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Anya Gallaccio, "Blessed"
Lehmann Maupin, through Oct 20 (see Soho).

BY ROBERT MAHONEY

Before the opening of Anya Gallaccio's latest show, *W* reported that the artist planned to set fire to the gallery's walls. She didn't go that far, but she did torch the floor black, transforming it into an eery vision of scorched earth—and, on another level, into an unnerving evocation of a wasteland. On this somber plain, Gallaccio exhibits several bronze sculptures cast from nature, along with a large color photograph of herself lying in a creek.

With its combination of naturalistic objects and cryptic photography, Gallaccio's art undeniably resembles Kiki Smith's. Unlike Smith's use of fairy tales to exorcise personal demons, however, Gallaccio seems more interested in echoing the rituals of ancient cults. The show's centerpiece, *Because Nothing Has Changed*, consists of a life-size bronze cast of a tree with its limbs pruned to nearly nothing, from these hangs a strange profusion of decaying apples. (Periodically, the gallery replaces the rotten fruits with ceramic copies.) This barren tree, with its thick, blunt presence, provokes the same sense of terrible dread that's linked to sacred groves, both the tree at Colchis (which carried the Golden Fleece) and the tree at Nemi (of *Golden Bough* fame) come to mind. It is the tree of life transformed into a tree of death—a sign of terrible sacrifices or imposing challenges to come. The apples, strung on ropes and putrefying, offer no hope; they are simply rotting in a rotten world.

The lone photo, *The Way Things Are*, hangs in a corner, reaching from floor to ceiling, and depicts the artist as a drowned Ophelia, covered with flowers. Bronze pea pods and lima beans are scattered on the floor beside it while a small branch with dried berries leans up against an adjacent wall. All of these objects promise the bounty of nature but deliver only reminders of death. Beautiful and creepy at once, Gallaccio's chilling corpse offers gallerygoers a vista onto the dark side of myth.