

December 2020
By Holly Bushman

Genesis Belanger: *Through the Eye of a Needle*



Genesis Belanger, *No More News*, 2020 (detail). Courtesy the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Pauline Shapiro.

ON VIEW

Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

September 21, 2020 – May 9, 2021

Ridgefield, CT

In a pivotal chapter from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, protagonist Hans Castorp watches his cousin Joachim die of tuberculosis in the remote yet posh International Sanatorium Berghof. Appearing near the end of Mann's great novel of irony and isolation, Joachim's last days are described as oddly routine: medical staff come and go, fellow patients wax poetic, family members putter aimlessly. Dying becomes a protracted ceremony for its witnesses, for whom the moment of passage itself, the colloquial crossing of the veil, is extended across days and weeks of anticipation. Yet the formalities of grief may be overwrought: "I know what death is," the sanatorium's head doctor states as Joachim's end draws near, "I am an old retainer of his; and believe me, he's overrated."

In Genesis Belanger's exhibition *Through the Eye of a Needle*, curated by Amy Smith-Stewart, death is an expected, albeit uninvited, guest, at home in the affluent domiciles orchestrated here through tableaux and mise-en-scène. Belanger works in ceramic, sculpting porcelain and stoneware into objects peppered with witty, surreal corporeal elements: an Old Fashioned garnished with an eyeball, a trio of candles with tongues in place of flames. Taking its title from that New Testament adage ("it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 19:24), Belanger draws attention to the rituals which mark loss, departure, and ending, and uses custom-made set pieces ("ghostly upholstered furniture," as the wall text states) in place of pedestals in order to situate the works in a domestic, though often uncanny, domain. As the show's title suggests, this representation of grieving appears tethered to an affluent conception of mourning: arranged on upholstered mantles and upright pianos, these ceramic candelabras and ornate flower arrangements are artifacts of a bourgeois interior. Like Berghof, Belanger's is a world of mannered formalities, in which the decorum of mourning is often at odds with the realities of grief.



Genesis Belanger, *You Never Know What You're Gonna Get*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Pauline Shapiro.

In the exhibit's first room, flanked by two steel-and-porcelain rubber trees (*Well Tended* and *Naturally Groomed*, both 2020), a stoneware Birkin spills its unlikely contents (a pair of peanuts and a half-sandwich missing a single bite) onto a bench covered with a grey cloth. It's a scene of anxious urgency, reinforced by a work against the adjacent wall, *No More News* (2020), in which a disembodied hand, its nails painted crimson, cradles a ceramic telephone. These small gestures underscore the loss of composure brought on by the unwelcomed call, a disquiet which informs the rest of the exhibit.



Genesis Belanger, *Manifest Destiny*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, New York. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

Much of the exhibition is installed in an adjacent room, and entering the space feels like stepping onto a stage set (Belanger styled props for advertising campaigns before beginning her MFA at Hunter College, and theatricality and the glitz of consumerism are both present here). A series of curtains, in muted greys and blues, cover the back wall, parted by two beckoning hands. Against this subdued backdrop Belanger's colorful flowers and foodstuffs, arranged on grey upholstered furniture, invite and disorient in nearly equal measure. Primed by the works in the previous room, these tableaux act as a continuation of a narrative: the final days, the wake, the eventual cleaning and sorting of a loved one's possessions. A box of chocolates sits on a grey ottoman (*You Never Know What You're Gonna Get*, 2020)—except in place of chocolates it holds facial features: two eyes, a nose, a mouth, an ear. On a table in the center of the room, the most ornate piece in the exhibition (*A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020), features a buffet: a half-ham, deviled eggs, plates of various vegetables, a generous helping of pie, amorphous servings of creams and moulded jellies, and a stoneware foot, two of its toes missing. One rests delicately on a forkful of cream. Here a question of subjectivity arises: is this sly surrealism a means of placing the viewer into the mind of the dying, one slowly losing sense of reality, or is it a reflection of the distorted perspective of the witnesses?



Genesis Belanger, *A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020 (detail). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Pauline Shapiro.

This tension is present throughout the exhibit, and remains largely unresolved. Nearby, *Abundantly Empty the Ceaseless Void* (2020), sits on an upholstered arch reminiscent of a mantelpiece. The work seems freighted with allusions to Vanitas paintings: an elaborate flower arrangement is surrounded by half-peeled citrus, apple cores, nibbled strawberries, and a pair of used matchsticks. Two colorful, oversized pills take on the affect of latter-day memento mori, their childish enlargement more uncanny than satirical. The surreal is again present in the form of phalanges: several pale fingers protrude among the tulips, while a disembodied hand delicately pinches a strawberry. Vanitas, meant to remind the viewer of the transience of life's pleasures, relied on a Protestant sense of morality, while Belanger's tableaux recall a sense of detached ritual. To the old retainers of death the gifted flowers and meal trains might feel routine; to the grieving, these ceramics represent efforts to take comfort in objects and actions, as well as the absurdity of those acts.