

Burning Down the House

by **Walter Robinson**



[Cosimo Cavallaro](#)
[Cheese Chair](#)
1999

Cosimo Cavallaro is a Montreal-born artist who moved to New York City when he was 14 years old. At present, he has a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Cavallaro is probably best known for slathering a New York hotel room with cheese back in 1999, bed, floor lamps and all. After that, he pumped 1,000 pounds of pepperjack cheese all over a frame house in Powel, Wyo., covering it inside and out, complete with furniture. These and other acts of Dada sculpture can be viewed in detail on his website, www.cosimocavallaro.com.

More works by
[Cosimo Cavallaro](#)
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The whole cheese thing came to him while he was having dinner at a restaurant -- Amici Mei, at West Broadway and Houston -- and the owner told him that he could use some paintings of wine and cheese for his decor. Cavallaro offered to cover the inside of the place with cheese instead. The restaurateur declined.

But Cavallaro went home and covered his chair with cheese. "The feeling was great," he said. But with one proviso. "Never get caught with the mess in your hands."

Eventually he was able to realize his vision, covering first the hotel room and then the house with melted cheese. "I used a rental machine that sprays tar on roofs, and got surplus cheese that was going to be thrown in the ocean," Cavallaro explained. It took about a week to finish the job. "It's like you're underwater -- did you ever go into a shipwreck?"

Cavallaro claimed that he sought to cover Madonna with cheese, too. "She said maybe later."

But Cavallaro is pretty much done with his cheese fetish. In early March 2002, he took a piano to a field in Toronto and set it on fire. For two and a half hours the piano burned, finally flickering out just as the lights came up in the city. Nothing remains of the action except a straightforward documentary videotape.

The artist claims that burning a piano is not a destructive act. "Fire is the true art. That's the creation," he said, though he admits that people have gotten angry at him about it. "They think a piano is a precious thing," he notes with some disbelief.

In fact, Cavallaro has mixed feelings about his new direction. "What I do humbles me," he said. "I feel like an idiot." He remembers that as a boy, his mother would scorch the fur of dead rabbits to prepare them for cooking. At one point, he said, he even did a drawing of the dead rabbits as part of a school assignment.

The piano piece is a manifestation of his anger at his not being able to play music, a feeling that the artist converts, like a revolutionary, into a political and philosophical attack on bourgeois life. "To discover true power, true beauty, true form -- that's why I took this thing and destroyed it," he said. It was an enactment of man seeking to take control of the power of nature.

Cosimo is partaking in the eternal cycle of creation and destruction, like a neo-Fluxus follower of Kali. "It starts off with anger, and then I find beauty in it," he says. Besides the piano, he burnt a pair of shoes. "I'm going to be burning a dining room set, an armoire, a sofa, a bed, a car. And then smaller objects."

WALTER ROBINSON is editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



[The kitchen of the Cheese House in Arizona](#)



[Burning the piano in Toronto, 2002](#)



[Cosimo Cavallaro in the Artnet.com offices, 2002](#)



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