

ARTFORUM

Álvaro Urbano at SculptureCenter

by Daniel Belasco (April 2025)



View of "Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT," 2024–25. Photo: Charles Benton.

Experiencing Álvaro Urbano's multipart, multimedia exhibition "TABLEAU VIVANT" at SculptureCenter felt like entering this passage from Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You" (1960):

in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

Urbano's homage to late sculptor Scott Burton (1939–1989), a young contemporary of O'Hara's in the New York art and gay scenes, created a layered environment of reprieve and relaxation. Three principal elements interacted to intensify the self-awareness of a highly specific time and space. A group of six marble settees were arranged in fragmented concentric rings. Concrete castings of apples and trompe l'oeil renditions of blossoming magnolia trees, rhododendron bushes, and other vegetation—all naturalistically painted in acrylic as if they'd been freshly picked and pruned—were strewn on and around the stonework. The ceremonial mood was accentuated by shadows of dancers, along with those of leaves, puddles, and other street detritus animated on a sixty-by-thirty-foot drop ceiling of opaque Plexiglas sheets and LED lights programmed in a twenty-eight-minute loop. The tripartite presentation kindled fond recollections of the Pool Room in Philip Johnson's old Four Seasons restaurant in Manhattan's Seagram Building, with its impeccable modernist design, soft lighting, fulsome flower arrangements, and whimsical water feature.

Born in Spain and based in Germany, Urbano has sensitively explored philosophical and aesthetic expressions of private/public, nature/culture, and indoor/outdoor dualities in past projects, including a video installation on the futurist ruin of Johnson's 1964–65 New York State Pavilion, presented at Manhattan's Storefront for Art and Architecture in 2021. Here, Urbano's site-specific installation probed the multifaceted output of Burton, whose work as a queer artist elaborating on Conceptual and post-Minimalist explorations of situations and behaviors has received considerable reevaluation in the past

few years. At the same time, the physical states of his public art projects are in flux. The stone seating arrangements and other marble and bronze elements were borrowed from a suite of public pieces designed by Burton for the atrium of New York’s Axa Equitable Center, installed in 1986 and removed in 2020. The illuminated ceiling recapitulated the gestures in Burton’s undocumented early performance *Group Behavior Tableaux*, 1972. And the vegetal forms evoked the Central Park Ramble, where the queer community has sought sex and intimacy for generations. Urbano’s exploration of the intersection of sculpture and furniture with sex and gender codes smartly dialogues with art historian David Getsy’s theory of cruising as a metaphor for Burton’s larger practice of “strategic inhabitation of streets and other public and semipublic spaces.”

Public artworks, even when rendered in stone or bronze, are not necessarily permanent these days. We are living in an anxious period of contestation regarding the symbolic and actual occupation of the commons. The removal of Burton’s furnishings from the Equitable Center and elsewhere—like those of other destroyed or displaced public pieces by Mary Miss (*Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, 1989–96) and Elyn Zimmerman (*Marabar*, 1984)—will persist in consciousness so long as artists continue to take stock of trauma and offer consolation for communal losses. Urbano’s maximalist approach in amalgamating three discrete formal and material systems in a large gallery installation exemplified the shift of contemporary exhibitions from modernist reverence for the sanctity of the individual object to heterogeneous installation as memory machine. Recent institutional presentations in New York—such as the densely hung “Edges of Ailey” at the Whitney Museum of American Art or the sparsely installed Charles Ray retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—have eschewed the routine experience of a one-on-one engagement between viewer and object in favor of a perceptual immersion in a multivalent field of spatial and physical encounters. From Urbano’s presentation, one was thrust into an environment of subtle cues and references nodding at hushed movements in midcentury American urban environments and the assertive modernist sensibility that shaped these same spaces.