

SLEEK

ART

Defying Time and Play-Acting Glamour With AA Bronson

We talk to the Canadian concept artist as he prepares for major institutional reflections on his former collective General Idea and engages with his ancestor's persecution of Native Americans.



With an experimental and political artistic practice spanning nearly five decades, the artist born Michael Tims, AKA AA Bronson, shows no signs of slowing down at the age of 71. Bronson welcomes us into his third floor flat in west Berlin, wearing vivid orange trousers and a white linen top. As he settles into a black leather armchair next to a taxidermied fox, he outlines upcoming exhibitions and projects that encompass his multifaceted career as a member of the General Idea

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collective, a spiritual healer, the director of Printed Matter and an independent artist. “I still work hard, but I feel like I’m semi-retired compared to how I used to work,” Bronson says with a soft laugh.

This summer and autumn, General Idea has posthumous exhibitions at MAMCO, Geneva’s museum of contemporary art, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York. Next spring, Esther Schipper and KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin will showcase works by Bronson and his collective, as well those created under his pseudonym ‘JX Williams’. Outside of the gallery and institutional sphere, Bronson is compiling the group’s catalogue raisonné with Fern Bayer and developing a performance project at the Siksika Nation Aboriginal reserve in Canada.



– AA Bronson in front of “Anna and Mark, February 3, 2001, 2002”, his portrait of his husband with their premature daughter when she was 10 days old. AA wears a hand-embroidered shirt by MJKVL.

Bronson – who dropped out of university to found a commune and free school – founded General Idea with Felix Partz (born Ronald Gabe) and Jorge Zontal (born Slobodan Saia-Levy) in 1969. Consumed by themes of appropriation, parody and media, among others, the trio pioneered the mail-art movement, published artists’ books and staged conceptual and radical performances. Although success was not immediate, during the group’s 25-year existence, it eventually became one of the first internationally recognized art collectives.

“We planned in a reverse way to be successful,” Bronson explains. “We said we wanted to be famous, to be glamorous, to be artists, but it was said with tongue in cheek and no idea that it could ever happen. You don’t think of famous artists coming out of Canada,” he continues. “So our early work is almost a satirical

response to what we saw across the border, with the Andy Warhols of the world. We were acting out being famous, glamorous artists, when in fact we were penniless artists in downtown Toronto.”



“FILE Magazine”, one of the group’s first projects, remains an early indication of Bronson’s ongoing fascination with artists’ books. The magazine’s layout, color scheme and title appropriated LIFE Magazine, the familiarity of which brought unsuspecting readers into the art world. General Idea also published pamphlets resulting from mail-art endeavors that opened dialogues on sexual and individual identity. (For “Orgasm Energy Chart”, participants sent records with the times and dates of their orgasms. For “Manipulating the Self: Phase 1 – Borderline Case”, participants submitted images of themselves holding the side of their heads.) In 1974, General Idea established Art Metropole, which continues, to this day, to function under its original intention of publishing, promoting, exhibiting, archiving and distributing artists’ books, videos and multiples.

As anti-LGBTQ policing increased in Toronto, however, the trio relocated to New York in 1986. In 1989 and 1990 respectively, Partz and Zontal were diagnosed HIV positive and General Idea’s artistic output shifted from cultural critique towards a form of activism. In what became a public art project entitled “IMAGEVIRUS”, for example, they replaced the letters of Robert Indiana’s ubiquitous “LOVE” logo with “AIDS”. Pills also became a recurring motif: Warhol’s silver cloud balloons became pill-shaped; sculptures of various dimensions represented Partz and Zontal’s pharmaceutical intake. One of these works covers Bronson’s living-room wall; blue, green and red pills provide the

backdrop for our conversation, a clear sign that Bronson has not, and will never, let go of General Idea.



– AA Bronson wears suit by Missoni, shirt by Giorgio Armani

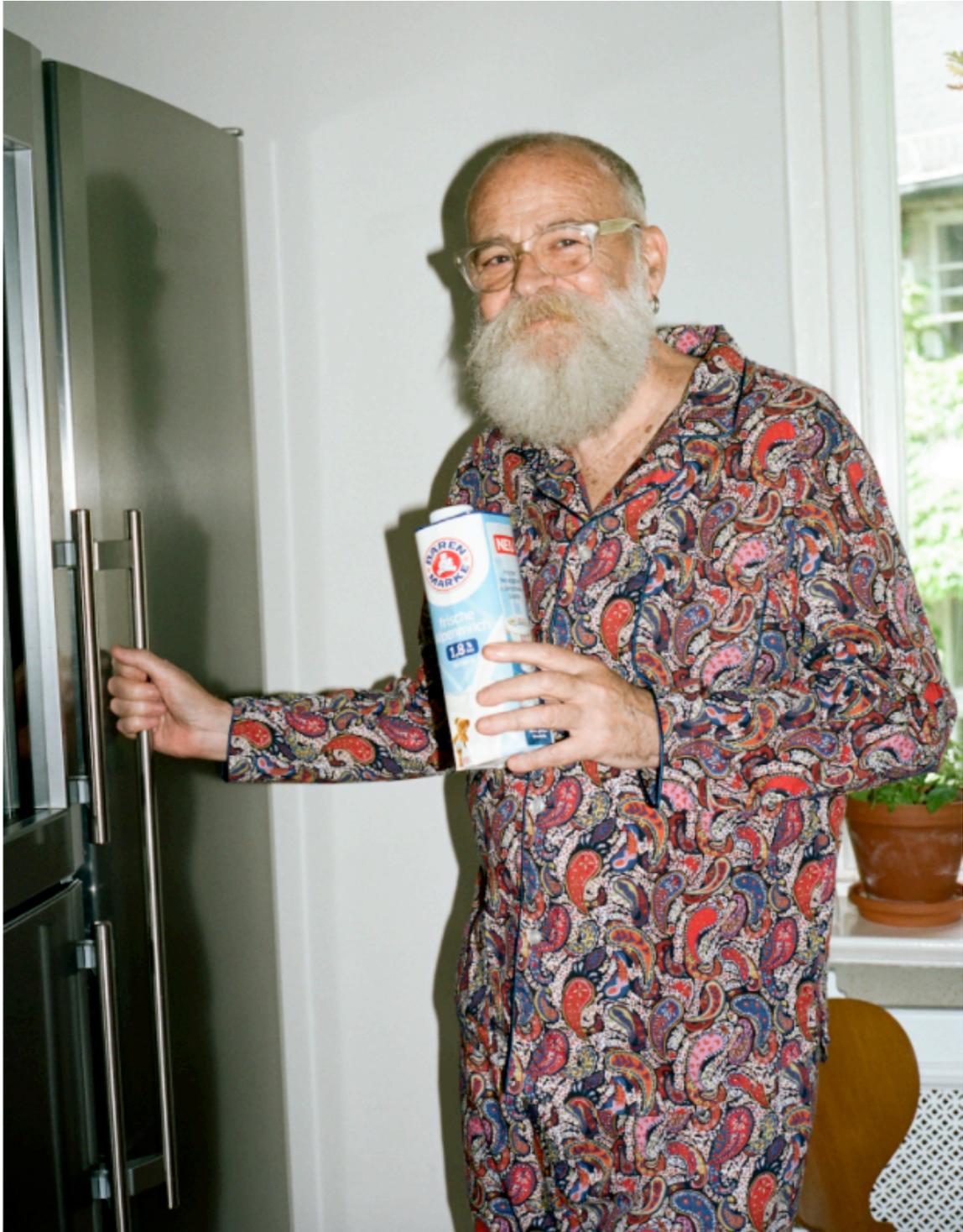
When Zontal and Partz died of AIDS in 1994, General Idea ended, leaving Bronson, then 48-years-old, feeling lost. “There have been periods of my life where I’ve felt like I’ve been in the bottom of a chasm,” he says, “and the biggest

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chasm was after the death of Jorge and Felix. It was an identity crisis. I'd always thought of myself as General Idea and suddenly I wasn't any more."

When asked how and when he was able to come to terms with himself as AA Bronson the solo artist, there's a long silence before he turns from his armchair to repeat the question to his husband, Mark van de Leur, who sits in an adjoining room.

"It was a very, very, very gradual process," van de Leur explains. "The main thing was that General Idea always collaborated and that's why you were completely stopped dead, you didn't have anyone to collaborate with. Some of the projects you did early on were collaborations because that's the only way you could work. It was very hard for you to start working on your own. It was easily 10 years, not until the mid-2000s, that you embraced yourself."



“Maybe it had to do with being the director of Printed Matter,” Bronson muses about his position from 2004 until 2010. “By being the director, it gave me a strong personal identity that I could build around.” Before van de Leur returns to his desk, he notes: “Also the healing stuff– that was the first project you did with your own identity.”

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In addition to General Idea, Bronson was deeply involved with Tibetan Buddhism for 14 years, and following the deaths of his cohorts, he spent time working as a professional healer in New York. “As I got this rush of clients as a healer, I was fascinated by the identity switch,” Bronson explains. “It was no longer ‘AA Bronson of General Idea,’ but ‘AA Bronson, Healer.’ I started to think of the healer identity as an art identity.” In recent years, Bronson’s spiritualism has become integrated with his artistic output. His performance series “Invocation of Queer Spirits” (2008-2009), for instance, included five séances and healing rituals, carried out across North America. Each one, though different, reflected Bronson’s shamanistic practice, which focuses on issues of individual and collective trauma and memory. They also contemplated the exclusion and violence in today’s world, particularly the aggression directed toward the ill, weak, abused and those who are ostracised for their sexual orientation. This series continues to live through exhibitions of photographs, paintings and ritual objects, and the book “Queer Spirits”, published in 2011.



Despite his ties to Buddhism and shamanism, Bronson grew up in an Anglican family. He refused to return to church at the age of seven, but from 2008 until 2013 – at which point he moved to Berlin for a one-year DAAD residency – he studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Here, he developed his own relationship to Christianity and is now preparing a performance entitled “A Public Apology to the Siksika Nation”.

“Siksika Nation is one of the Blackfoot tribes of North American Indians and my great grandfather was the first missionary to the Siksika,” he explains. “He built the first residential school and developed the written language, but also did some

really horrible things. He took the children away from their parents. They weren't allowed to speak their own language, keep their holidays, or wear their own clothes. He tried to destroy the culture and was fairly successful.”



Plagued by this history, passed down three generations, Bronson decided it was time “to make a gesture of reconciliation”. His next step is to create a book and develop a performance, in collaboration with a Siksika artist, to be presented on the reservation. Much like the “Invocation of Queer Spirits”, he imagines that the documentation of this performance, as well as objects related to it, will turn into a travelling exhibition.

Reflecting on his life and artistic practice, he says, “there was General Idea, this book thing in the middle as a hiatus, and then Berlin...These are all pieces of my life that all engage me these days.” Though each piece has eventually built upon the previous, it hasn’t always been easy. “You have to fail to succeed and you have to succeed to fail,” Bronson says. “You can’t have one without the other.”

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Photography by Christian Werner

Styling by Lorena Maza

Emily McDermott

#emilymcdermott