

MacQueen, Kathleen. *Unabashed Love*, Shifting Conversations, October 18, 2013, online.

SHIFTING
CONVERSATIONS
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UNABASHED LOVE

October 18, 2013 · by Kathleen MacQueen · in
Conversations

Roll over Chris Burden. Bypass Paul McCarthy's gargantuan Lilliputians. Make way for a sexuality that leaves out boy toys and cartoons. Step in A.K. Burns who fashions freedom from the introspection of Francesca Woodman, the rage of Ana Mendieta, the openness of Annie Sprinkle, and the erotic bliss of Carolee Schneeman.



A.K. Burns & A.L. Steiner, still from *Community Action Center*, 2010, video, 69min. Courtesy the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

Burns, along with her partner A.L. Steiner, presented their near feature-length socio-sexual video, *Community Action Center* (2010) last week at The Kitchen to a sold-out crowd. Like Paul McCarthy's *WS*, Burns and Steiner's film mutates porn scenarios but, in their case, conjuring urine into gold. Rapidly and unabashedly, the cinematic sequence presents an unabashed love fest of explicit LGBT sex though, in my opinion, gender or sexual persuasion is not exclusive here. As her

camera rolls from cruising, to bondage, to food fest, to collective orgy, she exults diversity and vibrancy over potency and domination.

A week before at The Kitchen, artist Simon Leung staged *ACTIONS!* a reprise of the various labor disputes between management and staff of the Museum and Modern Art from the mid-1970s to the recent past. Accompanying him on stage, an assembly of artists presented the positions of both labor and management. As founder of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), A.K. Burns might well have joined them. During the Q&A afterwards, Simon spoke of his influences asserting Paul McCarthy's pride of place: "When I walked into the Armory and saw dwarves fucking trees, I thought 'Yea, dwarves fucking trees!'"

I respect Simon's work and was struck by his remark that seemed a non sequitur to the content of the evening. It took me away from thoughts on artists' rights as workers to rights of free expression. Had I opened or limited discussion through my review of McCarthy's Armory exhibition by being critical of its aggressively overwhelming environment? McCarthy's work is significant for breaking taboos and exposing the weak morality of innocence but his bodies remain caricatures. One difficulty of the cinematic fairy tale genre is its fusion of adult and child within the same character, the metaphorical manifestation of a psychic condition of trauma. Its grip is difficult to loosen once you've been abused. Certain spaces are impossible to enter without a pressing sensation of impending doom as fear and shame infiltrate desire.

Burns and Steiner's video adds dimension to the debate on overt sexuality by reminding viewers of the important feminist shift in the 1970s from objectifying the body to affirming its subjectivity. McCarthy literally dwarfed his audience with his installation, belittling our presence but in *Community Action Center*, the sexual act is performed as a creative action, visualized, vocalized, and communally shared. Various artists and musicians accompanied the screening with a captivating live score, giving the experience a spatially participatory dimension. Whether we fear or luxuriate in sexuality, it is part of the human condition. While McCarthy asks us to give in to the orgy, A.K. Burns invites us to join the exploration.