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Installation view of A.K. Burns: *Shabby but Thriving* at New Museum, New York, 2017. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

IN SEARCH OF A BODY: A.K. BURNS' ODE TO ENDURANCE

BY OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

One of the most unassuming artworks in A.K. Burns' exhibition and residency, *Shabby but Thriving*, is perhaps also the best reflection of the artist's three-month tenure at the New Museum and her concurrent Callicoon Fine Arts exhibition, *Fault Lines*. Nestled at the end of a corridor on the museum's fifth floor, *Post Times (drop open)* straddles the rift between utility and inertia, the body and environment, endurance and decay. A thin wooden latch, running the length of two closet doors is fully plastered with pages of *The New York Times*, a publication that has become emblematic of the country's current political turmoil. From Donald Trump's much discussed visit to its Times Square headquarters following the election, to the paper's blockage from a White House briefing in late February, the *Times* found itself both reporting on, and in the front row for backlash against (and from) the Trump administration. Shrouding a functional object belonging to the museum's architecture with such a pennant of social and political unrest, Burns blends anima into the building's façade, pondering the exchange and resistance between the self and its surrounding.



Installation view of A.K. Burns: *Shabby but Thriving* at New Museum, New York, 2017. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

Post Times may get to the heart of Burns' message, but *Living Room* is the exhibition's visual and conceptual centerpiece. The latest installment in an ongoing video project that began with 2015's *A Smeary Spot* at Participant Inc., Burns shot the *Living Room* inside the New Museum's adjunct building on 231 Bowery, a once crumbling prewar building that now houses the museum's artist-in-residence program. In the video, characters wander within this habitat in a state of unstable equilibrium, reminiscent of Maya Deren-esque existentialism. They strive to communicate with themselves, each other, and their environment, but the possibility for them to find a harmonious state is obstructed by challenges placed en route: one character clumsily wears high heels, a Chelsea Manning name tag on his chest; another, a woman sporting a faux pregnancy belly, lifts a cluster of furniture heavier than she can carry. As they try to ascend the building's narrow stairwell these aloof characters touch, crash, and stumble around the space, struggling to survive or feel comfortable. Is the building's bitter absorption of these characters a microcosm for one's presence

within a prevailing political regime? Is it thwarting these human protagonists? Or is *the building* the hero in this story, bravely resisting an unwanted invasion?

The exchange between the building and its inhabitants is a fluctuating dialogue in which the occupier and its object systematically fuse. The building, with its rooms and niches, reflects a body, exposed, yet resisting; the film's protagonists, hence, wear the shoes of intruders, invading the object's physicality and spirit. In contrast, they seem to equally face challenges, too, embodied in the physical or ethereal strains imposed by the building. The human body—a target of civic duress and autonomous activism—finds its empowering celebration at the end of the film when various dancers rejoice in the basement, dancing in broken harmony, their gestures oscillating between army precision and nightclub moves. They wear black, uniform-like attire with various words printed on their shirts: "Her" and "No," for example. The pressure the basement space imposes on their routine is visible on their worn faces; however, once the rhythmic beat winds down, it becomes clear what the exhibition title solidifies: *we are all shabby but thriving...*



Installation view of A.K. Burns: *Shabby but Thriving* at New Museum, New York, 2017. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

Installed throughout the rest of the exhibition space is a series of site-specific mixed-media sculptures combining arbitrary objects such as fish hooks, pennies, feathers, and beads hanging on fishing lines clutched by concrete hands. The fishing baits and lures echo the dynamics of predator and prey. Reinforcing the aforementioned interplay between occupant and body, Burns' assemblage speaks to the individual and their body, especially those objectified due to their gender, skin color, or faith, particularly those currently exposed to public investigation and institutionalized aggression.



A.K. Burns, *Fault Lines*, Installation view at Callicoon Fine Arts, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

steel tribute to Greek goddess Artemis, with recycled Gatorade bottles standing in for five pairs of breasts. The solitary right foot supporting the structure is the sole representative of an otherwise abstracted human body, shaped from building materials. Artemis is the mythological symbol of wilderness, nature, womanhood, and birth, but Burns' drained dystopian version of the goddess signals dearth and despair. Her breasts, after all, are the empty vessels of an energy drink that not only promotes itself as alternative to water, but also espouses a masculine and virile attitude. The life-sized sculpture encapsulates the systemic dominance of masculine perspectives over women's bodies and identities.

Back in the New Museum, disembodied hands hold fishing lines to encapsulate societal tensions. At Callicoon, Burns takes no prisoners calling back to this work: here, in *Hand Out (She Was Warned)*, a cement hand protrudes from the wall, grasping a necklace embellished with an intrauterine device (IUD) as a charm.

[Shabby but Thriving](#) runs through April 23 at the New Museum. [Fault Lines](#) continues through April 9 at Callicoon Fine Arts, Delancey Street.

—[Osman Can Yerebakan](#)

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Down the Bowery on Delancey Street, the artist's Callicoon Fine Arts exhibition expands the conversation on the fluid borders between individuals and their environments, both in terms of physical hindrances and cerebral challenges. Alluding to sexual liberties, reproductive rights, or religious freedoms, Burns resumes her juxtaposition of the body as a socio-political territory whose autonomy endures scrutiny by authorities. Three sandblasted steel sculptures recall gates. The words "Known" and "Unknown" are faintly legible within the metal slats, emphasizing the dilemma of the two opposing words as well as the society's predominant fear for the unfamiliar.

The most striking piece in the calmly-hung exhibition is *She Was Warned*, a cement, concrete, and



A.K. Burns, *Hand Out (She Was Warned)*, 2017, Cement hydrocal mix, rebar, steel wire, nitrile glove, gold-plated brass. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York