

Genesis Belanger's Scrumptious Last Supper

At The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, the artist's series of stoneware works offer a feminist critique of domestic life under the unmistakable presence of death

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Genesis Belanger, 'Through the Eye of a Needle', 2020, exhibition view, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Courtesy: the artist and Perrotin, New York/Paris; photograph: Guillaume Zicarelli

I've never wanted to put an artwork in my mouth more than Genesis Belanger's stoneware devilled eggs. I think she'd accept that as a compliment – or at least feel that I'd fathomed the spirit of her delicate sculptures of victuals. What is it about the hard candy shell of her unglazed porcelain vegetables that suggests a bubble-gum interior? What is it about the splatter of white marbling on pink haunches, peering out from beneath browned skin, that makes you want to befoul the sweet dinner ham? Belanger's ceramic smorgasbord presents an inoffensive spread, but it solicits the depraved desire latent within a certain manufactured, tame domesticity.

Her installation 'Through the Eye of a Needle' (all works 2020) at The Aldrich – the artist's first major solo museum exhibition – inspires a vulgar vocabulary and criteria: I want to speak of the works' succulence, their umami, their mouthfeel.

It's a bodily urge, and a particularly awkward one given that the gallery is staged as a funeral: scattered around a food-stuffed table are sculpted vases of counterfeit flowers, condolences, deflated balloons, extinguished candles and ominously parted shrouds that invite the unmistakable presence of death.

With Belanger, everything is a *double entendre*, but there's an even greater elasticity to her meaning. The exhibition's title refers to the biblical and qur'anic verse that says: 'It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.' The artist's funeral parlour is a purgatory just beyond our earthly consumerist damnation. The objects into which we displace our grief are suspended here as if in formaldehyde. Disembodied lips, hands with red-painted nails and other plump organs are arranged pleasingly amid the food spreads and bric-a-brac. Bouquets are bedecked with eyes, mouths and hands while a box of chocolates contains sculpted facial features, indicating a reciprocity between gift-giving and carnal pleasure. Baby blue and pink pills offer medicated reverie and the suppression of true feeling. 'A well-manicured hand can sell just about anything,' Belanger is quoted as saying on a wall text. Her dioramas of femininity are our ultimate material vanity.

Belanger's most obvious kin are pop artists like Claes Oldenburg and Marisol, or any surrealists with a sense of humour. Like them, Belanger sees how media severs women's bodies to sell pleasure. (Think of the femicide-chic aesthetic of Guy Bourdin's fashion photography.) And it's fitting that these works are exhibited in Ridgefield, Connecticut, near the setting of *The Stepford Wives* (1972), Ira Levin's satirical feminist novel about lobotomized housewives. Belanger wields the mid-century idyll of suburban living that wanted desperately to smother the burgeoning feminist and civil-rights movements. Her mastery over stoneware and porcelain – which she colours with powdered dyes blended in a KitchenAid mixer – is a counterpoint to mass-produced merchandise. Her clean lines convey the warm efficiency of master craft and her confectionary hues wear the dull, inoffensive sheen that can be polished from imported rare woods.

But when I saw Belanger's exhibition, I could only think of Alina Szapocznikow's 'Dessert' series (1970–71). Szapocznikow survived Auschwitz. She was a witness to the gruesome factories of death that transmogrified, after the war, into brain-dead, US-exported consumerism. Her body-horror sculptures of decapitated breasts and mouths, set delicately atop ornate tableware and carafes of ice cream, are corpse-like – a decadent feast of human meat. Belanger, on the other hand, worked first-hand in advertising, and her fluency in attraction extends into a witty sensibility. Both artists made self-aware pleasure objects designed to ridicule the brutal male-gaze fetish of dismemberment: Szapocznikow's embody a grotesque perversion for lab-grown dysmorphia, while Belanger's are animated by this libidinous force. They laugh at the male erection.

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