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ALEX BAG

Whitney Museum of American Art

Inspired by her mother's career as a children's TV show hostess, Alex Bag's new, untitled video installation, commissioned by the Whitney, is a mordant parody of early-'70s children's television that, in a roundabout way, continues to poke fun at the artworld in the tradition of her name-making 1995 video (also untitled). That earlier video showcased Bag's spot-on comic portrayals: an SVA student evolving from "totally psyched" frosh to theory-weary, media-fried reluctant Gen Xer in a series of semester recaps; a performance artist lecturing on videos she made of her purse; and two bored



Installation view of Alex Bag, *Untitled*, 2009 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

salesclerks trying to write a punk rock song about how bored they are. Since then, Bag has created a number of videos that have likewise energetically satirized television, consumerism, and arty pretension; a sense of personal burnout seems to permeate this new work and perhaps is what prompted a turn to her heretofore unexplored familial television heritage.

Bag's evocation of a setting from a '70s childhood brings to mind Keith Edmier's life-size, minutely detailed recreation of his childhood home at Friedrich Petzel in New York last year, but her video is a black-humored, ambiguous tribute to, rather than a replication of, *The Patchwork Family*, the CBS morning kids' variety show that her mother, Carol Corbett, cohosted (circa 1972) with a friendly yellow and orange puppet named Rags. In the Whitney video Bag replaces her mother in the role of hostess, and is joined by a sneering red and yellow stuffed dragon (who goes unnamed) with a slight Spanish accent that could indicate a distant cousinship with *Conan O'Brien's* Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, another puppet prone to relentless ridicule. With flowing blond hair and a white gown, Bag is not only poking fun at Corbett and Rags but probing deeper to remark on the ancient tale of the princess and the dragon. But in this case a conquering hero never materializes to rescue the clinically depressed princess (who often sounds like she's under the influence of tranquilizers despite claiming to be "off my meds") from the dragon, who minces no words in eviscerating her every slurred artspeak utterance. Behind the two, a video plays of rapidly scanned medieval and Renaissance paintings, mostly depicting hell and religious scenes;

footage of explosions and other disasters, natural and man-made, are also dropped in.

"Let's get this over with so I can sleep," Bag moans near the outset. Holding up David Bowie's 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*, she traces her mental anguish to her first encounter with Bowie's music—an "early break from reality"—and wants to share the music with the children, enlisting a bearded, scraggly-haired guy in camouflage togs and a wheelchair (she admits to having found him outside her house) to sing a somewhat rushed but enthusiastic Bowie medley, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. The kids mostly stare off or at the camera, although one claps his hands off-time and another sways to the music. The next guest is a mysterious animal wrangler who brings in snakes and a monkey to show the children (this set of kids is slightly older) while reciting non sequiturs on subjects ranging from the Bible to keeping a diary to anxiety about 2012. "What the hell was that?" roars the dragon at the segment's end, "Why would anyone want to see this?"

A clip from an actual episode of *The Patchwork Family* follows, in which a leotard-clad instructor has two children "footpaint" with finger paints, dancing around on a white-papered floor (creating "an impressionistic abstract"). Later, Bag gets dressed up like Morticia Adams to read Sartre's *Nausea* to the children, who laugh or smile occasionally but don't seem to be reacting to the reading per se (their cheerful obliviousness recalls the nine-year-old unfazed by Jean-Luc Godard's philosophical inquiries in his little-known 1978 French TV miniseries *France/tour/detour/deux/les enfants*). For the grand finale, the guitarist-singer and the children do a rendition of the Rolling Stones' "Salt of the Earth," complete with footage of the Stones themselves performing the song at their 1968 "Rock'n'Roll Circus" tour in the background.

Besides (somewhat mercilessly) undercutting the chipper banter of a children's show, the rapport between Bag and the dragon resembles that of a spacy art student and an acrid professor during a particularly nasty art school crit. "This is the most self-indulgent, masturbatory drivel," the dragon says midway through. "Yes, but isn't all art?" is Bag's reply. It's hard to determine how reflexive (or facetiously reflexive) the video is: at one point the hostess asks what day it is—the answer is January 2—and the dragon reminds her that her show opens on the 9th, and that she "is fucked" (the Whitney opening was indeed January 9th). Some of the dragon's attacks could reflect past criticism of her work, or might function as confessions of the artist's own self-doubt in her latest output. He chides her for changing costumes (atypically, she limits herself to two different outfits here, as opposed to her usual Tracey Ullman-like successions of clothes and characters). Bag responds, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." When pressed, she more analytically explains that she's "hiding." Is Bag not only speaking as the character in this video, but commenting on herself in all her videos? The dragon accuses Bag of having a midlife crisis, and later, when the dragon and the guitarist-singer duet on Neil Young's "Old Man," changing one line from "24 and there's so much more" to "39 and I'm out of time"—Bag is 39—one has to wonder if the video is as much a statement about aging as it is about children's entertainment or the art scene. For all the video's vituperation and anxiety, it's a sustained piece of work, with no lack of ideas despite its creator's implications that she's running on empty. —Alan Licht