The Kitchen, is a multi channel performance-based video installation, by Winnipeg artist Sarah Anne Johnson installed at Gallery 44 as part of the Images Off Screen presentations. The work is composed of 15 monitors mounted in varying compositions around the gallery, each displaying a view of a brightly lit kitschy 1950s kitchen and a backwards facing masked archetypal housewife character. The back gallery video offers a bird’s eye view of the same figure, but this time shot in black and white with the camera in constant rotation following the movements of the trapped housewife on the floor performing a sort of claustrophobic choreography.

Although Johnson’s work adopts the language of retro-feminist wave critiques of gendered binaries, she uses this aesthetic in a way that moves beyond reductionist readings, allowing an emotionally rich exploration of both feminism(s) and her own family history. Johnson has been delving into her family archives for a number of years (in her capacity as a photographer she created the series House on Fire (2009), but turning to performance she embodies the fractured figure of her maternal grandmother, who was a victim of grossly unethical psychological experiments conducted in the 1950s/60s.

Unknown perhaps to many Canadians, Canada was a central testing place for psychotropic drugs, including LSD as well as various forms of experimental mind control agents from the mid 1950s to the 1960s. Much of this research was funded under the umbrella of a CIA project ominously titled Project MKUltra. Sounding like a Bradbury penned dystopian novel, these aberrant histories have been making their way into current awareness through academic research and the occasional magazine and television...
coverage. This history is intriguing for its unbelievable fictional-like qualities and sometimes the individual stories get lost along the way as they take on novelty-esque qualities.

In many ways, this work does conjure up sentiments of the well-worn 1970s feminist slogans, like ‘the personal is political,’ but, however redundant this slogan has become or however flawed 1970s feminism may be, here the personal is a necessary micro lens to remind us that these fantastical histories have both bodily and psychological impacts on real individuals. Johnson’s grandmother after seeking help for postpartum depression at the Allen Memorial Institute at the McGill Hospital in the 1950s, became a non consensual test subject for these psychotropic experiments. Johnson’s inverted inhabitation of her grandmother enacts the damage inflicted on her grandmother that carried through to Johnson. The legacy of early feminist performance and video art can be seen in The Kitchen, but this engagement is not pastiche nor the end goal of the work. The Kitchen is rooted in a personal and painful history that moves us beyond the believe-it-or-not angle of a little known but highly disturbing episode in Canadian history.

In addition to The Kitchen at Gallery 44, Johnson’s live choreographed performance Hospital Hallway, which delves further into her Grandmother’s history is taking place at Division Gallery’s Arsenal space for a final performance on Saturday April 16th at 2pm. To guarantee a seat RSVP to toronto@galeriedivision.com

You can also read the interview between Images Artistic Director, Amy Fung and Sarah Anne Johnson conducted for the Gallery 44 exhibition RIGHT HERE