

A.K. BURNS

JANUARY 18—APRIL 23, 2017

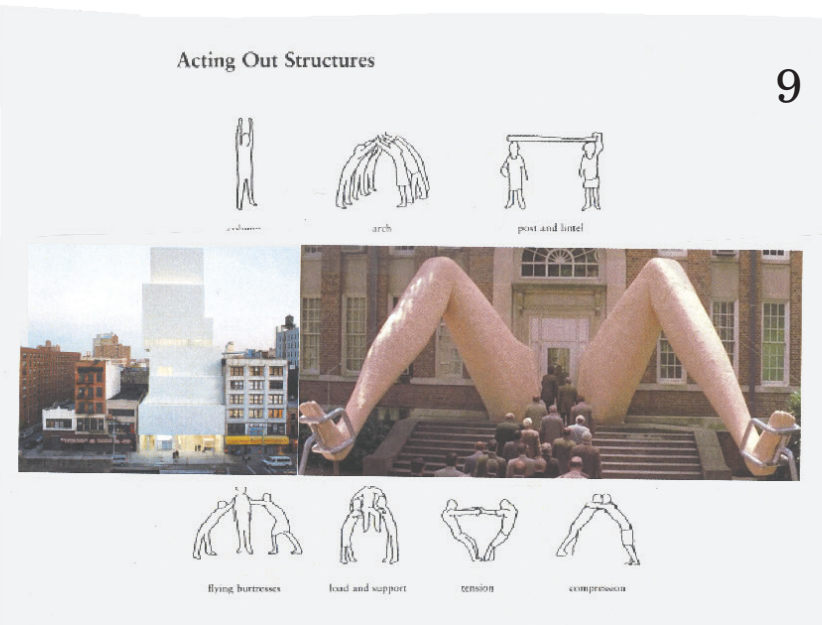


235 BOWERY, 5TH FLOOR

*Shabby
but Thriving*

A.K. BURNS

The natural world is riddled with murky distinctions between creature and environment, which have captivated artists at least since the Surrealists. Think of the Phasmatodea, commonly known as stick insects, which traipse along tree branches, or the reef stonefish, a brilliantly hued fish that embeds itself in coral, bearing 13 dorsal-fin spines that brim with toxic venom. In nature, insects approximate leaves; fish resemble plants; moths, owls; worms, snakes. Two beings can appear related, even porous, so that it becomes difficult to know where one ends and another begins.¹ Such real-world flickers between a living thing and its context give way to discussions of abstraction, appropriation, simulation, and symbiosis. So, too, the unsettling effect of an object with shaky boundaries gives way to fantasies of omnipotence on the one hand and to obliteration on the other. Indeed, writing about this slippery slope in 1935, the French psychoanalyst Roger Caillois, in his famous “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” went so far as to say that a true lack of distinction between self and surroundings was the ultimate definition of psychosis.²

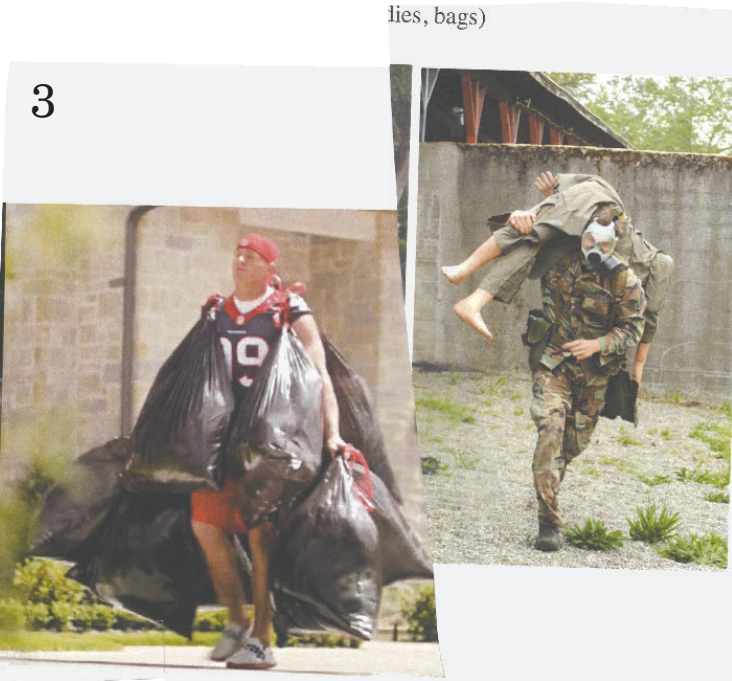


During World War I, this blurred boundary between a being and its context was mobilized to develop military camouflage—a way to jam signals, meld frequencies, and disrupt the perception of space within the context of combat. Individual units were absorbed within a field in which distinctions between near and far, marginal and central, became confused. Through oblitative camouflage, a soldier could be rendered as a series of fragmented forms receding into the environment. The body could better protect itself by integrating with its surroundings—it was also better able to prey on others.³ Yet, beyond the predator/prey paradigm, such tactics of display and decoy call attention to the ways in which individual bodies are themselves only ever part of a larger

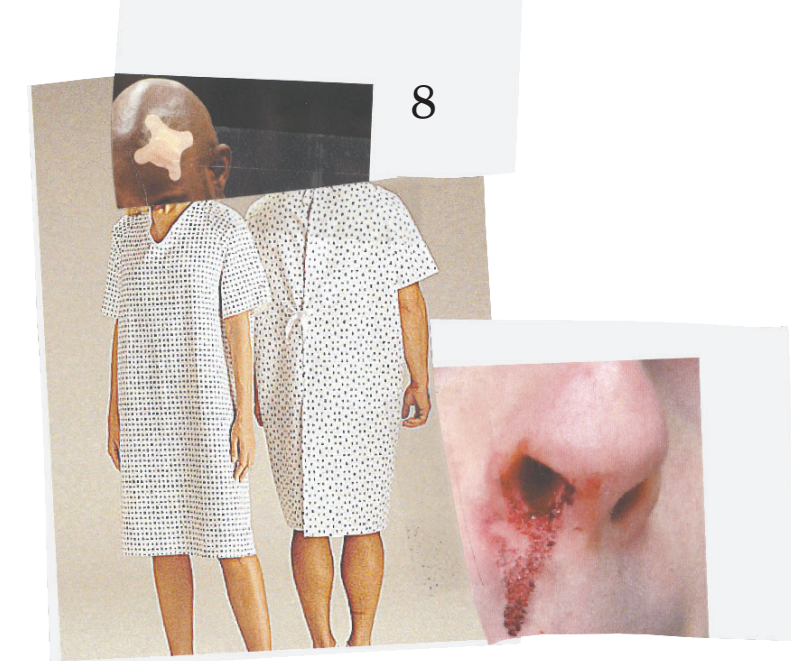


Defined by Proximities

fabric—social, sexual, political, material, architectural, affectual. There is no self without an/other.



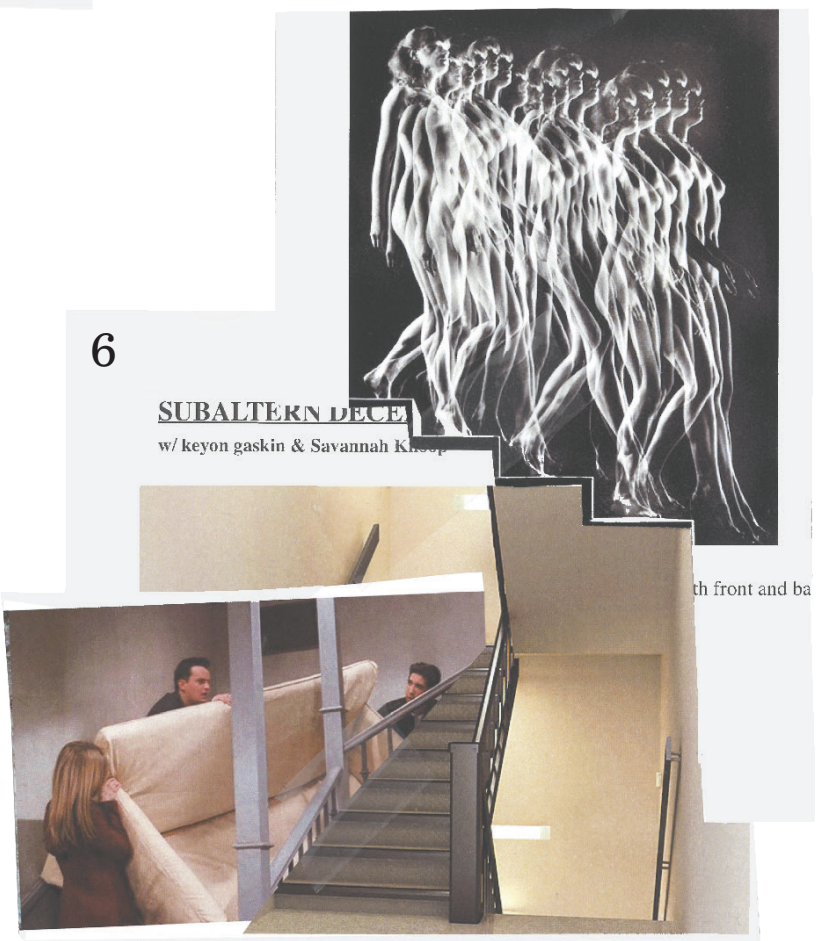
Mimicry, camouflage, and shape-shifting entities recur as motifs throughout “Shabby but Thriving,” A.K. Burns’s exhibition and residency at the New Museum. In this installation, she premieres *Living Room* (2017–ongoing), the second video in a multi-chapter project organized around five elements: power (the sun), water, land, void, and body. The two-channel video’s opening scene—and, because it is on loop, its closing scene as well—begins with a close-up of a cockroach on its back, legs twitching, body encrusted with dust, as a spider moves close, its head on the cockroach’s head and their legs touching. The moment might be read as tender, despite presaging an inevitable death.⁴ One is reminded that the ultimate destruction of one entity often means its incorporation into another; ancient Mayan rituals, and more contemporary customs too, posit an energy transfer between the conquered and the conqueror. With her video, Burns suggests the near-impossibility of considering any individual without understanding the conditions, both physical and mental, they live among.⁵ Where each of us locates the contours of our being is an ongoing negotiation.⁶



Before shooting any footage, Burns began *Living Room* with constellations of images culled from a variety of sources. The images in her visual research, arranged in clusters and reproduced in this broadsheet, are in dialogue with one another in funny, unexpected ways.⁷ Sometimes they riff on strange but undeniable morphological rhymes: a prosthetic pregnancy belly, for instance, combined with a backpacker on a trail. Some images provoke more intuitive or emotional resonances: two photos depict couches stuck in stairwells, surrounded by exasperated roommates; another shows a soldier running in full camouflage, with a body (dead? injured? mannequin?) hoisted across his shoulder. The images are like distinct yet interlocking blocks, situated alongside one another and

by Johanna Burton and Sara O’Keeffe

defined by their proximities.⁸ Using science fiction as a point of departure, Burns produces a kind of allegorical scenography, orienting the audience within a speculative present in which camouflage disrupts the boundary between internal and external. She shot *Living Room* in the New Museum’s 231 Bowery space, a prewar building that houses the artist-in-residence studio. The video traces a circuit through the building’s basement, its stairwells (partially renovated and bearing relics of previous eras), and all manner of found and constructed interiors.⁹ It uses the entire building as a stage and as a metaphorical body—that is to say, the performers themselves are bodies within a larger body.



The scenes that make up *Living Room* are numerous and varied: Children in an unfixed dream state channel a number of characters, sometimes portraying occupants of dwarf planets (celestial bodies that the International Astronomical Union excludes from its roster of official planets), and at other times imitating the fish and flies they find in their environment, causing, observing, and then assuming their gestures of distress. A parallel scene depicts a person with a backpack and prosthetic pregnancy belly heaving fragments of a demolished couch through doorways and down a stairwell in a protracted descent, intercut with footage of a figure in military uniform bearing Chelsea Manning’s name, carrying a heavy load down the same stairway. In an interpretation of Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting *The Death of Marat* (1793), two patients commiserate in the bathroom, one on the toilet, one in the tub, and riff on phrases, at one point passing possible names for a queer party back and forth. Beneath all this, dancers in the basement move in and out of sync, alternately organized and singular, swaying independently; their shirts are printed with fragments of text taken from political slogans and



Shabby but Thriving

protest signs—"No," "Her," "Or bust," and "Again"—which align in new linguistic combinations as the dancers change positions. The building, at once a hermetic ecosystem and protagonist in the narrative of *Living Room*, frames, supports, and limits these performers as they use their bodies to labor and leisure, choreograph and organize, bathe and subsist within its vital architectural interior.¹⁰ Furniture and props act as both benign objects and political subjects, until the distinction between these ostensibly binary states becomes fleeting and unstable.¹¹



In addition to these props—which appear in the video as well as in the installation surrounding it—Burns's exhibition is riddled with lures and bait, objects made to resemble prey and placed at the end of a fishing line to entice fish to bite. Single pennies, punctured once or twice, dangle from hooks on the walls. A penny is, of course, a token of a much larger system of



value, distribution, and currency. Introduced in 1864, the penny was the first American coin that no longer bore the insignia *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one"), the result of a fierce national debate about the terms by which "the many" could relate to one another or even be considered "one." Now, amid shifting political and social terrain,¹² we find ourselves once again negotiating these terms. Our very survival as individuals, as well as collective entities, depends on forging coalitions of support in an increasingly hostile context.



A.K. Burns
Shabby but Thriving, 2017
Mixed-medium installation
Courtesy the artist
and Callicoon Fine Arts

Post Times (drop open), 2017
Newspaper, glue
Dimensions variable

No Relief, 2017
100% Cotton t-shirt with
silkscreen text
Dimensions variable

Lure, 2017
Feathers, fish hook, pennies,
plastic or wooden beads, swivels,
roofing tar, plastic bottle, fishing
line, concrete-hydrocal mix
Dimensions variable

Corporeal Soil, 2017
Topping soil, foil-wrapped hard
candy, resin
Dimensions variable

Fly, 2017
Feathers, steel wire, roofing tar
Dimensions variable

Living Room, 2017–ongoing
Wood, metal coils, plastic webbing,
underglow
Synced two-channel HD video, sound,
color; 36 min



VIDEO CREDITS

SITE OF INTERIORS / THE BODY
231 Bowery, New York, NY

LIVING ROOM / PSYCHE
Dwarf Planets (Celestial Bodies)
Make Make: Winter Collins
Eris: Mia Cenholt-Haulund
Pluto: Elias Delate

Animalia Anima
Fish (out of water): Winter Collins
The Fly (swatter): Mia Cenholt-Haulund
Bird of Prey: Elias Delate

STAIRWELL / MOUTH TO ANUS
Weight-bearing
Ms. Manning: keyon gaskin
Pregnant Backpacker: Savannah Knoop



Footnotes in this essay link to image clusters constructed by Burns and follow an associative model in dialogue with the artist's visual research strategies.

BATHROOM / KIDNEYS
Detox Tub Talks
Marat (economic toxicity): A.L. Steiner
Patient Patient (persistent micro-aggressions): keyon gaskin



BASEMENT / UTERUS
The Movement
HER: Nate Flagg
OR BUST: Arianna Gil
NO: Jahmal B. Golden
AGAIN: NIC Kay
HER: Savannah Knoop
OR BUST: Monica Mirabile
AGAIN: Marbles Jumbo Radio
NO: Tsige Tafesse

Producer: Sara O'Keeffe
Director of Photography: A.K. Burns
Additional Cameras: Eden Batki and Minnie Bennett
Video/Audio Editor: A.K. Burns
Musical + Sound Score: Geo Wyeth
Audio Mix: Matthew Patterson Curry / Quentin Chiappetta
Costume, Props, and Set Design: A.K. Burns
Choreographer (basement scene): NIC Kay
Production Assistants: Diana Lozano, Delfina Martinez-Pandiani, Jessica Robbins, and Saar Shemesh
Lighting: Derek Wright
Tech Assistant: Kate Wiener
Still Photography: Eden Batki, Minnie Bennett, and Lauryn Siegel
Digital Effects: Common Space Studio

Special Thanks
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Lauryn Siegel
Will Rawls

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The Kitchen

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

BODY POLITIC: FROM RIGHTS TO RESISTANCE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 11:30AM-6:30PM

This event features information sessions with lawyers, activists, and grassroots organizers on issues centered around the body: civil disobedience, protest, healthcare, policing, prisons, immigration, and environmental contamination. Each session will focus on resource sharing and modes of resistance, and will include presentations followed by discussion with the audience. Participants include staff from Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Center for Reproductive Rights, the New York Civil Liberties Union, the New York Environmental Law and Justice Project, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

THE QUESTION OF QUANTUM FEMINISM

THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 7PM

This roundtable discussion brings together artists exploring the evolving and expansive topic of quantum feminism, and considers how an understanding of bodies as sensory systems can be a starting point for discussions around ethics and “entangled relations of difference.” Panelists include A.K. Burns, Harry Dodge, Carolyn Lazard, Anicka Yi, and Constantina Zavitsanos.

LISTENING PARTY: POETRY AND RECORD

RELEASE FOR *LEAVE NO TRACE*

THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 7PM

In celebration of A.K. Burns’s *Leave No Trace* (2016), this record release party includes performances and readings by artists and writers including Justin Allen, Fia Backström, CAConrad, Katherine Hubbard, and Juliana Huxtable. *Leave No Trace* is an experimental audio project released as a limited edition vinyl with an accompanying poem. The recording consists of two full-length LP tracks that combine ambient environmental recordings, vocalization, sounds generated from various materials, and an old electric guitar. The title references wilderness ethics, pointing to questions around unregulated spaces, bodies, and actions that go unrecorded, and what is natural or naturalized.

THE RESOURCE CENTER

An associated presentation entitled “The Resource Center” is organized by A.K. Burns and Alicia Ritson, Research Fellow. Taking cues from the reading room, the gym, the listening station, and the space of respite, it attends to how the body processes shock, psychic and physical trauma, grief, and rage in the face of political extremism.

SPONSORS

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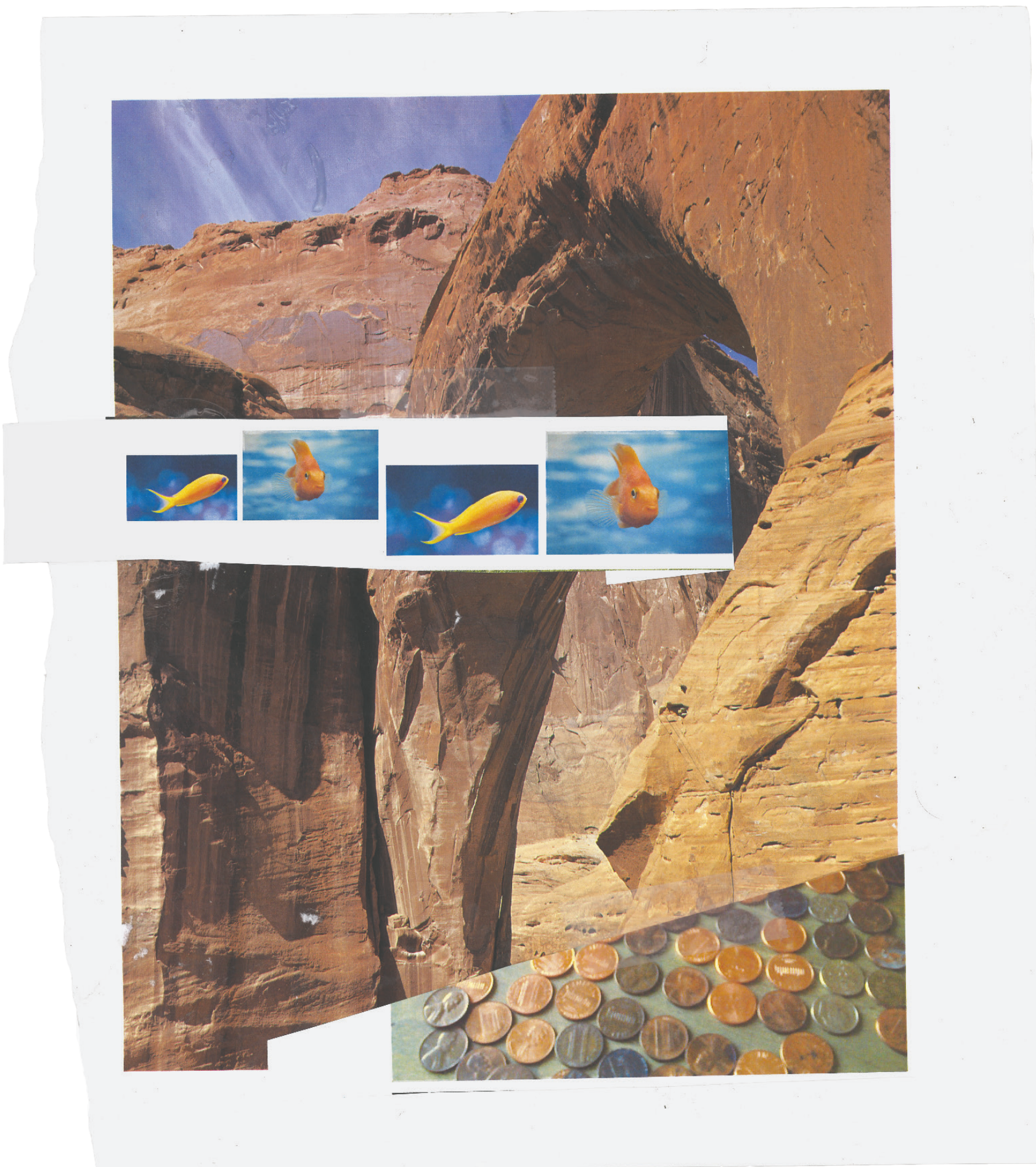
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**NEW
235 BOWERY
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10002 USA
MUSEUM**

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