müllerschön, Matthias Frehner, Susanne Friedli. Kerber Verlag Leipzig, approx. 250 pp., German / English, with numerous illustrations.
ISBN-No.: 978-3-86678-155-9.
CHF 58.00 / Euro 35.00

Concurrent with the exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts Bern

James Lee Byars, *Whisper Perfect to the Golden Peak of the Kunsthalle*, 1978
Kunsthalle Bern, Helvetiaplatz 1, www.kunsthalle-bern.ch

Accompanying program

Public tours in German

Tuesday, September 16, 30, October 14, 28,
November 11, 25, December 9, 23, January 6, 20, 27,
7pm

Public Guided Tour in English

Tuesday, November 4, 7.30pm

Visite guidée publique en français

Mardi, 11 novembre, 19h30

Introduction for teachers (in German)

Tuesday, September 16, 6pm and Wednesday,
September 17, 2pm

Adult further education course:

James Lee Byars – An Alien in Bern (in German)

Tuesday, November 4, 11, 18, 5.30pm – 7pm
Register: VHS Bern, T 031 320 30 30, info@vhsbe.ch

IM FULL OF BYARS

Loeb, Spitalgasse 47 – 51, Bern
Wednesday, October 22, 2008

The perfect performance is ... A reply to James Lee Byars, 1978 by Florian Dombois

Tuesday, November 11, 2008, 8pm
With the kind support of the Bellevue Palace Bern and
the Berner Fachhochschule / Department Architektur-
Holz-Bau

An American in Bern: A talk on James Lee Byars (in German)

Picking Holy Words from the Perfect Ghost:

Performance by Ana Roldan
Tuesday, January 6, 2009, 8pm

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