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New Museum Exhibit Explores Strange Bodies

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By Natalie Whalen, Entertainment Editor

Artist-in-Residence at the New Museum, A.K. Burns', new fifth-floor installation, "Shabby but Thriving," is nothing if not thought-provoking.

The exhibit itself centers on a video projected onto overlapping walls. Sometimes the smaller 'wall,' which is more or less a piece of heavy material placed at a slant perpendicular to the other, will provide a close-up on Burns' meticulously crafted scene. The thirty-six minute video, titled "Living Room," is organized within a series. The first in the serial, titled "A Smear Spot," was debuted in 2015 but is currently housed by the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art.

Surrounding the video is a smattering of sculptural objects, including bags of dirt and a gutted wooden couch with blue light emanating from underneath. These objects act complementarily towards the video, which seems to explore some of these themes of perpetual dirtiness.

Overall, the video is very strange. Admittedly, this exhibit may not be for the first-time viewer of contemporary art. It opens on two individuals (one, a visibly pregnant woman; the other, a man dressed in drag) carrying trash and destroyed furniture down the stairs on a pre-war building, which happens to be the home of the New Museum's artist-in-residence program at 231 Bowery. It is cut with images of children lying on couches, engaging in various dubious activities. One child is looking through bags of dirt for candy; another is staring longingly at a fish tank.

The video ends with a bizarre dance party in the basement of the building. Performers wear oversized shirts with arbitrary words such as "no" and "again" and headlamps as they writhe to the music. What the exhibition seems to and claims to explore is bodies within spaces, and the implications of this dichotomy.

This makes sense given Burns' status as a queer, female artist. In a time where being female and queer is somewhat peculiar in itself, the exhibit is knowingly bizarre—perhaps too bizarre for the audience of giggling museumgoers that I encountered upon attending last weekend. But Burns' work is recognized and highly regarded by authorities on contemporary art: the artist teaches at graduate programs at Hunter College and Columbia University, and is a 2016-2017 Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University.

Politically minded Burns has not simply left her work to fend for itself, either. The New Museum will feature a series of public programs to complement "Shabby but Thriving." On Feb. 5, the museum will host a day-long program titled "Body Politic: From Rights to Resistance" featuring sessions with, "lawyers, activists, and grassroots organizers on issues of bodies under duress: civil disobedience, protest, healthcare, policing, prisons, immigration, and environmental contamination." Mar. 9 will host a panel on quantum feminism, and Apr. 20 will feature a listening party for A.K. Burns' 2016 experimental record "Leave No Trace."

"Shabby but Thriving" opened on Jan. 18 and will run through Apr. 23. New Museum admission is free with your NYU ID. Email Natalie Whalen at entertainment@nyunews.com.