

# ARTIST PROFILE

DECLARATION  
APRIL 21st –  
SEPTEMBER 9th

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Installation view: Cassils, *Encapsulated Breaths* and *Burn for Camera Still from Inextinguishable Fire*, detail; Paul Rucker, *Storm in The Time of Shelter*, partial view, Institute for Contemporary Art, Richmond, Virginia, 2018. Photo: Terry Brown

## CASSILS

Cassils is showing three works in *Declaration*, each related to a performance *Inextinguishable Fire*.

The first, *Inextinguishable Fire*, a precisely crafted video screened in the ICA Auditorium, distills a dangerous performance for camera: Cassils was set on fire for 14 seconds that unfold onscreen in dramatically slowed time. The camera pulls back from a close view of the artist's canvas-wrapped torso to show their burning body and reveal the controlled conditions of a Hollywood set, before reversing through the performance to restart the loop.

Through tactics such as the slow pace and intensified sound design—we hear a heartbeat, breath, flame—Cassils heightens both our potential identification with this seemingly vulnerable body, and our privileged distance from the danger. Cassils subjects their own body to such extreme challenges in order to raise urgent questions, often in relation to trans bodies. Here, they ask: when faced with sensationalized images of violence, how might we maintain both criticality and empathy?

In an adjacent gallery, Cassils' *Burn for Camera*, a still from *Inextinguishable Fire*, was presented in dialogue with *Encapsulated Breaths*. Cassils worked with a master glass artist to make each of these “breaths” with a single long exhalation: giving material form to a fleeting, physical, and fundamental act. The artist thinks of these objects as speech bubbles like those in cartoons or text messages and suspended them at varied heights to suggest conversations among different types of bodies. While evoking the poetics of the body as a vehicle for many forms of speech (aesthetic, political, interpersonal), the installation also highlights the precarity of true communication.

### WORKS ON VIEW

*Inextinguishable Fire*, 2014–15  
Single-channel video, 26:02 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Produced with support from The Pacitti Company and Canada Council for the Arts

*Encapsulated Breaths*, 2017  
Blown glass and hardware

Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Supported by Canada Council for the Arts.

*Burn for Camera, Still from Inextinguishable Fire*, 2017

Archival pigment print, plexi faced and aluminium backed

Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

### LOCATION

Gallery 1  
Beverly Reynolds Gallery  
and ICA Auditorium

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Still from *Inextinguishable Fire*. Photo courtesy of the artist and Robin Black

*Art offers an opportunity to engage with an idea without words. Art can hijack one's body and tell one's body what to think, versus the other way around. This motivates me to think of visual art as a place to create and engage social change. —Cassils*

### PLEASE PROVIDE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK YOU'RE SHOWING IN *DECLARATION*?

*When we show you pictures of napalm victims, you'll shut your eyes. You'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close them to the memory. And then you'll close your eyes to the facts.*

—Harun Farocki, 1969

*Inextinguishable Fire* is a performance for the camera in which I undertake a treacherous fire stunt. Using techniques borrowed from Hollywood stunts, I experience the very real human terror of being lit on fire. Using a Phantom camera that shoots at 1000 frames per second, the 14-second full body burn is extended to 14 minutes of slow motion flame. The title of the piece references Harun Farocki's 1969 film of the same name, which approaches the impossible task of effectively depicting the horror of napalm on film. My gesture of self-immolation speaks to both the desire for and the impossibility of knowing such horror even while decisively aiming to approach it. Though the stunt is a simulation of violence it still presents real danger. This possibly volatile situation (and the attempt to control it) is captured to create an image where danger, empathy for those experiencing violence and the privilege of removal from such circumstance operate simultaneously in one transparent performance.

### ARE THERE DETAILS IN THE WORK YOU'RE SHOWING IN *DECLARATION* THAT YOU'D ESPECIALLY LIKE AUDIENCES TO PAY ATTENTION TO?

The sound design in *Inextinguishable Fire* is subtle, but very important. In the beginning of the film, the camera starts with a tight crop on my chest. You don't know what you're looking at. Perhaps it is a blank canvas, as I am wearing a canvas bodysuit. As the camera pulls back on a dolly throughout the duration of the film, more and more information is revealed about the context in the frame. I use sound to speak to ideas of identification and alienation. Who do we empathize with? Who do we ignore? In the early part of the film when you realize it is a body on fire that you are watching, you hear the body burning as if it was your own. The flames crackle closely to your ears. It's as if you could smell the smoke. You can hear my adrenalized heartbeat, my muffled breath escaping my mouth. Near the end of the film, when we realize we are in fact on a set, and the very image of what you thought was a traumatized body is a constructed image, manipulating you into thinking you're looking at a traumatized body, you hear the sound of the burning body as if it was on the other side of the room.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO BE SHOWING YOUR WORK AT THIS MOMENT IN HISTORY? IN THIS LOCATION?

Virginia has been a site for contested trans rights in recent history. My work is rooted in many things: art historical references, engagement with various mediums, in dialogue with civil rights histories, and the feminist movement. I am also a trans artist. I am interested in engaging a populous who has the possibility to really shape and change the future of trans rights in their state. I hope my work can create empathy and understanding for transgender people and their struggle, and that the citizens of this state make choices to support trans rights.

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## BIOGRAPHY



*Inextinguishable Fire*, performed at the National Theatre in London as part of the SPILL Festival of Performance, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Born 1975 Toronto, Canada; Lives in Los Angeles, California

Cassils is a trans visual artist who has achieved international recognition for a rigorous engagement with the body as a form of social sculpture. Drawing on the histories of conceptualism, feminism, body art, and gay male aesthetics, Cassils undergoes strict physical training regimes to create a powerfully trained body for performative purposes.

Cassils received their BFA from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada and an MFA in Art and Integrated Media from California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. Select solo exhibitions: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York (2017), Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha (2017), Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts (2016), School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2016), MU Artspace in Eindhoven, Netherlands (2015); Trinity Square Video in Toronto, Canada (2014); and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York (2013). Select group exhibitions: University Art Museum of Central Michigan in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan (2015); Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, Germany (2015); National Gallery of Art in Sopot, Poland (2015); Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York, New York (2014); Art Gallery of York University in Toronto, Canada (2014); Rutgers Institute for Women and Art at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ (2013); One National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, California (2012); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, California (2008); Whitechapel Gallery in London, England (2005); National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City, Mexico (2003); and Manifesta in Frankfurt, Germany (2002). Collections include: Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts (PA), Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York, Katie Bush, San Francisco (Private Collection), Wanda Kownacki, San Jose, (Private Collection), Natalie Loveless, Alberta, (Private Collection). Select awards: John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (2017), Creative Capital Visual Artist Award (2015), Rema Hort Mann Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship (2014), MOTHA Art Awards (Museum of Transgendered Art) (2013), Canadian Council for the Arts (2010- 2016), and Banff Center for the Arts Merit Grant (2006).

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