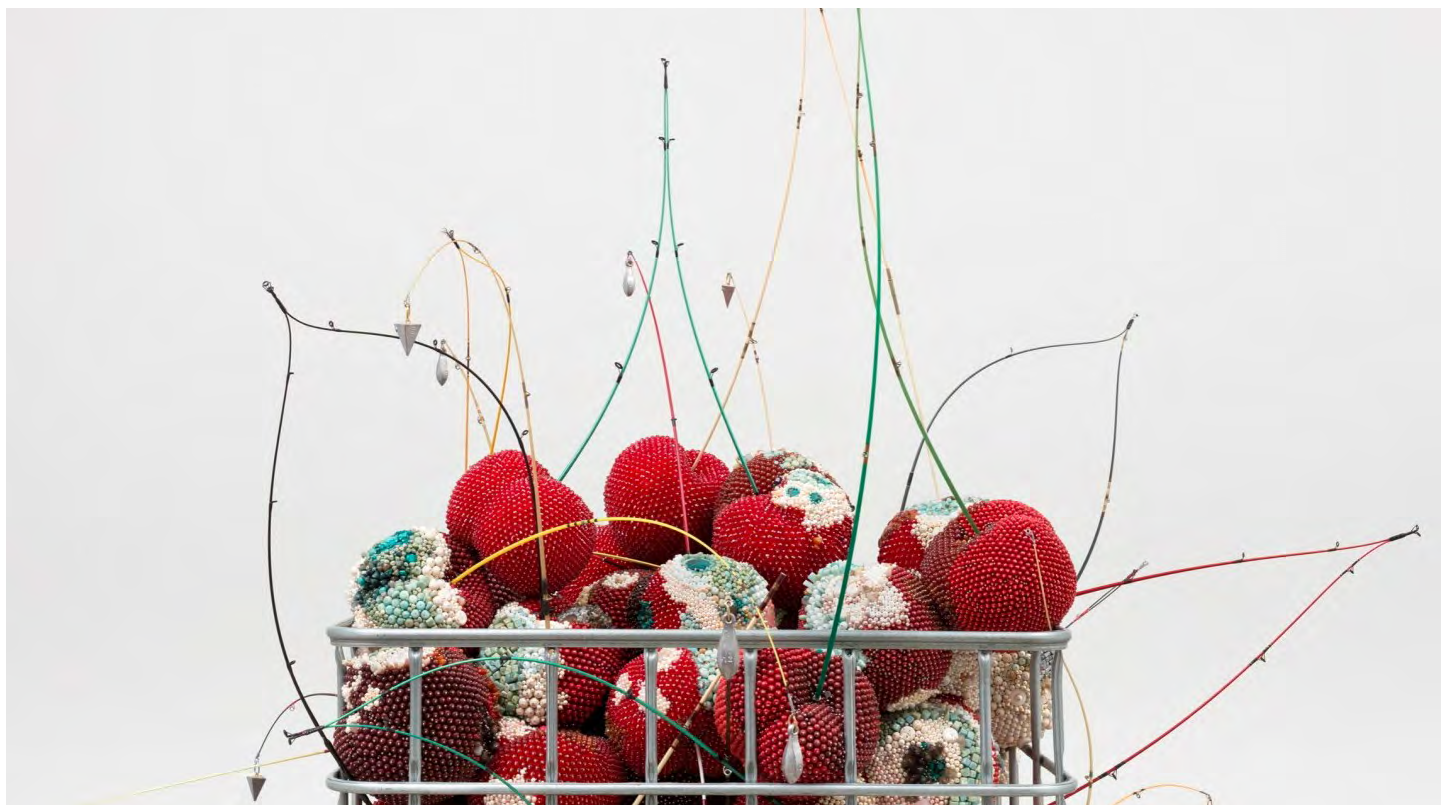


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[Kathleen Ryan, Hamburg review — a dreamworld of bowling balls and bejewelled fruit](#)

by Kristina Foster, May 22, 2024

Kathleen Ryan's sculptures almost look good enough to eat. That is until you notice that they are, in fact, going bad. She is known for her glittering oversized, overripe fruit, whose bejewelled flesh is seductively captured mid-rot in glass beads, pearls and semi-precious stones. It's both unsurprising and ironic that these dazzling objects have been hungrily snapped up at art fairs in recent years, allegories of waste and excess turned collectors' items for the wealthy.

However, the New York-based artist's institutional clout is currently being cemented with her first museum survey — at Hamburg's 155-year-old Kunsthalle no less, which has just closed a show celebrating the 250th anniversary of Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich.

One of the ways the museum tries to distinguish Ryan's work from fair fodder is by emphasising its art-historical connections. Two opulent sculptures from her *Bad Fruit* series (2018-) are strategically placed at the entrance of the Old Masters gallery in the historic building. The setting invites parallels between her mouldering citrus fruit and half-eaten peach and Renaissance vanitas painting, in which fruit-laden compositions were often reminders of life's transience. However, displayed in glass vitrines, these works seem to have more in common with 17th-

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century Wunderkammer, chambers of curiosities, reinforcing their association with pure spectacle.

It is in a more contemporary context where Ryan's work shines. Her sculptures conjure visions of sunny west-coast locales (the artist was born in Santa Monica in 1984), of Californian abundance, of the juicy possibilities of the American dream and the eventual souring of that promise. The rest of the exhibition unfolds over one floor at the museum's modern building dedicated to contemporary art, where we can better appreciate Ryan's work as shrewd reflections on a more recent past.

The flotsam of late-capitalist America seems to have washed up here: old car parts, fishing rods, satellite dishes, the wreckage of Airstream trailers, mostly hailing from the large store of found objects and foraged industrial machinery the artist keeps in a warehouse in New Jersey.

As in her putrid fruit, the most striking works play with a sense of contrast. A Volkswagen bonnet and boot are transformed into an oyster shell sheltering a shimmering spider's web of quartz in "Generator II" (2022). "Caliper" (2017) is an exercise in delicate minimalism with two perfect crystal balls balanced serenely on cast-iron leaves hanging from a rusty hook. In "Heart" (2022), an agate and rose quartz stone fruit is sliced in half to reveal an unsightly centre made of metal scrapyards parts.

Through her deft repurposing, Ryan challenges notions of value, but she also compellingly draws attention to how value changes over time. "Pearls" (2017), for instance, recalls sweet memories of a quintessential American pastime through a snaking line of 35 bowling balls sourced from eBay. Their marbled patinas gleam deliciously like hard candies. You can imagine how their owners once devotedly polished their surfaces, yet now they lie



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strung together on rope and strewn across the floor like a discarded necklace.

Meanwhile, “Satellite in Repose” (2018) is a monumental memorial to a pre-internet era. A giant dish, like those that once beamed sitcoms into houses in the 1980s, lies dormant in a corner of the gallery. Ceramic parrots perch on top of its skeletal frame with their tails dripping down like stalactites, transforming the whole thing into a kind of fossil.

Tinged with nostalgia, these works adopt an ambivalent stance towards a society where progress turns objects into relics and the state-of-the-art into junk. However, it is clear that Ryan also finds beauty in this endless cycle of accumulation, jettison and renewal.

There is something joyous about “Daisy Chain” (2021), a towering four-metre-high flower garland whose lolling heads are made from vinyl and sprinklers, its stems from gardening hoses. Evoking the Californian hippy period, it is unapologetically fun and bright. Its Pop aesthetic bears the influence of Jeff Koons, that master of artwork-turned-commodity whose projects Ryan worked on earlier in her career. His embrace of kitsch is also echoed in “Hanging Fruit”, a suspended cornucopia of beaded fruit made from DIY kits once popular with homemakers.

Yet in recalling the optimistic postwar period, many of these works have an air of lost innocence about them, the physical remnants of the last century swept away in the relentless tide of consumerism. For all their focus on flashiness and fun, in the end it is one of the *Bad Fruit* sculptures that best sums up this parable of overconsumption.

Sparkling chunks of a smashed watermelon lie scattered across the floor, their rinds made of slices of an Airstream trailer, once shiny symbols for leisure and movement. It’s an image that evokes crushed dreams, as well as the taste of an all-too-fleeting summer. Yet encrusted with natural crystals, its decaying surface also resembles the coruscating textures of coral reefs, a striking visual metaphor for the sea change that things undergo when time and nature transfigure them into something strange and new.

Throughout the exhibition, Ryan’s work consistently upends our expectations about objects and their meanings, including her own artworks. Those searching for artistic sustenance will find plenty to chew over here.