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Ivy Haldeman: *The Interesting Type*

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Ivy Haldeman, *Colossus, Ankles Cross, Hand Hooks Heel, Finger Tips Press Bun*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 84 inches. Courtesy Downs & Ross.

Since 2016, Ivy Haldeman has been exhibiting erotic paintings of feminine, anthropomorphic hot dogs. These ladylike link-sausages, with pouting lips, svelte human limbs, and Cinderella-heels are seen lounging seductively inside pillowy hot dog buns. The leggy figures recalls classic pin-ups by Alberto Vargas, the elegantly drawn, erotic fantasy illustrations of “All-American Beauties” that ran in *Esquire Magazine* and were famously idolized by young, lonely airmen during World War Two.

Haldeman’s imagery is disarmingly funny and sexy. Critics have praised her early efforts, but have also seemed a bit baffled by them; at worst, the paintings have been subjected to deflating, pedantic assessments, like Ken Johnson’s review in the *New York Times*: “While these figures read as female, they retain conspicuously phallic profiles. If the bun is seen as correspondingly vaginal, then the convergence of hot dog and bun may be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual intercourse.”¹ Like a rudimentary Freudian anatomy lesson, this statement drains the blood from Haldeman’s figures (after all, the resemblance of a hot dog to a penis is so obvious, it is known to produce contagious delight in giggling fourth-graders). While Johnson over-simplifies Haldeman’s work, he attempts to engage its meaning, something Will Heinrich’s recent write-up of the artist’s new solo show at Downs & Ross refuses to do. Deferring interpretation completely, Heinrich, also writing for the *Times*, concludes that the paintings are about “that magical something of sex, art, femininity, or even good advertising that no analysis will ever quite capture.”²

Yes, the English language is notoriously ill-equipped to locate and describe the shapes of Eros. But given Haldeman's curious persistence with this imagery, I believe her paintings can stand up to more exploratory handling, and the exhibition at Downs & Ross appears designed to complicate our impressions of the work. There are three dynamic new hot dog compositions, immaculately constructed in a limited palette of bright acrylics, including crisp white accented by subtle bluish shadows alongside hues of supercharged peach, so that the scenes appear illuminated by blazing stage-lighting. Instead of full-figure pinups, these paintings show abstracted crops of tangled limbs; as their titles suggest, the figures have grown larger than their frames. In *Colossus, Two Knees Down, Pinch, Hand Held Back* (2018) for example, thighs appear to encircle the butt-end of a protruding hot dog body. In such close-up views, the formerly comedic impact of the sausage-woman is traded for a slower recognition of form, both more bizarre and more erotic.



Ivy Haldeman, *Hand, Index Linger Back*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy Downs & Ross.

There are also two small paintings of a woman's hand pantomiming leg movements, making figures that resemble dance positions, described by matter-of-fact titles like *Hand, Index Linger Back* (2018). These walking fingers are the exhibition's simplest pleasures, elegant and devoid of the grotesque. There are also four large canvases depicting pairs of women's business suits, an entirely new image for Haldeman. The garments float on white backgrounds as if filled by invisible mannequins, appearing emptied of the female figure that has been injected into the hot dogs. The suits themselves are somewhat inanimate, but the dialogue they create greatly complicates the exhibition's symbolic intrigue. Haldeman offers clues in a cryptic press release consisting of just two quotations, firstly an excerpt from *Living Currency*, a work of economic theory by French artist-philosopher Pierre Klossowski that crosses Marxism and psychoanalysis to describe how systems of commercial production harness and give shape to our libidinal desires. The second quotation is from a transcription of a Kraft Heinz Co. conference call, in which company managers discuss their putrid condiments' profit margins, and which includes the pornographic turn of phrase: "We see Oscar Meyer Hot Dogs increase households' penetration and velocity, grow dollar sales and gain share."

Penetration and velocity; quick and dirty. Efficiency is the cardinal virtue of capitalist production, and a hot dog is a highly efficient form of meat—an anonymous batter of trimmings that can be squeezed into identical, standardized casings. But efficiency of production must be met with efficiency of desire: for although desire can be monetized through the power of advertising, it works better when we all desire the same things. For an especially grim illustration of "homogenization," one just might search YouTube for videos documenting the mass-production of hot dogs.

In the age of corporate commerce, a woman's "power suit" is designed to conform femininity to the male world of business. "Powerful" women in business must adopt the standard uniform, masculinizing the figure with shoulder pads and boxy silhouettes, while paradoxically fetishizing it with compulsory high-heeled shoes. There's a male fantasy associated with the dominant, empowered woman signified by the suit, but as Haldeman's emptied shells convey, the suit itself is merely a homogenized mold, and not unlike the hot dog, is a mass-produced product that requires erotic activation by a sexual persona. Haldeman performs a surrealist gesture by switching the site of erotic animation, emptying one cultural product of its persona while filling another. She demonstrates how easily the body of desire can be re-inscribed.



Ivy Haldeman, *Blue Suit, Blue Suit*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 73 × 73 inches. Courtesy Downs & Ross.

But of all the shapes that desire can take, Haldeman's choice of the hot dog—a body with existing genital and abject associations—is pretty naughty. I think her new, more cinematically cropped paintings look less like vintage cheesecake than contemporary anime porn, or *hentai*, as it is known in the English-speaking world. This choice is revelatory, as the Japanese word *hentai* does not mean pornography, but rather "metamorphosis." Influenced by psychoanalytic theory in the Meiji era, the word came to signify perverse or unusual sexual desire, becoming associated with paraphilia and fetish.

There's a richer tradition of offbeat erotica in Japan than in the West, or at least, the tradition is less closeted. Take the bestial fantasy genre of tentacle erotica, which pre-dates contemporary anime in famous works like Hokusai's *Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1814). The metamorphosis implicit in *hentai* is the unexpected change in the location or appearance of Eros, like the wife who dreams of making love to an octopus instead of a fisherman, or like the shift accomplished in Haldeman's paintings, which transforms the genital simplicity of "hot dog=penis" into a more enigmatic, vulgar delight.

For Georges Bataille, one of the few iconic Western philosophers of erotica, the unexpected transformations of perversion and taboo can function within society as antidotes to homogenization, injecting chaotic variety into its regime of the same. Bataille believed that such acts of “heterogeneity” embodied the generative, divine essence of Eros. This image appears to be echoed in Haldeman’s *Colossus, Knee to Elbow, Wrist Bent, Four Fingers Edge Out*, which shows a hot dog-femme shielding her eyes, with one hand bent in front of her face and the other pressed against her heart, as if she is bathed in the light of some divine ecstasy.

I risk spoiling Haldeman’s paintings with convoluted extrapolations, for their pleasures require none of this analysis to apprehend. But my aim is to sharpen the point of their pleasure by identifying their particular act of transference, the dislocation that constitutes their unspeakable “something.” This was essentially the philosophical project of Bataille, who could put a finger on matters of naughtiness while defending their ineffable mystique. He once wrote, emphasizing the difference between erotic pleasure and detached aestheticism of art, “I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”³

Notes

1. Ken Johnson, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/arts/design/what-to-see-in-new-york-art-galleries-this-week.html>
2. Will Heinrich, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/arts/design/what-to-see->
3. Georges Bataille, “l’Esprit moderne et le jeu de transpositions,” *Documents 8* (1930). Translation by Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p.112.

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