

“Let Them Eat Cake:” Art Review of “Slum Pudding”

Ms. Barbers Gallery Group Show

September 19th - October 11th, 2015

By Janna Avner

Artist Irina Anault smashes a pie into her face in a video she made for Ms. Barbers current group show, "Slum Pudding." Anault wears high-waisted pants and a dark t-shirt as she leans next to a kicked over yellow table. Now she's throwing kisses and bowing to no one. No one. I can't hear what she's saying and I don't know if it's my responsibility as the critic to figure it out or come back another day (should I blame myself for coming during the opening?).

"Slum Pudding" is a D.I.Y. art show involving actual breakfast cereals and, like a recipe for pudding, that which is put into this pudding, cannot thereafter be taken out. The artwork denatures, becoming something else, and it's not exactly edible. It is conceptual and conveys an inchoate sense of humor through references to food. For instance, Kenneth Tam's "Caress" is a giant bar of green soap infused with Cheerios. The floating Cheerios are suspended throughout the rectangular cube, evoking an involuntary, zen-like minimalism of sorts. "Caress" dispels lofty interpretations: you can wash your body with it (the Cheerios act as a body scrub) and it disintegrates over time. As a work of art, "Caress" is frankly non-autonomous.

Like most group shows that exhibit the typical phobia for medium specificity, "Slum Pudding" is "a happening," a fact that highlights itself to question why the work is being exhibited in the first place. If the pieces are considered works of art, this is only as a derivative and outmoded sentiment. Tellingly, the idea of "art for art's sake" has long been washed away by

today's post-postmodernism. What we're left with is pluralism and the fear of narrative a.k.a. telos. We are lost at sea now; perhaps the frustrated viewer—me —is incapable of reaching zeniths of intelligence to figure it out. Regardless, "Slum Pudding" intimates a hidden agenda, a story or intention belying its half-baked appearance. Despite the show's all out nonchalance, we as viewers are meant to take it seriously, to find reason and rationalize through its high viscosity, wade through its creamy consistency.

On the left wall of the gallery, a tennis shoe cut open and splayed in the shape of a skinned animal is glued to the painting "Sketchers Shape-Up Works" by artist Anna Rosen. These days, a forced relationship between the avant-garde and tennis shoes is championed by the implausible "health goth" fashion movement and by "art bros" like Ryder Ripps, with his brand-critical, Nike brand-centric Instagram vibes. Yet Rosen's wobbly paint handling suggests a do-it-yourself, arts'n crafts bravado. The word "slum" is defined as a "thickly populated, run-down, squalid part of a city, inhabited by poor people" or just an "untidy place." If meant as a verb, then this pudding is "slumming," and slumming hard: Rosen's shoe sticks out of her painting like a sore thumb and most of the show seems pretty much slapped together. The show's curator Becky Kolsrud proves her discerning eye for intelligible, complex themes and concepts not reflected in individual pieces, per se, but in the show as a whole. If you can't figure these works out, it somehow does become your fault.

Non-sequiturs abound throughout "Slum Pudding:" there are two ceiling fans gently blowing warm air, and occasionally they clink together sharply, creating a staccato, tinny sound. As Sean Cassidy's work, "Tomato Tomato" is mysterious and enigmatic. Resting beneath it, Kenneth Tam's huge, badly burnt "Cake" is blacker than the metal structure it stands on. "Cake"

is placed next to a small, metal sculpture covered in cheap sea shells and tar that becomes its visual counterfactual and the fans' contrarian due to its title—"I don't hear anything"—and is also made by Cassidy. "Spencer," a smudgy faced illustration by artist Phil Davis on an almost Pepto-Bismol pink, partially painted linen canvas, gives off a very difficult expression to describe. As the only figurative work in the show, its expression seems to ask on the entire show's behalf: "*What do you think I'm doing here?*"

Moments of transparency bind this group show together: a well manicured stack of wooden pancakes and frying pan titled "Floppy" by artist Patrick Price is straight forward enough. Each pancake is evenly spaced and painted in two tones of navy blue/ cobalt and orange/ yellow-ochre. They don't deserve the pejorative "cute," though they are: they have clean lines, and are simple, harmonious design-like renderings.

Offering less clarity is the opening's accompanying movie script that could never be sold to a film studio because jpegs of friends of Ms. Barbers (Lydia Murray of gallery space Chin's Push is in one shot) interrupt the text, inserted pell-mell with little disputed either way. Whoever wrote it slurred their typing style quite a bit [there are typos] and the content of the dialogue is unclear. The intended mess of it is for a dramatic, frantic effect that is best understood as an inside joke.

The oddness of the script and its relationship to the art works in the room are carefully considered, despite desultory appearances. "Slum Pudding" is vaguely comforting—soaps, cereals, pancakes, pies, pudding, and cake are reminiscent of dinner parties and brunches. When combined with experimental poetry, writer Gertrude Stein's small book of poems Tender Buttons (1914) is a likely predicate: repetitive wordplay evokes domesticity and innuendos listed under

the text's refined and rich food items like "cream" and "mutton." Normally consumed at dinner parties for friends, these items reference the coterie of likeminded people Stein entertained in her Parisian art salon. Considering "Slum Pudding" in relation to Stein's work makes sense of the jpeged movie script as well as the accompanying press release, which presents a ponderous and delightful poem of heroic couplet and free verse by Patrick Price.

Art, food and experimental poetry draw a crowd; Stein adorned the walls of her salon with Picasso, Cézanne, and Matisse's paintings, works of art briefly considered "ugly" and misunderstood at that time. "Slum Pudding's" distorted shopping list endures similar misunderstandings, though it eventually relents, providing its own internal logic and clarity as Ms. Barbers takes on a more familiar and welcoming, though totally unforeseeable, domestic space.

Opening:

September 19th - October 11th

Saturday, 12 - 6, Sunday, 12 - 4

Ms. Barbers

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