Sarah Anne Johnson takes grim trip into family past
Sarah Anne Johnson in the prison-like stage built for her performance Hospital Hallways. In it, she embodies her grandmother, who was subjected to secret psychoactive drug experiments by the CIA at a Montreal hospital in the 1950s. (Sian Richards / Courtesy Division Gallery)
Sarah Anne Johnson takes grim trip into family past

Artist embodies grandmother’s nightmare for Images Festival in Hospital Hallways. Her art is also on view at McMichael.

It’s a wobbly climb down a very tall ladder into the deep hexagonal chamber currently installed at Division Gallery in Toronto, but Sarah Anne Johnson — heels and all — makes it with a practised ease.

In a way, it’s a descent she’s made thousands of times. It’s the set for Hospital Hallways, the well-known Winnipeg photo-artist’s first ever performance piece and a little background goes a long way to explaining why. In 1956, her grandmother, Velma Orlikow, checked herself into the Allan Memorial Institute, a psychiatric care facility at McGill University in Montreal. She suffered from postpartum depression and was looking for a speedy recovery to get on with the happy business of new mothering.

Instead, unknowingly, she fell into a mind-control drug experiment administered by Dr. Ewen Cameron on behalf of the CIA. MKUltra, as it was later revealed, used test subjects without their knowledge and against their will. Three years later, after several stints in Cameron’s care,
Orlikow finally emerged to rejoin normal life. But she had brought back a plague of mental trauma: severe depression, fear of crowds, an inability to concentrate.

“It’s a lot to take in,” says Johnson, now standing on the dull grey floor, surrounded by stark white walls glowing cold under fluorescent light. “I do a little research and then I have to step back. It’s family. I have to take it slowly.”

Johnson is likely best known for photographic works that marry a naive sense of utopia with a dark side of idealism. New pictures, about the coming-of-age ritual of the summer music festival, hand-tinged by Johnson with sinister colour that suggests the dangers of youthful bacchanal, can be seen at the McMichael Collection of Canadian Art until June 5.

Here, though, in this colourless space, is a place Johnson comes back to time and again. In 2009, Johnson made House on Fire, an installation of ghoulish sculptures and a dollhouse of rooms simmering with domestic nightmares: a kitchen with melting walls, a foyer underwater; an attic where her grandmother, naked, is locked in a waltz with a lab-coated doctor while the house burns.

The dollhouse also contains a hallway with no beginning or end, which is where Johnson now stands. Hospital Hallways is her first attempt to actually embody her grandmother’s physical struggle: in a stark prison with no way out.

She had planned it as a video, a simple, terrifying loop in which Velma enters, suitcase in hand, and can’t escape. Eventually, she says, House on Fire could evolve into a full-blown film, room by room. The Kitchen, currently on view at Gallery 44 for the Images Festival, is the first of them. In it, Johnson, wearing a photographic mask of her grandmother’s face, struggles to rejoin the life of sunny domesticity expected of a 1950s housewife.

Hospital Hallways was to be the second but, once the set was built, it seized Johnson with a visceral chill. “Spending time in it, I realized how dizzying and awful it was,” she says. “You can’t tell where you are. And it turns out it’s the perfect size for my body to do all kinds of things.”

Johnson stoops to pass a hand over the floor, fretting that it might not be sanded smooth enough. “I don’t want to rip my clothes” she says, matter of fact. When asked if she plans to spend time on the ground, she laughs. “Oh, yeah,” she says. “I’m down there a lot.”

Hospital Hallways is Johnson’s attempt to embody her grandmother’s inner torment. Masked with Velma’s face, Johnson braces herself between walls, shimmying unsteadily to the space’s full height, or collapses across its breadth on the floor before inverting herself in a gruesome reverse headstand, her legs convulsing with a grisly clatter against the wall.

“A lot of the moves are about how a body breaks; it just looks wrong and it’s meant to,” she explains. “She would try to refuse treatment and the doctors would tell her that she was a bad wife, a bad mother, that she didn’t want to get better. Her family, with the best intentions, told
her to trust the doctors — they didn’t know the truth; nobody did — and so she just resigned herself at some point. So I’m kind of exploiting that: what does it feel like to lose yourself, body, mind and spirit?”

This is, of course, just one of a dozen of Velma’s chambers of horror — maybe more. Which means that Johnson has just begun. Even if she completes them all, she knows she’ll never finish. “I knew this would be a magnum opus,” she says. “But I know I’ll never be completely outside it. I just can’t imagine a time when I’ll have all my questions answered. It’s never-ending.”

Sarah Anne Johnson, Hospital Hallways: A Performance, is part of the 2016 Images Festival. It takes place at Division Gallery, 45 Ernest Ave. Johnson’s video work The Kitchen, also part of Images, runs at Gallery 44, 401 Richmond St., to April 23. Field Trip, Johnson’s photo show at the McMichael, continues to June 5.

Images Festival

The Images Festival, Toronto’s annual out-there cornucopia of experimental film and video, always offers an array of gems for the avant-garde inclined. Kicking off April 17, a few of note among the many:

Oliver Husein, Isla Santa Maria 3D: A German video artist who came to Toronto some years ago and liked it enough that he stayed, Husein has consistently been on the leading edge of experimental video installation, using sly and subtle techniques to reveal the rift between spectator and the action onscreen. Here, he moves one step further, into a sci-fi retelling of the Christopher Columbus tale, and the genesis of colonialism, the shockwaves of which never seem to abate. At Gallery TPW, 170 St. Helen’s Ave. Opening April 14; til June 4.

Kyung Mook-Kim and Caroline Key, Grace Period: Yeongdeungpo is the semi-legal red light district in Seoul, Korea, where, after years of polite society — and the police — turning a blind eye, the construction of a huge new shopping mall suddenly recasts the district as seedy and unwanted. In this work, Mook-Kim and Key combine documentary and fictional footage to capture the sex workers’ protests against their loss of livelihood, capturing a wider hypocrisy about precarious labour of all kinds at the mercy of gentrification. Whippersnapper Gallery, 594B Dundas Street West. Opening April 14 at 7 PM; til April 24.

Carlos Motta, Beloved Martina: Motta, a Colombian artist, makes his Canadian debut here with works on the suddenly-topical subject of gender identity, and specifically, how it can be non-specific. His 2015 video piece, Desires, unspools in the front gallery, detailing 19th century correspondence between Martina, a woman in Colombia persecuted for being a hermaphrodite, and Nour, a woman in Beirut who is forced to marry the brother of her lover, who is a woman. In the back gallery, sandstone sculpture aping classical forms — they are in fact 3-D prints — unpack the bi-gender prevalence in ancient myth. At Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor Street West.
Opens April 14 at 7 PM; ‘til June 4.

**Heung-Soon IM, Factory Complex**: A winner of the Silver Lion Award at the Venice Biennale last year, IM’s exploration of the injustices faced by female factory workers in South Korea is an unflinching view into labour inequality in a culture that, despite its growing economic status in the world, remains dangerously partriarchal. Screening at the Royal Cinema, April 15 at 7 PM.