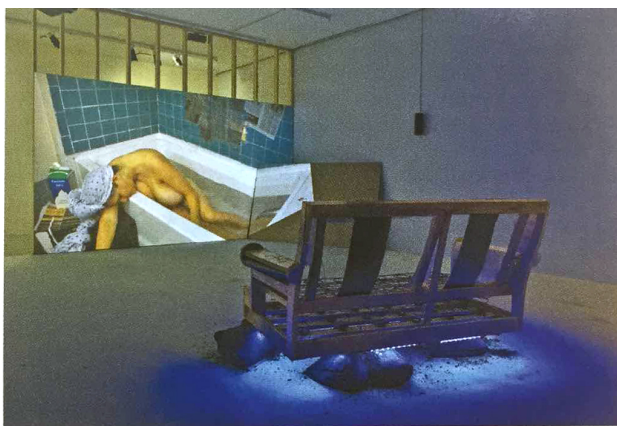


A. K. Burns

NEW MUSEUM/CALLICOON FINE ARTS

In recent months it has been dispiritingly difficult to visit exhibitions without applying the lens of American politics, but “Fault Lines,” A. K. Burns’s show at Callicoon Fine Arts, couldn’t have been read without it—literally. Language was a focal point of the presentation: Steel fences featured the Rusmfeldian terms *knowns* and *unknowns*; a cast-concrete foot on a rebar leg bore the words YOU’RE FIRED; and a



A. K. Burns, *Living Room*, 2017–, wood, metal coils, plastic webbing, underglow lighting, two-channel HD video (color, sound, 36 minutes). Photo: Maris Hutchinson.

similar hand gracefully offered a gold-plated brass IUD in *Hand Out (She Was Warned)*, 2017, its title echoing the silencing of Elizabeth Warren as she opposed the nomination of Jeff Sessions for attorney general.

At the New Museum, Burns’s “Shabby but Thriving” was far more ambiguous and literally messy, sited within a gallery that was partly decked out as a grubby living room lined in a cream carpet smeared with dirt. Populating the space were a number of sculptures individually named *Corporeal Soil*, 2017, each consisting of resin, topsoil, and foil-wrapped hard candies (à la Felix Gonzales-Torres) that have been mixed and fixed and hardened in bags, so that they resemble slumping pillowish shapes even though the packaging itself has been cut away. These collapsing, Eeyore-ish forms are melancholic and invite a kind of sympathy, yet they are also abject, like glittery feces. They’re shit that’s breaking down and getting everywhere, but we’re encouraged to look at them as kindly and appreciatively as we would a body: These are mixed feelings that I really appreciate.

A stripped sofa with soiled pillows beneath it sat within *Living Room*, 2017–, an installation with a two-channel video that is both sprawlingly episodic and structurally symbolic. Each section of the video component relates to different spaces in 231 Bowery, next door to the New Museum, where the artist has been in residence this spring, as well as a corresponding body part. In the section “Detox Tub Talks,” relating to the kidneys, artist A. L. Steiner lies in an Epsom salts bath in a dingy bathroom ripping out articles from *The New York Times* and adhering them to the tiles around her with water, accompanied part of the time by keyon gaskin, who appears clad in a hospital gown and covered in Band-Aids. They share a chocolate cake, discuss semantics

and money, and plan a revolutionary protest dance party. At times this conversation is frustrating, being both difficult to hear in the tiled environment, as well as slightly overprescriptive, unlike the rest of the video, which captures a buzzy materialism. In “Animalia Anima,” three seraphic children carry out symbolic gestures on spinning sofas. Memorably, a girl dressed in fish-print pajamas on a matching sofa plays with a fish tank before thrashing on the floor. In “Weight-Bearing,” two figures struggle to descend a staircase, one in high heels and a military jacket bearing a nametag that reads MANNING and the other with a large backpack, a strapped-on pregnancy belly, and pool sliders. Both are further burdened by piles of foam and furnishing material, such as ripped-up sofa parts, that have been awkwardly lashed to their bodies, as a form of allegory for bodies that pass with difficulty through a given system.

From room to room, circumstances, aesthetics, and characters change, giving the video a certain unwieldiness. Individually, however, these vignettes have moments of crackling energy and sensitive texture. A child stabs and tears a sofa apart with vigor, the rips making a satisfying sound, like a body that is opened up with unexpected pleasure, or a soil bag torn away, spilling fertile contents everywhere.

—Laura McLean-Ferris