

URBAN OMNIBUS

New City Critics

A Living Painting

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Installation view, “Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT,” SculptureCenter, New York, 2024–25. Photo by Charles Benton courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter

In 1986, the Whitney Museum operated a short-lived “branch museum” in the lobby of the Equitable Tower at 787 Seventh Avenue. This was one of several satellite exhibition spaces developed by the museum to enliven culture south of Central Park, establish an aesthetic style for corporate America, and simultaneously, to increase the rental value of new office buildings. These were the beginnings of the more-than-office office. Nestled amongst commissions by Sol LeWitt and Roy Lichtenstein, and a work by Thomas Hart Benton was Atrium Furnishment, a site-specific lobby installation for sitting and waiting and talking made up of curved verde larissa marble slabs organized in a half-circle of benches around a large planter.

This furniture-sculpture is a spatial investigation and a social, bodily performance by American artist Scott Burton (1939-1989), whose practice spanned writing, performance, and sculpture. Despite his prolific oeuvre and popularity, Burton's work slid into relative obscurity after he bequeathed his estate to MoMA (rather than to an advocate for individual artists) shortly before he died of AIDS in 1989. Only recently, amidst a renewed interest in design objects and queer histories alike, has Burton's work found a new audience. This moment — in the wake of a pandemic and discontent with private development — has also coincided with a broader desire to protect and honor the fast-disappearing realm of urban public space. When Atrium Furnishment was slated for demolition in 2020, curator Jeremy Johnston and an anonymous donor transported the sculptural pieces to a storage facility in Westchester, New York, and began their search for an institutional forever home. For a few months this past winter, the artist Álvaro Urbano took up the mantle in SculptureCenter's ground-level gallery in Queens.

At SculptureCenter, Urbano reframes the decommissioned sculpture in an installation titled TABLEAU VIVANT. Boundlessly recursive, this is a protracted attempt at conversation between artists (Urbano and Burton), institutions (The Equitable Tower, the Whitney, SculptureCenter), mediums (tableau, installation), and sites (gallery, lobby, museum, storage) and their histories in New York City. But reproducing a thing does not reproduce its values. This is the perpetually unresolved tension of the show, self-described as a "ruin in progress," which at once claims to give life to, but also reproduce as tableau vivant, Burton's now-historic artwork. The installation is in perpetual oscillation between two contradictory positions: ruin, an ongoing state of organic and inorganic disintegration; and tableau, a frozen, ephemeral staging of a familiar scene.

Urbano sets the green marble pieces in three loose concentric circles, interspersed with warm onyx lamps and plants, apples, magnolia, morning glory, and rhododendron meticulously fashioned from painted metal to resemble their counterparts in Central Park. Manhattan is evoked most pointedly in the dropped ceiling, which is gridded to recall the borough's urban blocks and hung low to simulate our smallness amongst skyscrapers. In this, Urbano returns Burton's work to Manhattan, but it is a Manhattan that is distant from the corporate lobby. Instead, we see a tableau of the outdoors, a generic default for what should be a robust public place. Visitors walk around the objects trepidatiously, cameras in hand. The scene resembles an archeological dig, provoking a want to touch, a need to resist. It is unclear if the benches can be sat on, if the apples can be picked up. I do both, quickly.

The show's actual setting in Queens, in a repurposed industrial building nestled among a sea of luxury rentals and high-rise offices, is unfortunately ignored. The fact that Burton's piece has crossed the East River is yet another reminder of capital's steady subsumption of the peripheries of the city. With its placement at SculptureCenter, the work continues where the commission at the Whitney-Equitable left off in its task for art to activate a new public. In the ground-level gallery, it is too easy to imagine that we might just be in Manhattan.

Now that the show has ended, I suspect that all its components will return to the storage facility, receding further into the depths of institutional archives. We are holding something hostage. This is a protective desire, one that needs to see its subject in a safe climate-controlled place in order for it to be understood as artistically meaningful and monetarily valuable. Who gets to save, and what? It is especially unnerving to encounter photographs of the artfully composed, photo-ready show amidst the near-constant stream of images of wildfire, genocide, and famine. What is the value of longevity when its subject is stripped entirely of its functionality and turned, quite literally, into a tableau vivant — a stilled version of itself?

In presenting the sculpture as a "ruin in progress," deterioration is framed as both a danger and a loss, a fantasy and a fetish, a position that registers the curator as savior. Has the ruin been stalled by placing the work back into a stable, regulated interior? Has ruin been deferred by placing the work and its context back in public consciousness? Certainly, the capital that moved for this show to occur renders it certain that nobody wants Atrium Furnishment ruined. But how does the show choose to define ruin? The paradoxes Urbano chooses to play with are all deliciously complicated, but the ambiguous, atemporal stillness that makes for something beautiful in a gallery sidesteps a real opportunity to present a future where an artwork is leveraged, in perpetuity, in service of an articulated, defined public that evolves with the artwork's every appearance.

Urbano admiringly called Burton a "lunch artist," alluding to the fact that his work can operate as a seat or a table, can be encountered and used without registering as art. This remains the experience of some of Burton's only remaining sculptures in the city: the endangered granite chairs in Battery Park City and Urban Plaza North on West 52nd Street. In contrast, this gallery show presents Burton's artistic spirit as a "tableau," a formal genre in which work can only be beheld at a certain distance, in time and in space. The rescued Atrium Furnishment in its new light denies us both the ambiguity and generosity imbued in Burton's original project: to chance upon a thing and respond to it, to be moved by it. An unpoliced, free seat is a gift to the whole body, not only to our eyes.

And a tableau, an artistic genre dating to the late 18th century, is not an inanimate staging. It is an arrangement of people supported by props — part performance, part image. This genre was revived with the advent of photography. The title of the show might also refer to Burton's performance series of 1973, Group Behavior Tableaux, a set of individual scenes in which performers rearranged themselves to depict social relations non-verbally.

SculptureCenter's gallery setting, with its own social and bodily codes, perhaps unintentionally invites us to reproduce one of Burton's performances where the audience is invited to move with, around, and on a piece. But for most, the experience is likely mediated not only through glass, but through the close-cropped frames of Instagram, in deference to the objects rather than in relationship with them. I'd like to believe that we are more daring and more liberated outside of the gallery. A meaningful perpetuation of Burton's legacy requires a commitment to un-antagonizing the public, to the outdoors, and to loitering. Instead, we are cast alongside Burton's objects into a cultural arena that fetishizes its own rescued, disinterred materials and insists upon protecting them, indoors, lest they be returned to dust.