

# Art

## Reviews

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Installation view

## Alex Bag

★★★★★

**Whitney Museum of American Art,** through April (see Museums)

An artist returns to the place where children's television and childhood memory are the same.

By **Howard Halle**

Thanks to YouTube and reality programming, just about anyone, it seems, can appear on television. But back when three broadcast networks ruled the medium, getting on TV was a really big deal for ordinary folks. What opportunities existed were limited to daytime shows or courtesy of your hometown station: by being a game show contestant, for instance, or if you happened to run into your local news crew covering a fire—then you could always jump into the shot and wave like a idiot. For the most part, however, the small screen was as much a barrier to a privileged domain as it was a window.

Imagine, then, what it must have been like to grow up watching your mom on television three decades ago. Artist Alex Bag, 40, did just that, and judging from her new video installation at the Whitney, her first ever for a museum, the experience was both a blessing and a curse.

Bag's piece is untitled but it could have been called *That '70s Show*. Not only does it employ loopy psychedelic effects, it also features, among other things, a scraggly, long-haired, wheelchair-bound troubadour in an army jacket. He strums a guitar while warbling Neil Young and Bowie tunes to groups of children, as if Jon Voight's Vietnam vet in *Coming Home* had decided to give Dan Zanes a run for his money.

Mostly, though, Bag pays weird homage to *The Patchwork Family*, a kids' program hosted by her mother which ran in New York City between 1972 and 1973. Bag's mom, Carol Corbett, appears in a couple of brief archival clips at the beginning of the video. Near the middle, one of the *Patchwork* regulars, artist and "fitness expert" Suzy Pruden, can be seen shepherding a group of youngsters through a "finger painting with feet" exercise. They dip their tootsies into poster color and trample all over a canvas like so many junior Pollocks. "Ooh," Pruden coos, "this is beginning to look like an impressionistic abstract."

The same could be said for Bag's disjointed, hallucinatory effort. Housed in a gallery meant to recall *Patchwork*'s set (walls limned in blue-screen azure; floor covered in a large white shag rug on which child-sized benches provide seating), Bag's video

shares the DIY production values and kiddie-oriented format of Corbett's show, if not its confidence in transmitting anything meaningful. Wearing a long blond wig, dressed in virginal white, Bag addresses the camera, questioning her own ability to make sense. More than just unpacking her past, Bag takes a Dantean descent into aimlessness, and in case there's

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any chance of missing the point, viewers are treated to background images of flicking flames and medieval scenes of the damned. There's even a peculiar Virgil on hand: A plush-toy dragon puppet which comments acerbically on the goings-on in a pronounced Puerto Rican accent. When, for instance, Bag wistfully allows that her work is a "kind of painting," he retorts "Leesen, you're no painter!" When the camera cuts back to them after a bizarre sequence with a Jack Hanna-type wildlife wrangler nattering on about the symbology of snakes, he exclaims, "Wat the hell waz dat?"

What the hell, indeed. Bag, at times, seems to try to work in themes of light versus dark or good versus evil. The artist contrasts her befuddled golden-tressed Beatrice with another character who wears a severe goth wig, but what impresses is Bag's eager embrace of incoherence. Is it meant to preempt criticism (after all, if you say the work sucks, who's to disagree with you?), or function as a surreal avenue for emotionally distancing herself from a legacy? Hard to tell. It is pretty obvious, though, that Bag, a gifted mimic with a penchant for mining obscure veins of pop-cultural gold, owes much to her mother's performance art. Yet she communicates her sense of inadequacy, of not measuring up to Corbett's accomplishments. "Why do I do this? Because my mother did," Bag says in a resigned tone at one point. When the dragon asks if she has children of her own, she answers, "No."

If Bag treats her own psychology as a minor pop-cultural artifact, it's because her mother was one too. Although it helps to know, for example, that the original *Patchwork Family* featured its own wildlife whisperer and puppet cohost, those details aren't necessary to appreciate the work. What Bag offers is an acid-soaked madeleine to remembrances both real and Memorex. Go ahead and take a bite. ■