Sarah Anne Johnson did an artist talk to accompany her installation, *The Kitchen* at Gallery 44, as a part of April’s Images Festival. The talk brought out a crowd of curious people, as the work is ominous and incites a great deal more questions than it answers.

Johnson’s talk helped to shed light on the interesting and disturbing history of how the work came to existence. The artist’s maternal grandmother suffered from post-partum depression in the 1950s, prior to any understanding of the illness. She received on and off treatment in the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. It was later revealed that this treatment was a part of a CIA initiative to develop mind control – the effects of these highly immoral practices would affect Johnson’s grandmother and family for many years to come.

![Sarah Anne Johnson, video stills from *The Kitchen*, 2016. Photo: Rhiann Moore](image)

Johnson focuses on the familial results of this injustice. The kitchen – her own kitchen slightly redecorated – is done in the 1950’s style, as is the dress of Johnson. In Gallery 44 there are various screens, which show extended scenes of the artist herself doing basic kitchen duties with immense difficulty as she does them all backwards with a mask. In her talk she described how this intends to reflect the way the doctors tried to break her grandmother down and put her back together, and how this made the formerly simple tasks hard to accomplish. The long takes of each scene cause an extension of this discomfort and allow for the viewer to see how the immense difficulty of going through
life backwards would be in real time.

Sarah Anne Johnson, video still from *The Kitchen*, 2016. Photo: Rhiann Moore

The gallery also features a separate backroom where there is a larger black and white projection of Johnson moving into various strange positions on the kitchen floor. Johnson admitted herself that this part does not necessarily go with the other scenes, but she felt the image was too powerful to be excluded from the exhibit, a fact most viewers are likely inclined to agree with.

Sarah Anne Johnson, video still from *The Kitchen*, 2016. Image courtesy of Gallery 44

Johnson looks largely from the perspective of her family's personal history, with a decisive understanding that this government project was not exclusive to her family. The exhibition is layered with the facts that give viewers a deeper understanding of what Johnson is
trying to accomplish, however, it is capable of standing on its own. The exhibition is disturbing, alienating and fascinating. Johnson mentioned that these pieces were done not only for her family, but rather for all the people who have suffered from mental illness that affected their daily activities.

Sarah Anne Johnson (left) at her Artist Talk, Gallery 44, Images Festival, April 14, 2016. Photo: Rhiann Moore

Johnson said that throughout her childhood she constantly remembered her grandmother being surrounded by books and writing utensils. She went through life assuming that her grandmother was an avid reader and writer. Later on she found out from her mother that, as a result of the trauma of her hospitalization, reading and writing became incredibly difficult for her grandmother, yet she constantly tried to improve. It was clear in her speech that Johnson greatly admired the perseverance this would have taken.

Johnson also spoke about her future plans to create different rooms in a dollhouse that would work alongside *The Kitchen* and Hospital Hallway, a performance based installation. *The Kitchen* is an interesting and emotional piece – and alongside other rooms would be equally, if not more, powerful.

Rhiann Moore

*Exhibition information: April 1 – 23, 2016, 401 Richmond Street West Suite #120, Toronto. Gallery hours: Tue – Sat, 11 am – 5 pm.*