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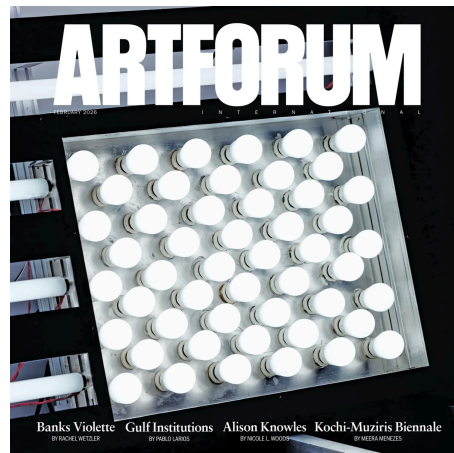
FOREVER 2001

On the art of Banks Violette

By Rachel Wetzler



Banks Violette, *Not yet titled (broken screen)* (detail), 2008, aluminum, fiberglass, wood, epoxy, ash, steel, steel hardware, sandbags, duct tape, 8' 1/8" × 16' 1/8" × 8' 6 3/8". Photo: Leslie Artamonow.



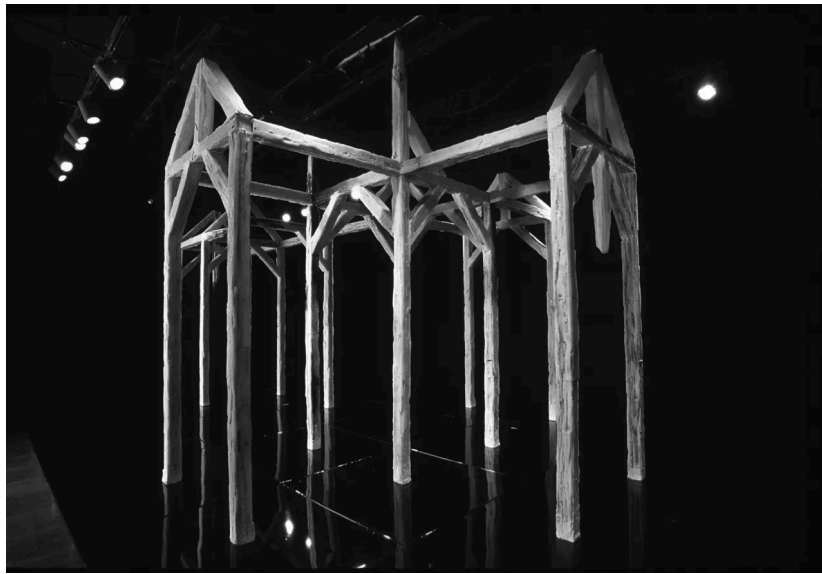
Banks Violette, *not yet titled (flag)* (detail), 2007, aluminum, fluorescent tubes and bulbs, ballasts, wiring, road case, hardware, dimensions variable. Photo: Leslie Artamonow.

FEBRUARY 2026

VOL. 64, NO. 6

FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, I have been haunted by an artwork I saw as a teenager: the skeletal form of a burned-out church, cast in salt and polyurethane by Banks Violette. Towering above a platform of shiny black epoxy, more stage than plinth, the untitled 2005 installation occupied the better part of a black-painted gallery at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, which had commissioned the work on the heels of the artist's star turn at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Against the black ground, its crystalline beams appeared at once physically overwhelming and insubstantial, conjuring a fossilized ruin, a spectral trace, an X-ray revealing a hidden wound.

I was drawn in then, as I am now, by the work's doomy elegance: This was art for the end of the world, which is what it often felt like to be a teenage malcontent during the two-term death cult that was the presidency of George W. Bush. As I circled Violette's installation, I became aware for the first time of looking at a work of contemporary art, in the sense of an artwork made by *my* contemporary (or at least someone closer in age to me than to my parents), one that emerged from my own present and articulated its particular character in an alluring language of provocation and disaffection.



Banks Violette, *Untitled*, 2005, bonded salt, salt, polyurethane, polymer medium, ash, epoxy, wood, galvanized steel and steel hardware. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Sheldan C. Collins.

A text panel spelled out the ghostly sculpture's obscure backstory: It had been modeled on the charred remains of the twelfth-century Fantoft Stave Church in Bergen, Norway, the first casualty in a string of some sixty church fires set in the early 1990s by members of the Norwegian black metal scene, many of them self-proclaimed militant Satanists. More precisely, the work was based on a photograph of the destroyed church as it appeared on the cover of the 1993 album *Aske* (Ashes) by Burzum, the solo project of Varg Vikernes, a neo-Nazi who was among the scene's ringleaders, and who was widely assumed to have set the fire himself. This wave of destruction culminated in Vikernes murdering a rival and former bandmate, stabbing him twenty-three times. Another musician, Snorre Ruch, of the band Thorns, served eight years in prison as an accessory to the crime. For the show, Violette invited this accomplice to become his own: Ruch composed the work's ominous soundtrack of droning electronic noise mixed with thunderclaps, churning water, and howling wind, which Violette described in the catalogue as "a glue-sniffer's apotheosis of Burke's sublime."

Some reviewers, including *Artforum's*, were unimpressed with these layers of baroque exegesis, viewing them as a veneer—edgy but not embedded. For Violette, this was the point: Most visitors, unacquainted with extreme metal subcultures, would not immediately recognize what they were looking at. As a result, the work projected what he called an “amoral” position toward the event, presenting the artifacts of the crime without passing judgment, creating a putatively neutral frame in which the viewer could engage with the object as object—and only later, perhaps, contend with how their reaction aligned with their sense of ethics. The work ultimately was not about murder or church burning or Satanic panic, but about complicity, reflecting Ruch's role as the accomplice back onto the viewer. “If you can find this compelling as an aesthetic experience,” Violette later said of the Whitney installation, “that's one step down a queasy slope to putting yourself right next to the person who's lighting the match.”



Banks Violette, *Ghost*, 2002, epoxy, polystyrene, cast fiberglass, plywood, IV-unit water, 60 1/2 × 58 3/4 × 58 3/4".

The Whitney commission cemented Violette's reputation as the foremost representative of what critics, curators, and glossy magazines had taken to calling the “New Gothic,” a loose group of young artists who emerged around the start of the millennium with works that took up death, destruction, and decay, often filtered through the aesthetics of dark subcultures and adolescent rebellion. Violette's breakout show “Arroyo Grande 7.22.95,” presented at New York's Team Gallery in 2002, revolved around the gruesome 1995 killing of a teen girl in California by classmates obsessed with the band Slayer; they believed that the ritual sacrifice of a virgin would elevate the fortunes of their own metal band, Hatred. The exhibition was divided into two sections, one corresponding to the murder (a drum kit with twelve black stalactites, one for each stab wound), the other to its memorialization (a sculpture of a white unicorn with a melting face). The result was a striking, if heavy-handed, introduction to Violette's enduring preoccupations: antagonistic social formations, fictional overidentification, the language and logic of cliché.



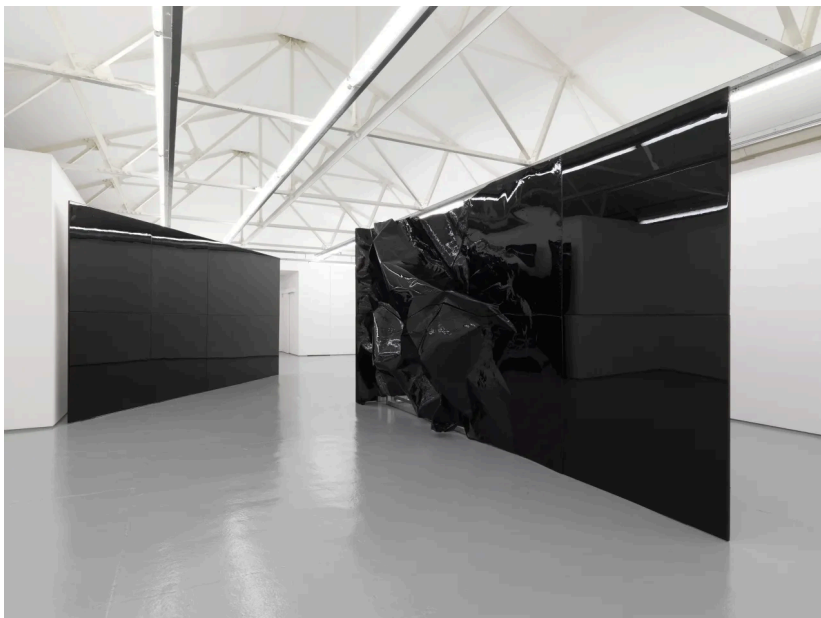
View of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Floor: Banks Violette, *DeadStar Memorial Structure (on their hands at last a) 4.1.94*, 2003. Wall, from left: Banks Violette, *burnout (fadeaway)/vol. 1*, 2003; Banks Violette, *spotlight (blackhole)/vol. 1*, 2003. Wall painting: Banks Violette, *Judas Priest (Suicide Anthem)*, 2004. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.

By the time of the 2004 Biennial, to which Violette contributed an ensemble of works situating the 1994 suicide of Kurt Cobain as an archetype of Romantic self-destruction, the neo-goth sensibility was prevalent enough to occasion a catalogue essay on the subject by cocurator Shamim Momin. As the decade wore on, Violette's work proliferated in group shows across Europe and the US with titles like "The Black Album," "Noctambule," "Scream," "Back in Black," "DARK," and "Defamation of Character," alongside that of other artists who mined a related vein. Gardar Eide Einarsson staged a play based on Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's short story "Ship of Fools." Aïda Ruilova's lo-fi videos featured isolated figures in claustrophobic settings repeating the titular phrases ("uh-oh," "OK," "um") over and over; these were remixed with frenetic jump cuts and loops, like possessed MTV clips. Hanna Liden's photographs reimagined the northern Romantic landscape tradition of Caspar David Friedrich and Vilhelm Hammershøi as populated by practitioners of the suburban occult, with figures in skull masks or Grim Reaper hoods dwarfed by moody vistas. Jeremy Blake released a trilogy of animations about San Jose's Winchester Mystery House, the Victorian citadel built by a gun heiress to keep out the ghosts of those killed with her rifles. A parallel tendency—similar in spirit but more anarchic in form—included the druggy, debauched bricolage of artists like Dash Snow and Dan Colen, whose infamous *Nest* at Deitch Projects in 2007 displayed the results of a five-day pseudo-Happening in which the artists and their friends got wasted and destroyed the space, filling it with shredded paper, crude graffiti, and assorted bodily fluids.



View of Greater New York 2005, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York. From left: Banks Violette, *Untitled (disappear)*, 2004; Banks Violette, *Hate Them (single stage)*, 2004.

Most “neo-goth” artists rejected the label, Violette included, but it was a convenient shorthand for an atmosphere of nihilistic abandon centered in downtown New York in those years. “The one thing that I did have in common with a lot of the artists that I was grouped with was just, we were all young and we were all, you know, pretty engaged with self-destructive behavior. And, you know, the artwork kind of reflected that,” Violette said in a conversation last year with the artist Ajay Kurian. “But you can’t really be like, ‘Oh, look at this group of artists who are all drug addicts.’” Or maybe you can: Violette, after all, was a heavily tattooed high school dropout from upstate New York who had a history with heroin and meth; he listed his GED alongside his Columbia MFA on his gallery CVs. Before he moved to New York for art school in the mid-1990s, his main experiences as an artist involved designing flyers and T-shirts for punk and hardcore shows in Ithaca, and a brief interlude tattooing in Hawaii. Vanity Fair photographed him in his studio lighting a cigarette with a blowtorch.



View of "Banks Violette," 2008, Maureen Paley, London. From left: *as yet untitled* (single screen), 2008; *as yet untitled* (broken screen), 2008.

Some commentators at the time simplistically linked the gothic turn in contemporary art to the horror of 9/11: "So why Gothic now?" asked Jerry Saltz in a 2004 *Village Voice* review. "On September 11 we all witnessed what could be described as a manifestation of the demonic." But the art of Violette and his cohort tapped into a deeper disillusionment, the kind of corrosive cynicism that pervades a culture in which any sense of possibility for a non-horrifying future has been foreclosed. In February 2003, six million people took to the streets to protest the imminent invasion of Iraq, and the next month we went to war anyway—proof positive that the will of the people was no match for the imperial ambitions of the Bush administration and its cronies. In this climate, it made sense that the era's most provocative art was shot through with adolescent angst: *Everything is bad and I am powerless to do anything about it*. In Violette's work, the anomie of the aughts found its most perfect expression: a slick, sepulchral cool whose posture was oppositional without articulating a politics as such, directed toward everything and nothing in particular. At a moment newly attuned to American-sponsored mass death, the focus on isolated, peculiar acts of violence was a form of both sublimation and sensitization: the depravity of infighting Norwegian metalheads instead of the normalized barbarity of war planes and shock troops.

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View of "Banks Violette," 2010, Gladstone Gallery, New York. From left: *throne (andover and over again)*, 2009–10; *blackouts/blackholes (for DS 7.13.09)*, 2009.

IN THE MID-2000s, even as the attention-grabbing sensationalism of Violette's early work reached its apotheosis, he began to introduce more abstract expressions of antagonism and estrangement. A fascination with Minimal and post-Minimal art, particularly that of Robert Smithson, had from the outset been implicit in Violette's output: its allusive materiality, impersonal facture, and preoccupation with entropic decay, not to mention its aggressive masculinity. Now all this came to the fore.

Emblematic of this shift was Violette's installation for MoMA PS1's Greater New York survey in 2005, which overlapped with the Whitney show. At the center of a large gallery, he placed the sculpture *Hate Them (single stage)*, 2004, another of his stagelike platforms, here bearing black epoxy stalactites that hung down from metal stands. This time, specific references were stripped away, leaving only a distillation of the dark rage evoked by metal and punk, equal parts elemental and contrived. Framing the stage on either side stood works that explicitly invoked a Minimalist vocabulary: *Untitled (disappear)*, 2004, an imposing black monochrome of reflective epoxy panels arranged into a rectangular screen, and, directly facing it, *Anthem (to future suicide)*, 2004, a grid of fluorescent light tubes culminating in a tangle of extension cords. Both sculptures



Banks Violette, *Not yet titled (Light Spill)*, 2007, fluorescent light fixtures, Plexiglas, aluminum, wood, epoxy. Installation view, Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Banks Violette, *no title/(proposal for a future performance)*, 2025, aluminum, fluorescent bulbs, OSB, road case. Installation view, von ammon, Washington, DC. Photo: Vivian Marie Doering.

By centering the infrastructure of the stage, Violette offered a hyper-literal embrace of the theatricality that Michael Fried had found so blasphemous in Minimalist sculpture—its arrogation of real space and real time into the realm of art as it unfolded for the viewer in an embodied perceptual encounter. Yet even as Violette's installations suggested performative settings, there was a void at the center of each one where the event should have been: a sense of having arrived too late, the action always missed. For a notorious 2006 exhibition at Maureen Paley in London, Violette took the anticlimax of belatedness as his subject, engineering a spectacle of frustrated anticipation. For the opening, he had the drone metal band Sunn O))) perform, with the singer Atilla Csihar sealed in a coffin, but the audience was barred from the gallery until the set was over. Viewers encountered only the residue of the performance, in the form of an empty black stage and salt casts of the band's gear, arranged around a pile of black shards. Violette's nostalgic invocation of the aesthetics of the late '60s and early '70s did not so much channel the utopianism of the counterculture as mourn its passing, returning again and again to the grave of the last mythic moment when radical change seemed possible.

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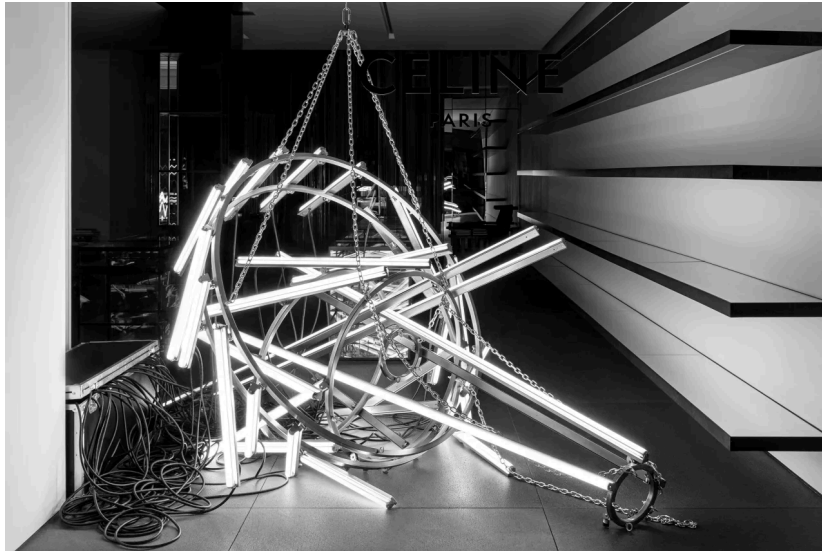


Banks Violette, *SunnO)))/(Repeater) Decay/Coma Mirror*, 2006, steel, hardware, plywood, paint, fiberglass, tinted epoxy, salt, resin. Installation view, Maureen Paley, London.

THE PROBLEM WITH WORK that so completely embodies the mood of its moment is that one day, sooner or later, the mood will change. Around 2008, an unthinkable narrative started to unfold: one of “hope.” This was the watchword, of course, of the Obama campaign, an over-the-counter balm against the existential misery of the left; three years later came a new variant in the form of the Occupy slogan, “Another world is possible.” Against this backdrop, Violette’s work seemed to disappear from view almost as rapidly as it had emerged, a cautionary tale of art-world stardom. By 2012, Violette was burnt out from his punishing exhibition schedule, feeling the physical effects of his insistence on fabricating his works almost entirely by hand, and back on heroin. He abandoned his Brooklyn studio and went home to Ithaca, thinking he’d take a break for a few months. He didn’t show new work again for six years.

Violette briefly resurfaced in 2018 with a small solo show at Gladstone’s Upper East Side town house—an improbably tasteful site for an erstwhile rebel. A series of black-and-white drawings offered a coolly ironic nod to the bizarre landscape of Trump’s America: the logos of the canceled reboot of the sitcom *Roseanne* and of the plumbing supplier American Standard; an upside-down flag; a Stormy Daniels headshot. The show’s single sculpture featured a funereal basket of white flowers, an etiolated copy of a copy of a still life by Henri Fantin-Latour that had appeared on the

cover of the 1983 New Order album *Power, Corruption & Lies*. It landed with a thud. A year into Trump's first term, this art of nihilistic disaffection seemed like a dead end, a sophomoric shrug in the face of catastrophe. My affection for Violette's earlier work suddenly seemed misplaced, a nostalgic totem of my lost gothy youth.



Banks Violette, *throne/first and last and always (reasons to be cheerful)*, Pt. 6, 2023, steel, stainless steel, aluminum, chain, ABS plastic, nitrile rubber, LED lights, electrical wiring, road case, MDF, power supply unit, acrylic paint, polyurethane. Installation view, Celine, Paris.

But 2018 belongs to another lifetime. It was possible then to see the election of a buffoonish reality TV star as an aberration. Perhaps the groundswell of populist anger that Trump had surfed to Washington could still be harnessed toward more constructive ends. Then, in 2020, the pandemic shook open deep fault lines in the social landscape, unleashing reserves of everyday cruelty and divisiveness whose flow has not yet abated. In my most despairing moments I can't help but see Trump's reelection as confirmation of the nihilistic fears that the Bush years had first stoked, at least for those of my generation: that this is who we are and what we deserve.



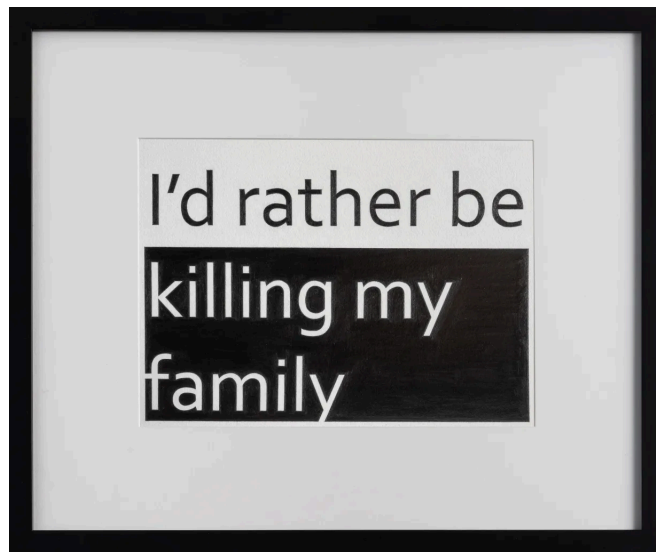
View of "Banks Violette: i like america and america likes me," 2025, von ammon, Washington, DC. From left: *no title/(Gadsden/Revelations)*, 2025; *no title/(i likeamerica)*, 2025. Photo: Vivian Marie Doering.

Into this miasma of exhaustion, despair, disillusionment, and rage—or perhaps out of it—Violette’s work has returned with a vengeance. Since 2024 he has been the subject of no fewer than five solo shows, including a just-opened exhibition at Tick Tack in Antwerp centered around the death of artist Steven Parrino, killed in a motorcycle accident on New Year’s Eve 2005 after a party at Violette’s studio. Violette’s comeback might be traced to a 2023 invitation from designer Hedi Slimane to install a group of fourteen new sculptures in Celine stores across the globe. The commissioned series, “throne/first and last and always (reasons to be cheerful), Pt. 1 to 14,” returned to the form of the chandelier: LED tubes hung from ceilings on heavy chains; snarled wires snaked their way into black road cases set on the floor. The sculptures, rather than resisting the opulent glamour of their original luxury retail settings, torqued it in a macabre direction. Violette, taking inspiration from Martin Kippenberger’s late-’80s/early-’90s “Street Lamps for Drunks”—slumped or swaying poles that anthropomorphize and replicate the experience of intoxicated perception—allowed his lighting fixtures to unfold as slow-motion sequences, evoking the postures of the narcotized body as it slumps, stumbles, and collapses to the ground. Four of the sculptures, installed in a long line at Dan Colen’s Sky High Farm Biennial in upstate New York in summer 2025, conjured the sliced and schematized representations of bodily locomotion in Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotographs.



Banks Violette, *celebration/(white phosphorus)*, 2024, graphite on paper, 22 × 30".

The Celine sculptures possess a dissolute drama, their icy white light toggling between the enticing and the clinical. Even more ominous are Violette's light sculptures in the form of deconstructed American flags, a series begun in 2007, which appear more irradiated than illuminated. Haphazardly propped on the ground with wiring and hardware exposed, the flags appear as symbols debased and emptied after centuries of misuse. One such flag featured in his solo show "i like america and america likes me" at von ammon in Washington, DC, this past May. The work, titled *no title/(proposal for a future performance)*, 2025, comprised an upright, carceral rectangle of metal bars enclosing fluorescent tubes, against which a thin square of aluminum with punched-out stars leaned precariously, the entire construction sitting atop a provisional platform of unadorned engineered wood.



Banks Violette, *Untitled (I'd Rather Be Killing My Family)*, 2011, graphite on paper mounted on aluminum panel, 36 × 60".

Flags belong to the category of image that Violette refers to as "strip-mined": emblems like flowers, rearing horses, and skulls that are so freighted with cultural and semiotic baggage that they become meaningless, with each use surrounded by implicit quotation marks. As Violette has suggested more than once, these images have a zombielike quality, and the reanimation of the dead is always a horror story. Alongside the flag sculpture at von ammon were a group of new graphite drawings, technically immaculate and blankly inexpressive renderings of black voids overlaid with terrifying silhouettes: the Gadsden flag crossed with the seven-headed snake of Revelation; a close crop of the Confederate battle flag's starred saltire cross; a double shower of bright sparks in the air that might be either celebratory fireworks or, as the image's title suggests, white phosphorus. Spilling over this entire ensemble, a pair of stuttering looped projections depicted wild dogs running, footage appropriated from Penelope Spheeris's 1983 punk thriller *Suburbia*, in which the animals—crossbreeds of abandoned domestic pets and coyotes—stand in for malignant fears of racial

Employing an old stage trick called Pepper's Ghost, the artist projected the image onto a sheer scrim so that it appeared to hover in the air, an unavoidable specter.

Last March, almost exactly two decades after his ghost church appeared at the Whitney, Violette put another destroyed structure on display: the canopy of an abandoned gas station split in half, each side precariously held up at an angle by a single pylon. No title (Gas station), 2025, was the centerpiece of his exhibition "American Standard" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Connecticut in the genteel suburb of Westport, an odd but apt setting for a body of work oriented around the seductive grip of myth. Even in ruins, the overhead lights stayed on, an eerie fluorescence illuminating the structure's cracked grid, as though it were under observation and might come back to life. Like the church, the gas station is the site of sacred rituals—it's easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to petroculture. This wreckage could only augur doom.

Violette's haunted gas station was like his church in another way, too, recalling an iconic site of symbolic violence: the Esso station at Milan's Piazzale Loreto. From its gridded canopy, in April 1945, the corpses of Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci were hung upside down and then mutilated by a frenzied crowd. After Violette's exhibition closed last June, the sculpture was transported to a roadside plot in Ithaca, the site of the former Cortright Electric company, where it will be left to decay. Nothing lasts forever.

Rachel Wetzler is the executive editor of Artforum