



*Fruit, 2000.*

# Offered Up

## The Work of Todd Cero-Atl

*Article by Tanya Hartman*

WE ARE GATHERED IN A DARK ROOM IN THE EARLY fall of 2007 at the University of Kansas for the weekly occasion of the Graduate Seminar. The room buzzes with tense energy and forced gaiety. A yearly ritual is about to be enacted, when third year MFA candidates present a half-hour slide lecture on their work to the faculty and students at The School of Art. After announcements the lights dim, and the presentations begin. About a third of the way through the night, a wiry compact man with close-cropped hair takes the podium. He walks with the slight swagger of a cowboy, and his brown eyes look both kind and tired. His skin is weathered and tanned and he wears a western shirt and jeans. This is Todd Cero-Atl, known in his community to be both talented and reserved. I am interested to hear what he has to say, but I am in no way prepared for the intensity and eloquence of what is to follow.

Todd describes his coming of age in Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas; the son of a mentally ill mother and an absent father. He demonstrates his early sense of isolation through photographs of his favorite hide-outs in Dodge City, Kansas. The screen fills with beautiful images of empty sky and crumbling rock. Cero-Atl describes how he used to seek refuge on the land when home proved to be dissolute and insubstantial. He explains that his love of the prairie's abandoned enclosures and open skies was a first aesthetic experience of the ambivalence of containment. The vessel as a metaphor for both refuge and loss is an idea that has haunted him since youth.

Todd Cero-Atl was born into an economically disadvantaged family on July 14, 1969 in Monticello, Iowa. His parents divorced early, and his unstable and physically abusive mother became too dangerous to live with when Todd was 12. He ran away from home to avoid physical harm, and lived in a runaway shelter for two months. At the age of 14, he was placed in Father Flanagan's Boys Town and spent the next four years there, using literature and poetry as his escape into beauty. One teacher took an interest in Todd, and gave him Pablo Neruda's love sonnets. One of the poems described, "feasting on

*Dodge City, Kansas.*



the body". It was through that metaphor that Cero-Atl came into an awareness of his own sexuality as a gay man. Neruda's passionate capacity to own the body's eroticism became for Cero-Atl another ambivalent container, a way to express his early knowledge of flesh as a locus of anguish, yearning and delight.

Though Cero-Atl's aspiration as a teenager was to be an artist, the culture from which he sprang did not encourage it, and he accepted that he would probably end up in meat packing or in agriculture. Initially, he studied Equine Science at Dodge City Community College. But a passionate and prolonged love affair led him to Colorado State University and it was there that he met and was mentored by the ceramist Richard DeVore. DeVore was a trained painter who had switched to ceramics at Cranbrook Academy. At the time, Cero-Atl was 24 and reeling from his lover Nathan Quinter's untimely death from AIDS. DeVore understood Cero-Atl's need to express difficult subject matter, and explained to him that the language of ceramics is coded. Much of the subject matter that Cero-Atl wanted to explore was sexually explicit and dark, with autobiographical themes of illness and persecution running through it. DeVore reassured Cero-Atl that pottery has historically been about survival, protection, relationship and community. Were Cero-Atl to venture into potent subject matter, the language of ceramics could definitely contain and nurture his vision. And thus, Cero-Atl was launched into a productivity and originality of vision that is a moving testimony to the power of art to illuminate culture and express universal human

*Green Pastures. 2000.*



themes such as loss, hierarchy, fear and love.

An early piece from that time, *Fruit*, presents one clay apple sitting vulnerably inside a circle of menacing ceramic cowboys. The cast cowboys are uniformly red and without nuance while the one lone apple is an even and unwavering green. This simplicity of hue intensifies the visual opposition between the protagonist, 'fruit' and 'his' hostile tormentors. Cero-Atl made this piece shortly after attending Matthew Sheppard's funeral in Casper, Wyoming. While working at a gay nightclub in Fort Collins, Colorado, Todd had met Matthew Sheppard, who sometimes frequented the bar. Attending the funeral was an experience of both terror and release for Cero-Atl, who had never before experienced a collective expression of gay pride and strength. When he returned to the studio, he was unleashed and the result was this inverse fruit bowl. Cero-Atl explains that most fruit bowls offer up the fruit to be consumed. His 'fruit' plays on the slang slur for a gay man, and creates empathy in the viewer who wants to protect it from being 'offered up' to the 'hungry' cowboys. Cero-Atl's deliberate colour evokes the language of traffic signs, where red means a forced stop and green an enforced go. Despite obstacles and terror, the 'fruit' must move forward. Despite entrenched social conditioning, the 'cowboys' must stop. This is political art at its most effective; coded, hilarious, tragic and visually arresting. In Western Art, the apple is often a symbol for the sinfulness inherent in humanity's flawed nature. Though the symbol of the apple is usually presented as a singularity, it represents collective guilt. Cero-

Atl forces the viewer to embrace the apple while reconsidering an American icon of heroism and individuality, the cowboy, who in Cero-Atl's version, conforms and persecutes rather than liberates.

A companion piece *Green Pastures*, also references the murder of Matthew Sheppard. Like Mary, Matthew Sheppard's mother was unable to grieve the death of her son in privacy. By contrast, Cero-Atl's own experiences of loss occurred in shamed seclusion. Society still sequesters mental illness, physical abuse and AIDS, cloaking them with secrecy. Both too much publicity and too much isolation rob grief of catharsis. Hence, Cero-Atl presents the four cast *Pietas*, at right angles to each other, creating a architectural frame around the lonely apple. It cannot escape witness, and yet it stands alone among the paired figures of the *Pieta*. The intense cadmium green glaze that envelopes each element of the piece is Cero-Atl's tribute to the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in which the crucified Jesus is glazed in sickly and poisonous greens that communicate the mortification of both his flesh and his spirit. Cero-Atl's family of origin had four members, and the four solemn pietas seem to stand in for his lost tribe. The work attests to a powerful yearning to stand united in grief, enveloped by maternal embrace. Yet, to stand alone or to die with companionship seem to be the only options the work presents. This stark choice is a theme that runs throughout much of Cero-Atl's work and vision.

In *Suburbia*, we are again presented with isolation within a group. A posse of 15 wolves circles a lone wolf ominously. Each animal bears a teacup balanced

*Suburbia*. 2003.



precariously on its head. The outcast has dropped his cup, exposing himself to malevolent witness. There is tension among the group of cast figures and the possibility of violence lurks. For Cero-Atl, the teacup carries layered meanings. He describes having attended a café with Nathan; aware that his boyfriend appeared obviously ill, emaciated and diminished. The waitress had been uncomfortable, and when Todd used the restroom he saw their used teacups in the garbage. The experience of being perceived as pariah is apparent in *Suburbia*. The wolf is known as an outcast animal, isolated and peripheral. Yet, even among wolves he is alone, having exposed his mortality by dropping his teacup. Hence, the cup becomes a metaphoric vessel that we all balance as best we can, filled as it is, with memories, loss and eventual decline.

Decline and loss are the dominant themes of a work titled *Raising Cain*. It is a powerful, terrifying piece of art in which a wingless and blood-spattered Cupid perches on a commode, a death mask covering his face and the crumpled remains of his lover (Nathan) in a bucket at his feet. Behind the Cupid within the commode lies a silver pistol. Often the role of the artist is questioned in our culture. But, in the case of Cero-Atl, the role of the artist is clearly to bear witness and to be willing to feel what others are unwilling to endure in order to create visual

*Raising Cain*, 2003.



documents of human experience. And hence we are confronted with a terrible tableau as Cupid blows a last kiss to Nathan's remains. And yet, the possibility for transformation is presented in the form of a tiny frog perched on Nathan's hand. Will Cero-Atl's kiss change it into a prince?

Cero-Atl created the piece seven years after the loss of Nathan to AIDS. Wishing to escape from further physical and mental anguish, Nathan committed suicide, leaving Cero-Atl behind to make sense of the immensity and mystery of illness and death. And once again Cero-Atl turned to art and towards poetry in order to weave meaning into the unfathomable. He has perched his Cupid on an edge between action (the gun) and destruction (the body). And yet, the meanings are nuanced and interchangeable. Cero-Atl supported Nathan's decision to escape from pain. The gun could be perceived as an instrument of conversion that allowed Nathan freedom from the confines imposed by a sick body. And the body of the frog is about to receive a kiss, possibly altering his form into a symbol of eternal goodness, the prince. Has a curse been lifted through death or has Cero-Atl's final act of love and life lifted it? The artist must discuss the presence of both Eros (the kiss) and Thanatos (the gun) to express the full spectrum of human experience.

Cero-Atl returns to the discrimination that he experienced in the café in a work titled *Ven Guapo #1*. The viewer is presented with what initially appears to be a simple form: two common white teacups bound together by a 'halo' of pom-poms and safety pins. It is a nuanced and poetic image because the

*Ven Guapo #1*, 2007.



cups clearly represent Todd and Nathan. They are literally 'linked' by the accretion of shared living and dying. From any angle, the cups are bound, creating a sense of eternity and solemnity. Cero-Atl describes being inspired in making the piece by the memory of his grandmother who had a deep romantic loyalty to her late husband, and set a place for him at the table for 25 years after his death. That level of romantic loyalty is the norm for Cero-Atl, who binds himself to Nathan's memory in a similar way.

The coloration of *Ven Guapo* is analogous to that in *Raising Cain*. The red and the white hues create a metaphor for red and white blood cells, which is amplified by the red and white orbs of the pom-poms. In Eastern tradition white is the color of death, whereas in Western culture white is the symbol for purity. By referencing white in this way, Cero-Atl 'cleanses' Nathan's death of any taint associated in society (and in that café) with AIDS, while still asserting the impact of the disease's terrible outcome. The safety pins evoke pricking and piercing, an activity associated with needles, but 'piercing' is also a way to describe grief. Cero-Atl's aim is to use art to describe Nathan's circumstances while lifting him from harm, making pain 'safe' because it binds them together, allowing them to love eternally even in the face of loss and 'piercing' pain.

A similar piece, *Ven, Guapo #3*, places three white lotus-shaped bowls in the center of a halo of safety pins. In Buddhism, the lotus is a symbol of life and death. Cero-Atl uses the colour white again to evoke death and purity entwined. In this instance, the vessels portray Todd, Nathan, and a newer relationship, all bound by the spectre of illness. The 'halo' of safety pins is an evocation of viral accretion, or of a moat to keep intruders out, or of a magnet to which the pins have adhered. Like all great poetry, it can be read in manifold ways.

*Sexpots* addresses similar themes. It is composed of multiple white horn-shaped funnels that resemble

the trumpets of angels or medical apparatus. The tension between purity and contamination is expressed by Cero-Atl's choice to glaze only some of the pieces, rendering some impervious to contagion and some porous and vulnerable. The human body is a funnel of sorts, as is the spirit, because experience pours through it, filling the vessels of our lives with event and with feeling. Some of us are lucky and remain impervious to misfortune and despair, while others of us are deeply affected, causing us to look beyond ourselves, perhaps towards the 'angel's trumpet' to seek redemption.

The nature of redemption is a question that Cero-Atl ponders and answers in two recent pieces, *Tell Me What You See* and *The Rites of Spring*. In one, he photographs himself wearing a pair of porcelain goggles that have been gilded by gold leaf. In the other, he photographs himself crouched in the studio covered in white clay and white feathers, an empty vessel encircling his neck. Both pieces assert that though we are made from earth, we are also holy, made to sustain golden vision, capable of flight. Feathers in Central American myth are used to carry lost souls back to their owners, but feathers and clay also evoke the tarring and feathering of those considered guilty of wrongdoing. Gold indicates a celestial realm, but goggles connote blindness, or restricted vision. The pieces seem to assert that redemption lies in an acceptance of our spiritual and physical limitations. If we can love our true carnal humanity, then we can see past

*Sexpots*. 2004-2007.



*Ven Guapo #3*. 2007.



it, turning our insufficiency into a tool of illumination and compassion.

Cero-Atl's lecture has come to its conclusion and the room is silent, stunned by revelation into contemplative quiet. Todd seems comfortable in the stillness and stands within it, observing the expressions on the faces of his peers. Suddenly, the room erupts into applause, as person after person hugs Cero-Atl, telling him how meaningful his words were to them. Cero-Atl seems to take it all in stride, reminding me, in his reaction, of a poem by James Wright. In *Mutterings Over The Crib of a Deaf Child*, a mother reassures a worried relative that her child will persevere. The relative persists, inquiring, "But what will you do if his finger bleeds?" The answer is concise and inspiring: "He will learn pain...(but) I...will lift him into my arms and sing, whether he hears my song or not."

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Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas.

Awards include two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships, a grant from the Puffin Foundation, a Virginia Center for Creative Arts Fellowship, a Ragdale Foundation Fellowship, a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate studies in painting and printmaking at the Konsthögskolan in Stockholm, Sweden; a Ucross Foundation Fellowship, three Graduate Faculty Research Awards and a teaching fellowship from the Yale University School of Art. In 1999, she received the Gretchen Von Budig Award for excellence in teaching (University of Kansas). In spring, 2002, she received the Outstanding Graduate and Professional Mentor Award (University of Kansas). In 2003 she earned both the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at a graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence. She was a finalist for a second Fulbright Fellowship to South Africa. She was appointed to be one of the panelists deciding Creativity and Organizational Capacity Fellowships at the National Endowment for the Arts in July 2001.

Todd Cero-Atl may be reached at [cero\\_atl@msn.com](mailto:cero_atl@msn.com).



*The Rites of Spring*, 2007. Clay, feathers and fibrous material. Photo by Gabe Hopkins.