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A spectacle of language: the referential movement + known unknowns of A.K. Burns' Fault Lines

Laura Brown, 8 April 2017
Reviews

There are plenty of ways to think about the slipperiness of language; the way words form and are formed, the way they become connected, and their smearing forward and past us. There is also the understanding of the power that runs through this movement and lands upon our individual bodies. This kind of leaping is what might be described as the spectacle of language in politics. Malleable but heavy, words in these instances are loaded, by design, long before we determine how we read them. In the exhibition *Fault Lines* at New York's [Callicoon Fine Arts](#), running February 26 to April 9, [A.K. Burns](#) places and re-places these fluttering language-twists across a new grouping of works that seem both to be still in flimsy formation yet read-as-ever. Here, the New York-based artist insists in the relativity of words as dense forms, framed by what the press release describes as "a kind of death" in 'knowing.'

While most works appear serially or multiply, the most freestanding, larger sculpture stands centrally and singularly in the show as a ten-breasted goddess of cement and plastic Gatorade bottles, called 'She Was Warned.' The title points to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's defence of a silencing motion against Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren in February via a little-known [procedural rule](#). More specifically referencing Ancient Greek mother goddess, Artemis of Ephesus, this sculpture's allusive form is made up of gaping rebar (structural reinforcement usually otherwise buried in concrete), and stands upright on two supports: on the left a crumbling concrete block, the other a cast human foot. A different cast foot is propped elsewhere solo in the show, attached also to a piece of steel with the text "you're fired" bent in metal-wire cursive down its height. There are also three gates, each containing the variant word pairs "known known," "known unknown," and "unknown unknown" in the design of their lines, referencing US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's [noncommittal linguistic cartwheeling](#) in response to questions about the absence of evidence in linking Iraq's government with supplying weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups in 2001.



A.K. Burns, *Fault Lines* (2017)/ Installation view.
Courtesy Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

In these works, Burns turns between text-as-language-form and language-as-textual-frame, but what ultimately pins these back to the body is their recurrent sense of permeability. This is felt in the gaps that format the rebar grid, and the porous fuzz of mosquito mesh that constitutes the ground for some of the wall-based works, as well as the flimsy metal frame in which this mesh comes ready. Burns stretches the apparent literalness of direct quoting by placing these firm references in direct relation to materials of labor in-process. And while bodies are inferred and referred-to, the viewer's own body in facing these materials is also imagined as it might be behind this window screen, or traveling over a crumbling, reinforced sidewalk. Even better than a direct quote, this material flimsiness speaks to the susceptible mix of danger, proximity, and reliance involved in trying to think through language and its violent turns.

For this same reason, the two smallest rectangles in the gallery are the most difficult. These are color photographs directly transferred onto the wall, made murky twice-over by their newspaper-printing and then by this transfer process. These colored smears are images of the landscape at the site of the Dakota Access Pipeline, but here they have been processed and become abstracted so far as to feel mostly like well-timed punctuation marks between other works in the room. While this in itself is not necessarily an issue amidst a larger exhibition, Burns' responsibility or responsiveness drops off from the subject-image in question. The problem of these muddy-green additions points to the shifting predicament inherent in Burns' referential moves. **

A.K. Burns' *Fault Lines* exhibition is on at New York's Callicoon Fine Arts, running February 26 to April 9, 2017.



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