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Title : A.K. Burns: Shabby but Thriving, installation view at New Museum, New York, 2017. Credit : Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

A.K. Burns: Shabby but Thriving
New Museum, New York
18 January - 23 April 2017
Review by Rusty Van Riper

There are stains on the carpet that lines the floor of A.K. Burns' solo exhibition at the New Museum, 'Shabby but Thriving'. Brown and blotchy, presumably from the sacks filled with dirt that are scattered about the room, or a byproduct of the destruction of the gutted couch that sits in the middle, or merely the result of carpeting a public space, stains in a museum confirm the exhibition's title from the onset. An installation centered on a two-channel video, the exhibition extends Burns' trans-feminist practice, this time addressing the metaphoric body of an inanimate object (the New Museum building) alongside the various bodies that occupy it.

'Living Room' was filmed during Burns' residency at the museum, and utilizes the architecture of the building — its stairwells, basement, and partially renovated rooms — as both setting and subject. In the video, which contains no overt chronology or narrative but, instead, places a series of loosely connected scenes side-by-side, the viewer sees a variety of characters exist within the building. Three younger children, each in a patterned outfit that matches the fabric of the furniture on which they lounge and play, hang out in a room together. A bathing woman wearing only a turban eats chocolate cake as she discusses the news with a man in only a hospital gown; he is bandaged, her nose is running. A man wears an army jacket and heels as he carries bags of trash up and down a flight of stairs; this is cut with a woman who does the same (she also drags the couch that sits in the middle of the room). A group of dancers in black t-shirts with white text (that states, among other things, 'HER,' 'NO,' and 'US') move through a dark room, the only source of light coming from the flashlights on the hardhats they wear. Each of these scenes disavows the standard components of linear narrative — rising action, climax, falling action — choosing instead to merely document these bodies as they perform in/with/alongside the body of the building; each is self-contained, simply shot, and left unexplained.

Burns' presentation of this video is sculptural: a large screen on one wall and a smaller one tipped against it and the wall perpendicular to it. This second screen animates both the architecture of the room (allowing the building to continue performing beyond the video's confines) and the content of the video (sometimes showing the same footage on both screens, sometimes acting together as a single screen, and still other times juxtaposing different scenes simultaneously). Props from the video have been slightly modified and then scattered throughout the installation. The newspaper being read in the bathtub is now fixed to a plank of wood and hung on a wall, the couch being carried up the stairs is now lit with blue track lights, and one of the dancers' t-shirts (the one that reads 'NO') is pasted to a wall.

Beside the main space is a second room, the Fifth Floor Resource Center, in which a punching bag has been installed for visitors' use. Alongside a bookshelf of texts on feminist, queer, and aesthetic theory, the room is an invitation to make further use of the building as a site of bodily engagement, analysis, and play. With this, Burns incorporates the viewer into the hermetic ecosystem of the museum, as it appears in the video and before one's own eyes in the exhibition.