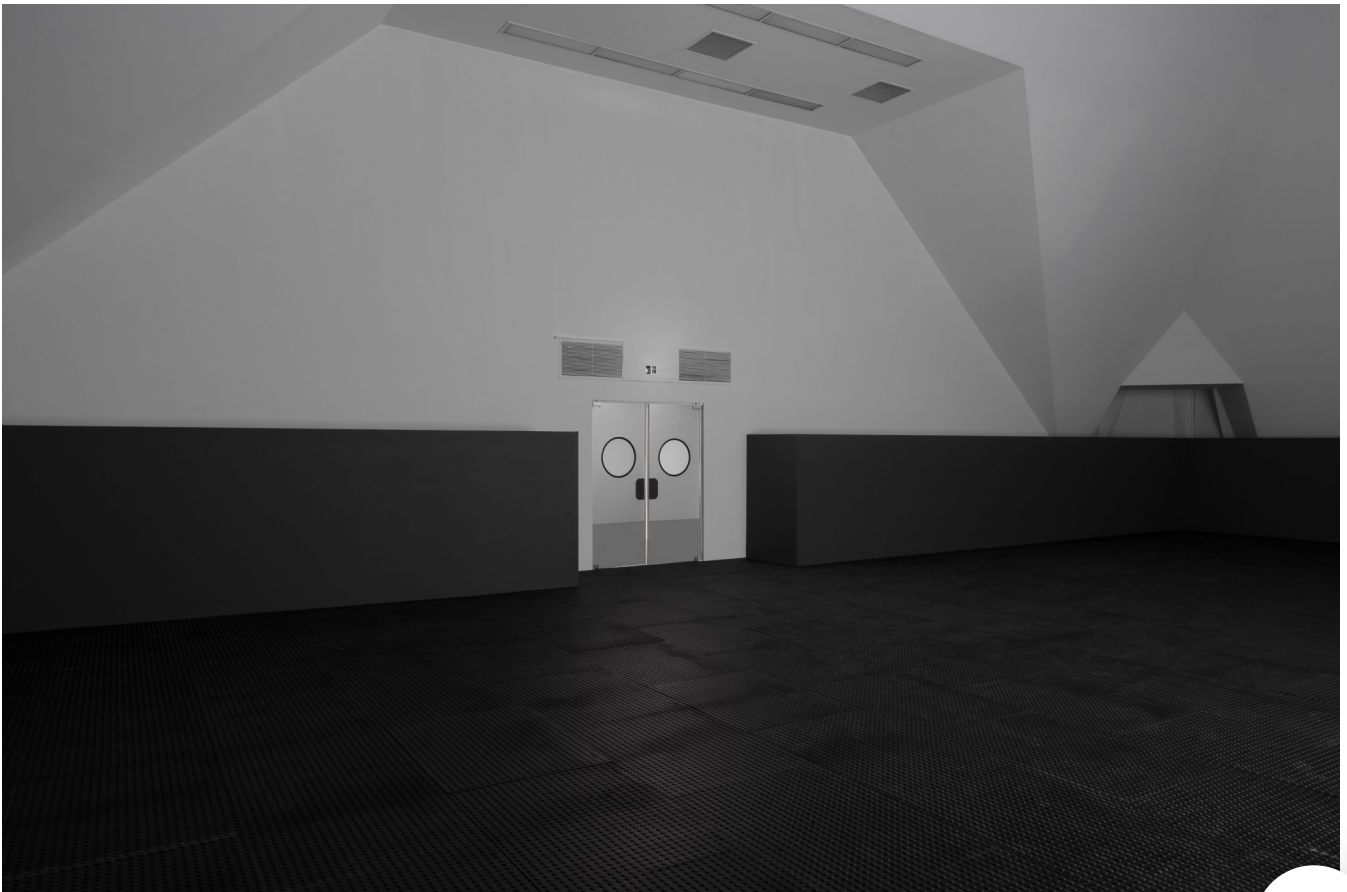


Alone Now: A Review of Aria Dean “Abattoir, USA!” at Renaissance Society

MARCH 8, 2023 AT 7:00 AM BY [JENNIFER SMART](#)



Aria Dean, “Abattoir, USA!,” installation view, 2023, The Renaissance Society/Photo: Robert Chase Heishman

The ambivalent tone Aria Dean's audiovisual work "Abattoir, USA!" strikes is evident in its title, a title it shares with an exhibition on view at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

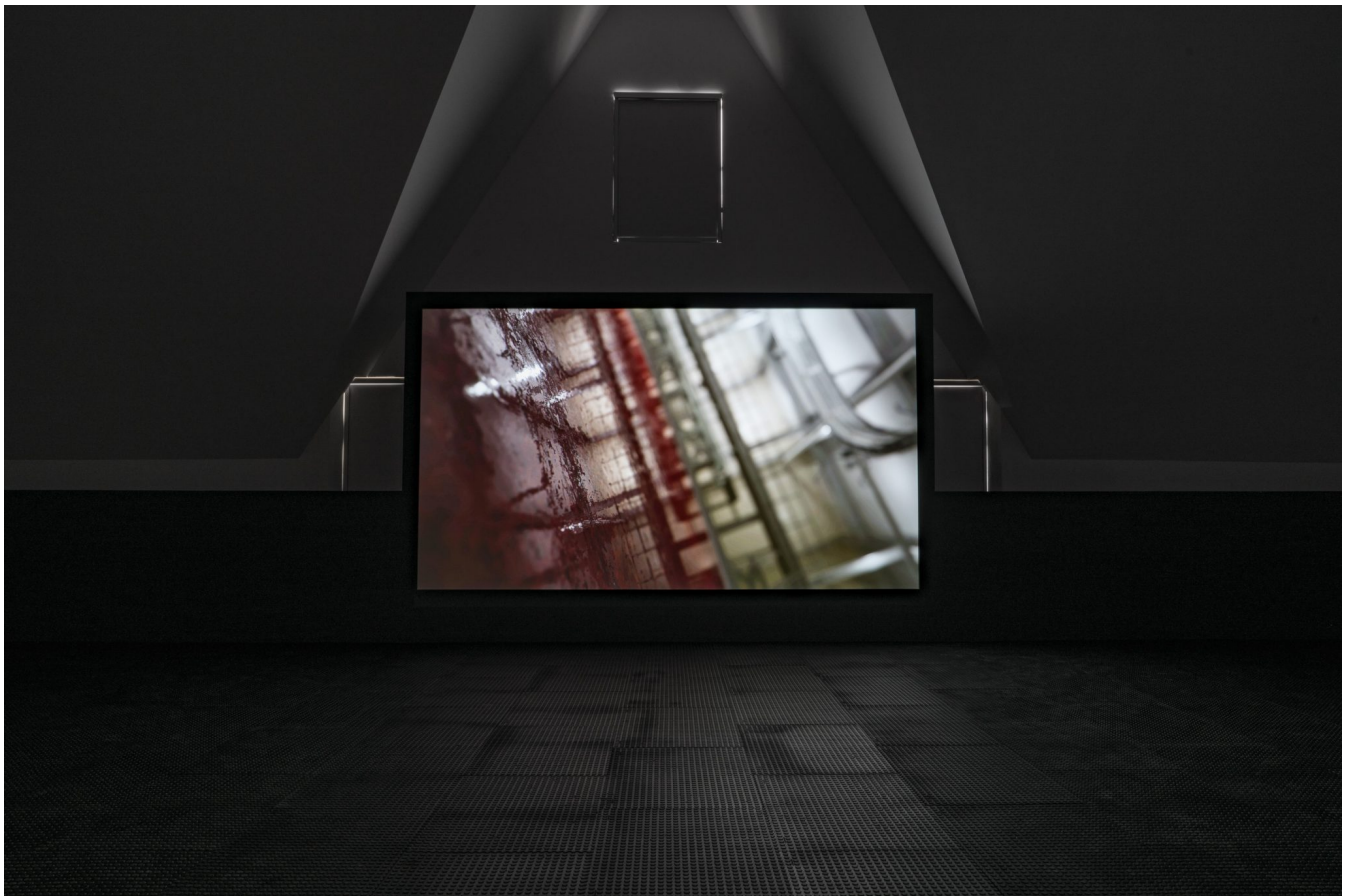
Dean is an artist but she's also an accomplished critic and theorist, and the conceptual currents of "Abattoir, USA!" are thick exploring the architecture and conflicted cultural resonances of the slaughterhouse. Dean is fluent in the complexities of visibility and representation in the twenty-first century, often using her artwork to explore and scramble sedimented connotations of historical imagery and symbols. In "Abattoir, USA!" she plays with the ideological nature of film's audiovisual affordances. The work is attentive to both the immediate manner in which setting and architecture are revealed in their representation, as well as the capacity of the moving image (especially evident here in film's relationship to animation and sound) to trouble the taken-for-grantedness of perception.



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For the exhibition the artist retrofitted the Ren's cavernous space to mirror the industrial setting of the video, coating the floor in rubber and building dark, fence-like walls around the perimeter. Visitors enter the darkened space through swinging aluminum doors to encounter the video of the title and eight-channel sound piece.

The animated film was created in Unreal Engine, a 3D computer graphics tool “used to create real-time environments.” Both the un-realness of the video’s aesthetic and its first-person perspective recall that of video games, making the viewer feel like an active participant in its unfolding. We enter the space of the video from above, following the camera’s gaze as it pans down from a blue sky to the floor of a massive building. Its movements are uncanny as it tilts, pans and soars through space, at times tentatively, at others more aggressively. The uncanniness of its motion is matched by the building’s stark emptiness. As the video progresses the viewer moves with it through maze-like tunnels in the floor before abruptly coming to a dead end. Here the video shifts from “real” space to an abstract, chaotic space of flashing lights and darkness.



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The camera, and by extension the viewer, regains its bearings through hesitating camera movements, before soaring through yet another space. Although this space is alien once again in its emptiness, it traffics an exaggerated sense of horror as sharp hooks sway above the viscous liquid of a blood-soaked floor.

The curatorial statement for the show describes the work as an exploration of 'how meaning is produced through moving images,' and while the work's affect is certainly trafficked through cinematography, arguably much more of its ambiguity is conveyed by the relationship between image and sound. The soundtrack, created by Evan Zierk, thunders through the gallery across an eight-channel speaker system. With the gallery's darkened space and the exhibition's design, it creates a profoundly immersive experience. The sound itself plays widely with sonic genre and register. Across the course of the video it shifts from cinematic, atmospheric droning and resonant synthesizers to screeching, scraping electronics and finally to a beautiful (and on-the nose)

string rendition of the oft-covered pop song, “I Think We’re Alone Now.” The sound is dramatic but it delves into the lushly beautiful, and is at times even playful, placing it in an often contrapuntal relation to what might otherwise be the connotations of the video’s blood-soaked, technical infrastructure.



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Described as an “impossible architecture,” Dean’s animated slaughterhouse and its fusion of the modernist glass and steel of the Crystal Palace-like opening sequence, with the metallic techno-aesthetic of the processing area, is disturbingly intoxicating. It’s a disconcerting affect for a video about such a cruel institution, but one which provocatively achieves Dean’s goal of thematizing America’s knotty relationship to the slaughterhouse, while revealing how powerfully film and music structure meaning and interpretation. The equivocal nature of the uncanny perfection of the video’s animations—Dean’s play with the recognizable architectures of modernism and the overly aestheticized presentation of blood and machinery—married to its cinematic

deployment of sound and music, makes “Abattoir, USA!” a provocative and fascinating work of art.