



Álvaro Urbano

TABLEAU VIVANT

In a moving tribute, Álvaro Urbano has staged a reinterpretation of artist Scott Burton's public artwork *Atrium Furnishment* (1986), previously located in the lobby of the Equitable Tower. Burton rejected the suffocating rationality and universalist bent of Minimalist art. For him, such works paraded the heterosexual masculinity of their creators. His furniture pieces—produced until his death in 1989 from AIDS-related complications—comprised a sly queer retort to this tradition. As art historian David Getsy has argued, they resembled the practice of cruising: they were hidden in plain sight, dissembling under the guise of functional objects. *Atrium Furnishment* suggested an extension of this theme, for it insinuated itself into corporate America. Burton's infiltration has come to an end, however: in 2020, building renovations displaced the work, and its fate is currently uncertain.

Enter Urbano, whose act of preservation simultaneously reinterprets its source material. *TABLEAU VIVANT* is, as its name suggests, a re-creation of a favourite work. *Atrium Furnishment* originally consisted of a half-moon bench in sumptuous green marble, four onyx lamps, and central plant holder, but Urbano has disassembled this work from its tight semi-circle into a radial array of sculptural objects. Some pieces of the bench still function as seats; others resemble the fragments of ruins. Fabricated branches, flowers, and apples strewn amidst the scene evoke the Ramble, a section of Central Park that has long been infamous as a gay cruising ground. Urbano activates a queer potential latent in Burton's work, a sensibility and orientation toward the public drawn from the social formations in which he was embedded. Removed from its original site and purpose, the decontextualized piece opens to new configurations of intimacy and viewer interaction. If one ambition of *TABLEAU VIVANT* is to restore the queer context of Burton's art practice, it does so through blatant artifice. Metal twigs, leaves, and apples flaunt their

status as mimics, and the overhead lighting panels abruptly switch from a gauzy orange light to the bright fluorescent glare of a corporate office. One has the sense of a tightly calibrated atmosphere that cannot maintain its appearance. Consider the copy of John Rechy's *City of Night* that coyly lingers on one of the benches. This best-selling 1963 novel was infamous for its depictions of hustlers and other denizens of the sexual underworld. In the context of this installation, the book alludes to the queer counter-publics that informed Burton's works. Urbano also seems interested in this novel as a historical artefact: the specific edition on display dates from 1988. Yet strangely, the book feels even more like a prop because of this detail: it solicits, perhaps compels, an imagined reading public, a romance about a time and a place. *TABLEAU VIVANT* therefore meditates on the very contrivances that seem to ground our access to the past. At once a bid for the preservation of Burton's artistic legacy, Urbano's installation curiously underscores the fragility of such efforts—and the ultimate ephemerality of queer interventions in the public sphere. Despite a revival of some cruising sites since the COVID shutdowns, Urbano seems to suggest that even the Ramble will one day disappear—or be unceremoniously uprooted—as Burton's public artworks have been. Perhaps the most provocative suggestion of this show is that the past, much like *Atrium Furnishment* itself, can never be reconstructed. Instead, we encounter history in and as ruins—in hieroglyphic forms that we grope to decipher.

Connor Spencer

SculptureCenter, New York
September 19, 2024–March 24, 2025

Álvaro Urbano
TABLEAU VIVANT,
exhibition views, 2024.
Photos : Charles Benton,
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SculptureCenter, New York