

DÜSSELDORF

A.K. Burns

JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION



A nosebleed, a thick pipe from which liquid drips, a juicer spilling pools of bejeweled color, the hazy aura of a sun eclipsed by the moon—these were among the images of leakage in the three video installations, a silent film, and twenty-one collages in A.K. Burns’s exhibition “Negative Space.” Another kind of leakage was evoked by Chelsea Manning’s military jacket, which reappeared throughout the series of sci-fi films on view, including two older works, *A Smearly Spot* (*Negative Space 0*), 2015, and *Living Room* (*Negative Space 00*), 2017; and the more recent *Leave No Trace* (*Negative Space 000*), 2019, a five-channel video installation premiering here and projected onto a white cube sitting askew on a fake human skull. Such leakiness was not exactly literal—WikiLeaks, get it?—but, rather, a metaphor for what escapes despite systems of control delimiting boundaries (and binaries) that perpetuate imbalances of power.

Burns has long been concerned with the idea that matter constantly changes. Fixity is not truth, just a way of organizing the world. These works should be considered as a continuum of forms that continually re-form. Take, for example, the arid desert landscape with its deep canyons and sedimentary rocks in *A Smearly Spot* and *Leave No Trace*, or the black-box theater that features repeatedly in both. Rather than being sites of absence, these spaces, seen from another perspective, are in a state of constant becoming: The theater is making; unmaking, remaking; the desert accumulates small particles, crumbles, shifts.

A.K. Burns, *Leave No Trace* (*Negative Space 000*), 2019, Still from the 28-minute, 15 second five-channel HD color video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising a 48 × 48 × 85¼" cube, speakers, a plastic skull, used tires, and ratchet straps. Clara López Menéndez.

If we consider the desert a mutable space rather than a mere absence, or void—and so dissolve its opposition with active, occupied space—then Burns manifests a world as described by the philosopher Karen Barad, who posits the entanglement of subject and object through what she terms the relational “response-ability” of matter, where subject and object reiterate and reconfigure each other rather than being different per se. It’s not that opposites attract, but rather that neither is fixed. Quoting Barad among other writers in *Negative Space Poster*, 2019—a giveaway now lovingly tacked to my studio wall—the artist proposes: PERHAPS WE SHOULD LET THE EMPTINESS SPEAK FOR ITSELF. Silence can be deafening as we tune in to atmosphere, letting the surrounding space *be*.

Such staging is typical of Burns’s videos, in which performers are what the artist calls “acting agents” and represent phenomena, while space itself is the protagonist. Thus the performers are symbolic rather than clearly discernible characters articulating a narrative arc, and the site itself represents a new kind of subjectivity. Humans assume representational value as free radicals, unpaired electrons that are highly reactive, or bright, pollen-coated bees that arduously labor for . . . what exactly? In *Leave No Trace*, they load and unload items including an aquarium, skulls, and protest-slogan T-shirts to build a desert stage. On it, a go-go dancer performs in metallic lamé shorts and tennis shoes—a clear homage to Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*), 1991—ripped torso sweating, one breast exposed. Labor is for the expression of such unfixed bodies, forms that move and seep.

Burns co-opted the art-history canon elsewhere in the show, too, with acting agents reproducing the poses of the reclining woman in Manet’s *Olympia*, 1863 (in *A Smearly Spot*), and of Jean-Paul Marat in Jacques-Louis David’s *La mort de Marat* (The Death of Marat), 1793 (in *Living Room*). David’s painting also featured among the collaged imagery in *Detox Tub Talks (bathroom/kidneys)*, 2019, one of several works where we viewers leaked in, since their mirrored surfaces absorb our own reflection. Both *Olympia* and *Marat* are symbols of revolt—the former a prostitute returning the male gaze and the latter a revolutionary murdered by the French bourgeoisie—that have here re-formed and been queered through performative staging, their appearance suggesting a corporeality of unassimilated difference.

During a Q&A with Burns and the exhibition’s curator, Lisa Long, an audience member asked (I’m paraphrasing), “How can I know what you mean when this means nothing to me?” But sometimes images and sounds just seep in, just as sometimes we are influenced without even realizing it. We learn through repetition. Let it be. Accept immersion. As Burns advised, “I want you to feel a sensation of being seduced and drawn into a world you do not understand.” Let yourself leak a little.

—Louisa Elderton