

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in April: Carolyn Lazard by Jillian Steinhauer



Installation view of "Carolyn Lazard: Two-way." via Artists Space, New York; Photo by Greg Carideo

In the United States, a simple visit to the doctor can be demoralizing. "Vital," one of two new short films by Carolyn Lazard — a 2023 MacArthur Fellow who makes work about disability and care — dramatizes that experience. It follows a Black person named Maxine Smalls at a prenatal appointment.

The camera moves with quiet, almost clinical precision. Nothing outwardly dramatic happens, yet problems abound: Smalls arrives to find that their doctor is out. The substitute is a condescending white man who dismisses her questions with terse responses. When Smalls checks out, the receptionist says insurance won't cover the visit.

Smalls weathers this all stoically, probably because they know that Black women, and those presenting as women, are frequently discriminated against in medical settings. That reality is the impetus for Lazard's second film, "Fiction Contract," which documents a childbirth simulation at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens. The care team is exclusively Black women, and the "patient" is a Black medical mannequin (something that until recently wasn't widely available).

Both films, commissioned by Artists Space, are stylistically so direct that initially I wasn't sure what to make of them. But after I left, I couldn't stop thinking about them. They capture the simultaneous intimacy and coldness of health care experiences so well, the contradiction of feeling both cared for and exhausted. The show's title, "Two-way," could suggest a street — a relationship of reciprocity — or a mirror: a medical system that's watching you, while concealing its mechanisms from view.