

Fussy Flora

ARIA DEAN
"SUITE!"
REDCAT
5 JUNE – 24 OCT 2021

The perpetually buzzed-about multi-hyphenate Aria Dean's (*1993) video installation at REDCAT opens by addressing the viewer in a straightforward manner: "Hello", a voice hails. Almost immediately afterward, a virtual version of that same exhibition space is presented on the screen: a dark room with warped, black-and-white chequered carpet and black curtains lining its perimeter. The artwork is quite self-contained – there is a digital video projected on a curved screen, stabilised by a rather rudimentary lumber support structure; the aforementioned carpet and curtains provide some atmospheric ambiance.

Digitally rendered dancers in the form of Kudzu plants – an invasive species that frequent the southeastern United States, Southern Gothic literature, and other forms of American folk culture – arrive on the scene. The voice-over narration continues throughout the video, reading a myriad of texts including some of Dean's original writing. Each statement is rushed and the delivery sounds nervous, maybe even stressed. This often feels at odds with the fluidity of the animated plants' choreography, which combines the artist's own motion-captured movements with a variety of other historical stylings sourced from the internet. Music and other recordings of manipulated sound often drown out the words or otherwise distract you from receiving and processing them. At a certain point, it's probably best advised to stop trying to make out everything that's being said and just let it blend in with what's being heard. After a while, the voice becomes something of a monotonous instrument. Then, suddenly, you catch a gem like: "How do you do a character study of no one?"



Still from *Suite!*, 2021, single-channel video

A little over a minute into the video, this indie-soundtrack ditty starts playing – the breezy strums of an acoustic guitar would be at home on one of LA's local public radio stations, KCRW. Eventually, the plants all morph into one, like a synthetic representation of an all-natural, organic successor to the T-1000 Terminator. (It's revealed that they simply snuggled up with each other to form a super-tight conga line.) Shortly thereafter is the appearance of a basic, white, elongated pillar – something Dean has fabricated and shown elsewhere in the physical world – around which one of the plants performs a pole dance. A virtual mock-up of the venue's parking garage is captured, recreated, and featured as a stage for one of the plant-dancers to gyrate in slow motion.

It's a glitchy moment that doesn't last long, as the viewer ends up back in the video's self-referential gallery space. A worn door promptly opens, exposing some of the plants in a dressing room, tending to their leaves the way a human entertainer might pluck their hair or add makeup between performances. One of the plants spots the viewer mid-intrusion and frantically chases us out of the room, shutting the door, as the camera's gaze hurriedly backs out. The video concludes with all the plants being burned to death, which is apparently the only way to kill Kudzu plants. The final words: "A slap in the face".

The burning of the plants is a reference to the sixteenth-century polymath Giordano Bruno, who was found guilty of heresy by the Roman Inquisition

and burned at the stake for teaching pantheism and reincarnation – one voice in the video's cacophony of quotations. In addition to being a Dominican friar, Bruno was a cosmologist, mathematician, philosopher, poet, and Hermetic occultist. He infamously challenged Copernicus's assertion that the sun was the centre of the cosmos; Bruno instead believed in the possibility of a boundless universe, composed of an infinite number of solar systems containing life-sustaining planets.

It's not surprising that Dean, who juggles plenty of positions, shares an affinity with Bruno. The biblical parable of the burning bush also comes to mind: the isolated flora was on fire, but was not consumed by the flames. The bush was kind of a stand-in for God, much like these Kudzu plants are for Dean, and, well, "the artist", as a broader concept. Is this how you do a character study of no one? In *Suite!*, there is no one to study; there are stand-ins, biomorphic understudies. The piece has a lot packed into it – the aesthetics and language of conceptual art, skilful animation that is both fresh and nostalgic, a slightly moody score, plodding prose. After watching this video many times, I started to imagine it as a well-funded effort to get nihilists to learn empathy and compassion. A study ought to produce a lesson, no? The lesson here, at least the one I took from the experience: Anyone can be a character, anything can be a character, but it's ideal if whatever it is *has* character. Kudos to the Kudzu!

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Photos: Brica Wilcox



Courtesy: the artist; Château Shatto, Los Angeles; Greene Naftali, New York



Views of "Suite!", REDCAT, 2021