



## A.K. Burns: Pregnant Patron Penny Pot

Callicoon Fine Arts, New York City  
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by Corrine Fitzpatrick

Given the nanosecond it takes a consumer to register the subject and object of any graphic ad, one can swiftly glean the context and subtext of A.K. Burns' debut solo exhibition via the glossy photocollage accompanying the press release for her show. Jutting from a slice of electric Manhattan skyline, the still-rising Freedom Tower at One World Trade Center stands just off-centre, implausibly crowned by a tomato red press-on fingernail. With one quick and punk perversion, Burns has femmed up the unabashedly phallic new American monument, daubing a flourish

A.K. Burns, *On Our Knees*, 2012, penny, archival ink jet image transfers on vinyl coated canvas, 48.3 cm × 20.3 cm × 10.2 cm  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CALLICOON FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

of queer onto a paean of patriotism and capital. Printed on the back of the card is the tightly packed and telling image title, “Castration reconstruction (aka the middle finger), A view from Brooklyn, February 14, 2012.” As a prelude to the 12 hard and soft sculptures on display at Callicoon Fine Arts, the postcard cuts to the chase: by pun or by proxy, Burns appears intent on amending the legibility of existing structures—be it iconic architecture, formalist sculpture, or feminism—from her embodied position on the peripheries of prevailing culture.

*Pregnant patron penny pot* is comprised of six freestanding sculptures and six wall-hung ink-jet prints on vinyl-coated canvas (all works, 2012). The immediate impression upon entering the small rectangular gallery is that of facing off a sentinel. Guarding what though? A preliminary glance says Minimalism, says “the empty vessel,” says classical sculpture met with the legacy of Judd (albeit evoking *The Dinner Party* colour scheme, thus hinting at a lineage of feminist revision). It takes just one furtive rap of the knuckles to understand that the five hard-edged “marble” sculptures are in fact Formica-surfaced wood constructions. Burns’ sentries expand their allegiance to include both art of antiquity and 20th-century middle-class kitchen decor, bearing on their laminate composite façades a contemporary usurpation of the original by its more accessible simulacrum (loaded as that equation is with consumerist nostalgia and aesthetic longing for traditional forms of yore).

Varied configurations within implied rectilinear frames, each of the five sculptures draws equal attention to its own interior and exterior surfaces. At a height of 32½ inches, *Small Change* connects two U-shaped structures around a deep square void that begs to be peered down into. The four straight appendages of *Hooker* resemble arms and legs bent at the joints in a jumble of 90-degree angles. The contorted figure could ostensibly be turned over and stood in five different ways; the adaptable terms of its self-supporting structure formally complicate the sexual politics of the commodified bodies denoted by its name. A sixth sculpture, *By Any Means Necessary*, is a seemingly reconstructed porcelain vase held together ad hoc-style by foam fill, packing tape, and epoxy (with smearings of copper dust for good measure). An ineffectual vessel—it parodies form and function—with globs of material messily collapsing the interface between inside and out, it is hard to tell whether the assemblage is indeed an attempt to repair a relic or an always already fragmented original unto itself.



In concert with the three-dimensional work is a series of six wall-mounted fabrics onto which the artist has printed images sourced from the New York Public Library Picture Collection and, in at least one instance, the front page of a recent daily newspaper. Each montage has been hammered into the wall with a penny, cheekily punctuating the image-codes with implications of low value, or lowballing. The vinyl-coated canvases weightily drape and turn into themselves in labia or curled book-page-like folds—depending on how one wants to look at it. Scaled to approximate letter-sized sheets, the pieces invite a textual reading. *On Our Knees* (making obvious reference to the first erotica magazine of and for lesbians, *On Our Backs*, which ran from 1984 into the early 90s and was itself in part a reaction to *Off Our Backs*, the seminal feminist publication that often published writing against pornography) depicts in its three sourced images a carved fertility ritual artifact; a woman on all fours, outfitted in head-to-toe latex with an oval glass tabletop across the flat of her back; and a group of predominantly female archaeologists, also on hands and knees, digging at an excavation site. Of the many takeaways this syntax might generate, one readily locates a lesbian-feminist conundrum of simultaneous indignation and sexual arousal at the ridiculously literal objectification of a female body. The double standard is positioned within the associative possibilities of excavation and reproduction, leading me to contemplate new terrain for the framing of feminist-lesbian desire—defined not by what it lacks or reacts against but, rather, by its own replete genealogy.

While the austerity of the new sculptures is (on the surface) quite a code-switch from the video and artist-advocacy work that has garnered Burns’ attention over the past two years, aims pronounced by projects like *Touch Parade* (2011),<sup>1</sup>

*Community Action Center* (2010),<sup>2</sup> and *Working Artists and the Greater Economy*<sup>3</sup>—widening the cultural legibility of underrepresented sexual desires; arguing for the fair compensation of artistic work—are recapitulated in these interrogations of traditional forms. Where *C.A.C.* updates the pornographic lexicon with rarely portrayed images of the feminist-minded power dynamics of queer sex and lust, and *W.A.G.E.* works to reinscribe the budgets of various art institutions with monetary remuneration for artists’ labour, *pregnant patron penny pot* strives to fashion a new logo out of extant (and overlapping) sculptural and feminist protocols. Burns’ ethos seems steeped in transhistorical homage, utilized materially in the construction of alternate baselines from which she can non-apologetically present such contemporary paradoxes as a feminist dyke who gazes upon and desires female bodies and a critic of capitalism who must earn and spend capital within the system she critiques. The freestanding pieces present well-crafted and physically commanding notations of the conceptual framework that Burns is lucidly mapping out with the ink-jet prints. Keeping in mind that this is the artist’s first solo exhibition, I read these works as starting points for a sculptural vocabulary that, in time, will push beyond its current stoic contours to assert even more dynamic shapes.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Touch Parade* (2011) is an installation of five tightly-framed videos in which the artist performs banal yet highly criticized actions from online fetish videos (crushing carrots under crisp white sneakers; slowly pressing a balloon between her hands until it pops; methodically putting on layers of latex gloves).
- <sup>2</sup> *Community Action Center* (2010), with A.L. Steiner, is a 69-minute-long vagina-centric and feminist socio-sexual porn video created in collaboration with members of the artists’ extended family of queer artists, musicians, and performers.
- <sup>3</sup> *Working Artists and the Greater Economy* (W.A.G.E.) is a New York-based activist group that advocates for the regulated payment of artist fees by art institutions. “We demand payment for making the world more interesting,” is written on their website.