

John Bock: Dead + Juicy

ANTON KERN GALLERY | OCTOBER 31 – DECEMBER 1, 2018

Entering John Bock's current exhibition, *Dead + Juicy*, provokes an immediate and profound sense of unease. The lobby of Anton Kern's Upper East Side townhouse gallery has been transformed into a dimly lit room housing a dilapidated shack made from corrugated tin; a floor to ceiling curtain onto which a looped fragment of film is projected opposite the shack. The film features a young woman running—perhaps being chased—through a jungle, or at least densely tangled brush, and eventually falling before an elderly, oracular woman with an animal's jawbone tied to her face. It's hard to be certain about the action because the ripples of the curtain, which mimic the corrugation of the tin roof, distort the film's imagery. Through a window of the shack, a muted blue light glows, just barely illuminating some sort of creature that might be constructed of wood posts and metal cans. It's not clear what we're witnessing, but the unsettled ambiance feels palpable.

Ascending a staircase crimson-tinted by the glow of a neon light is a hallucinatory experience. Upstairs, the disorientation continues. Curtains divide the main gallery into three sections. One contains only a tied, brown-paper package and walls lined with mercurial ink drawings. Another is riddled with vacuum cleaners and the shells of broken eggs, a charcoal grill and ketchup bottles, among other detritus. Is it the remnants of an abandoned barbecue in hell? Projections upon screens in this room might suggest so: a woman dressed in a pink Jackie-O outfit grills sizzling meat onscreen, the eyes and mouth of her face cut away, as she speaks a nonsensical discourse. Perhaps she speaks in tongues. Images superimposed over the woman show grilled meats, as well as a man who appears to wear an oxygen mask.

Pulling back the third curtain of these dark rooms reveals the centerpiece of Bock's exhibition, an hour-long film titled *Dead + Juicy* (2017), for which the exhibition is named, and it illuminates some of the mysteries the viewer has wandered through just as much as it conjures up many others. *Dead + Juicy* follows Lisa, a barber who runs the Crestview Barber Shop in Austin, Texas. Over the course of the film, the viewer watches as Lisa alternately interacts with her customers—a sort-of multi-racial, multi-national, Greek chorus of old men of who hang out in the shop—and comes and goes from the place: to her house, to a bar, to visit a suburban couple who turn out to be the Jackie-O woman and the oxygen-masked man. She races through the trees and vines and stumbles upon the old woman in the woods. The creature within the tin shack terrorizes her. The film reveals that the installations and film loops that have just been traversed are set pieces and isolated scenes from *Dead + Juicy*, but that is about as much as it crystallizes. We know



John Bock, *Dead + Juicy*, installation view, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. © John Bock. Photo: Thomas Müller



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something is happening, but the narrative remains just at the edge of making sense, as if the viewer is ensconced in a fever dream.

Shot without a script on location in Austin over the course of four days, Bock refers to the film as an “uncanny musical,” and music does populate the work, with characters frequently breaking into song or dance. The actors are local to Austin and were encouraged to make up their own dialogue and music, which often results in the feeling one is listening to speech and melody that is either coded, or else just plain illogical. Subverting language has long been part of Bock's practice (he is known for, among other things, giving ludicrous, performative lectures), which finds its roots in Dadaism. Filmed in the proudly self-proclaimed “weird” city of otherwise largely right-wing Texas, *Dead + Juicy* draws on these alternate sensibilities, the traditionalist and the strange. “Seize the day! Clean the world of evil and filth!” intones the prim Jackie-O-styled

woman, clutching a vacuum, while inside her house, her husband, clad in his oxygen mask, watches Lisa perform a disappearing coin magic trick. A few scenes earlier the man has mumbled what sounds like a retirement party speech to himself; now, he is overcome by the sight of Lisa's coin appearing and disappearing before his eyes, so much so it causes him to keel over. There is something in this that seems critical of the capitalist economy and conservative values upon which American society is built, but if so, Bock's precise meaning remains elusive, impossible to fully grasp.

On the surface this may frustrate the movie's audience, but halfway through one viewing it dawned on me that this frustration might be the point. If Dadaism was born of artists' rejection of the capital and colonial values that pervaded Europe following the First World War—an anarchical response to what was viewed as an irrational, inhumane time to be alive—then *Dead + Juicy* may be the quintessential work for our present moment in America. With a reality show president who spews daily nonsense and lies, electoral subterfuge perpetuated by Russian bots on Facebook, children shot dead in their schools, and California burning from both ends, perhaps the only way to reckon with the apocalypse is through absurdity.

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Jessica Holmes is a New York based writer and critic who contributes regularly to Brooklyn Rail, Artcritical, Hyperallergic, and other publications.



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