



Mouthy Pleasures

and
Purgatorial
Soothers:

The
Work
of Genesis
Belanger

BY Andrew Berardini

In the waiting room, the receptionist's desk tells a tale of delay and drudgery, with all the sundry medicines we eat to tolerate it. Everything looks either recently abandoned or counter-intuitively preserved as some kind of inglorious tomb, preparation for an afterlife no better than this one.







Center Piece, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Mrs. Gallery, New York



Swollen, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Pauline Shapiro



Reception (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Pauline Shapiro



One For Me and One For My Friend (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Pauline Shapiro

The half-wrapped hamburger plumply leers beside a few torn-open packets of ketchup. A retro office telephone with its host of buttons to multiple lines and speed-dials, holds and connections lazies, its yellow cord curling seductively. The oversized straw gently curls out of the soda, turning as if alive to look around, its red and white stripes coming to its mouth, alluringly open. Nearby a trio of blue ballpoint pens, like wilted flowers, limp dicks, lean lazily out of a coral-pink coffee mug. A pistachio tape dispenser doesn't hold tape but a soft, curling tongue, delectably unfurling over the edge that could snip it clean. A long slip of white paper shimmies and arches out of the adding machine like another tongue, reaching for that sloppy pink one lolling out of the dispenser. An open drawer holds a host of mouthy pleasures and oral fixations: a liquor bottle with a fleshy cap, an opened bar of lightly nibbled chocolate, a packet of pills. Two disembodied ladies' hands reach from the desk, one long and loose bends with a cigarette tucked between its fingers and a smart bracelet circling its wrist, while an arm arcing out of the desktop, sweated and cuffed, holds up with strength and style a little pink weenie.

Near the receptionist's desk, a sofa held up with legs made from sizable smashed cigarettes squats beside two lamps smirking with pinched faces, while on the cushion another hand with snaky fingers crawls out of the toothy zipper-mouth of its opening. On the clock above, it's permanently 2:55. One can only assume it's that long, dreary bit in the afternoon where you have no excuse not to be working but really can't wait to escape. A few ceramic bricks wrapped and tied with notes interrupt the placidity just so. The varicolored velvety curtains stage left give it all a theatrical flourish.

Carefully looking through *Holding Pattern*, this recent installation by artist Genesis Belanger at the New Museum, New York, it's easy to remember that Jean-Paul Sartre in his play *No Exit* (1944) saw hell as a waiting room where we're stuck with other people as our torture for eternity. At the New Museum, it's hard to say whose waiting room it is exactly: a therapist, a cosmetic surgeon, an executive? A waiting room for the resurrection, for the next life, for the miracle to come? So easy to look toward the future for answers than to live in the present, and we all have our little poisons to kill time. Seriously, what are you waiting for? Modernity makes most of us feel unsure, precarious, jumpy as hell; perhaps we're just waiting for the other shoe to drop. In Genesis's current show at François Ghebaly gallery in Los Angeles, this waiting room is paired with a wake in a funeral parlor, another kind of waiting to be sure.

Well, wherever it was and whatever we're waiting for, making others wait is always a power move, but here there's a certain kind of succulence to how Genesis has prepared her scenario. Everything flatly colored with soothing pastels like tooth-chipping confections, hard candy in soft shades. All of it, sometimes literally, a little mouthy.

Unnervingly soft and supple, in the borderlands of the bizarre, just a little cartoonish but totally alluring, Belanger's porcelain and stoneware ceramic scenes slyly turn things into bodies and vice versa, with a critical eye toward the suggestive sexiness of advertisements and a snicker of humor. The psychol-

ogy of power, so deftly deployed through desire and anxiety by capitalism, takes on human frailties and vitalities: long, erectly cylindrical cigarettes hang flaccid or crawl like caterpillars, hands and wrists elongate into slinky, boneless curves gripping giant pills in muted hues. "A well-manicured hand can sell about anything" says Belanger.¹ And as far as I can tell, all her disembodied hands are very well manicured indeed.

Turning things into bodies is only a little less creepy than turning bodies into things, but that's just beneath the surface; all the body parts and erect fruits, mouthy bouquets and shapely desserts that Genesis makes are really quite funny and likable. It's only later that you understand they're also a bit fucked up. Our manipulated desires, the dissatisfaction bred into us by capitalism, the purgatorial pacifiers we suck on to deal with the anxiety—her soft pastels are a luscious frosting over some serious predicaments of our contemporary condition.

With its optimistic colors and gently suppressed troubles, there's a cool advertorial, early-1960s vibe cocktail just so in Genesis's work, recalling Matthew Brannon's graphic and literary monoprints. But rather than the general upper-middle-class anxiety tumbling out of Brannon's clean lines, with Genesis we feel the nascent feminism of that era more keenly. (In both, however, I feel they're exploring the origins of the world we're living in now, going back to somehow to figure out how the hell we got here.) It's that moment when wives began to find the first release from domestic servitude by way of labor savers like washing machines and refrigerators, but were still stuck in the role of maid/cook/sex slave for their husbands; a spot of extra time and energy but without spiritual or intellectual outlets. Another point where the patriarchy left women feeling crazy (or as creepster Sigmund Freud might say, "hysterical"), with a burgeoning pharmaceutical industry ready to dispense to housewives succulently colored pills to stave off madness. Feminine anxiety winked from the drugstore covers of *Valley of the Dolls* and *Cosmo*, sedative prescriptions tightly clutched in lotioned hands.

Capitalism has long been expert in creating conditions of dissatisfaction and madness and then selling us solutions that never quite work.² In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Oscar Wilde wrote "A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?"³ He could have been talking about consumer capitalism. Addictive, poisonous, carefully marketed, totally sexy, and absolutely gross—still most of us can't shake the cool lent by a dangling cigarette even after the terrible industry has been so totally exposed for its trickery and murder. One could so easily say the same about pharmaceuticals, running for the shelter of our mother's little helpers. More than few cigarettes and pills beckon from Genesis's work.

In the twenty-first century, female empowerment is another brand, and the anxiety industries of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and sundry other adult pacifiers so often directed at women hum merrily along. More troubling still is that whatever self-awareness we bring to our exposure to the myriad ways that capitalism sells things to us, however obvious its manipulations may be, the sex they sell is still sexy.

GENESIS BELANGER was born in 1978 in the United States of America. She holds an MFA from CUNY Hunter College and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Belanger was recently the subject of a New Museum solo exhibition, *Holding Pattern*, curated by Margot Norton, and will present a solo exhibition later in 2019 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Belanger was Artist in Residence at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, in 2017. Her practice has been covered in the pages of the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *The Art Newspaper*, and *Galerie Magazine*. *Coins for the Ferrymen* is her first solo exhibition at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Belanger lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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Like Tom Wesselmann or Kiki Kogelnik, Genesis seems to enjoy the sexuality and sensuality so readily exploited by Madison Avenue. In her particular sculptural constructions, she takes the ad industries' lusty allusions one lick further, turning the suggestively sexy into literal manifestations that reveal their own absurdity and hint at those conditions that create a need for psychic analgesics. The artist possesses a self-awareness regarding the modern marketing of femininity, proposed in scenes like recently vacated sets in connotatively gendered spaces, the narrative up to us to supply. (And one suspects that beyond the discrete individual objects, Genesis's further forays will be into ever more complex scenarios.)

Stroking the manipulative allure that consumer culture cultivates in all of us, Genesis's take seems neither a dogmatic critique nor a vapid embrace (two directions other artists have taken to deal with post-war consumer culture and the powers that make it so), but rather a tense both/and, employing very real allure while simultaneously manifesting a dark awareness of its psychological manipulations. Her sly insinuations can sometimes feel almost coy: the slathered hot dog peeking from the zippery teeth of the gym bag might look a little cocky as it peeks from a vagina dentata, but sometimes a hot dog is just a hot dog, and however that sideways slit might grin, its neither a mouth nor a pussy.

Really though, it's not so difficult to jump from one wiener to another. But these are more than just suggestions. Even knowing the game, how manipulated we've been, how deplorable the conditions that brought us here, whether hot dogs or pills, cigarettes or chewing gum, they're all things to stuff into our dissatisfied mouths. And resist as we might, whether a pill or a cigarette or a drink, we still desperately want to stuff our mouths.



Genesis Belanger: *Holding Pattern* installation views at New Museum, New York, 2019. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Charles Benton

1 Christina Nafziger "Genesis Belanger: Simpsons Episode About the Uncanny" *Art Maze Mag*, Accessed May 7, 2019. See <https://artmazemag.com/genesis-belanger-simpsons-episode-about-the-uncanny/>.
2 See Adam Curtis's documentary series *The Century of the Self* (London: RDF Television, 2002).
3 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Lippincott's, 1890)



Dog's Age, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Pauline Shapiro



Dog in Heels and Sitting Habit, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Mrs. Gallery, New York