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Gina Beavers Hits Pause on the Everyday World of Oversharing

by Scott Indrisek



"I know it when I see it," said Gina Beavers, accidentally quoting Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart from 1964, weighing in on how he instinctually identifies hard-core pornography. It's an amusing coincidence considering that Beavers is talking about the gut feeling she gets when trawling Instagram photos hashtagged "foodporn," hunting for compositionally appropriate source material for her paintings. A range of them were recently on view at Retrospective in Hudson, New York: sculpturally thick renderings of the original images, depicting things like pastries, bread loafs, and lobster claws. (Beavers also has a work in the current Zach Feuer group show, "Don't Look Now," and in another exhibition at Andrew Edlin Gallery.) In some cases the square images are singular; more recently, Beavers has been experimenting with reproducing the multi-faceted, gridded shots that Instagram users can create using third-party apps. ("They can't get enough angles of the kimchi hot dogs!" Beavers said, referring to one painting based on an image in which the foodstuff in question is obsessively explored from all sides.)

These paintings aren't simple reproductions of the ubiquitous "this is what I ate today" images shared via social media. "If I paint something directly from a photo it looks like a copy," she explained. Beavers constructs a base for the image, generally using thickened acrylic medium that she carves and moves with a simple plastic deli knife. Once the representative shapes are built, she paints on top of them; the finished works have a lumpy, physical quality, as if you could indeed scoop them off the wall and devour them. The artist mixes in various other agents in order to achieve specific effects, like the dappled skin on raw duck legs. Beaver's topographic surfaces have a gnarly depth, flirting with intentional kitsch, a bit like the dimensional tableaux of Lynn Foulkes. "Building up [the work] interferes with my ability," she said. "It looks a little more handmade. The painting is trying to mess with me, and I'm trying to calm and tame it."

For a September solo exhibition at Clifton Benevento in New York, Beavers is moving away from the restaurant table. She's still primarily mining Instagram feeds for source material, though the selections are more eclectic: A shot of old carburetors; a gridded image of statue-genitalia snapped at the Getty Villa. She's toying with some other possible photographs, including one of a pair of female hands holding dice, with nails painted to match the black-on-white patterning. One in-progress painting hanging in the studio is based on a "how-to" image describing how to apply make-up to create a "smoky eye" look, she said. That one "reminds me of what it feels like to make a painting," she noted. "You're using brushes, trying to make yourself look appealing. It's evolutionary: *Mate with my painting!*" She's still pondering how to sculpturally represent the eye's lashes, perhaps using bits of cut rubber tire, or strips of colored acrylic.

This built-up, hands-on process comes from what Beavers termed a "crafty impulse," part of which she traces to her father — a retired hobbyist who builds mostly military-themed model installations out of simple materials. Her own practice is similarly obsessive and labor-intensive, albeit focused on what she admits is the transient, eternally in-flux world of social media. "There's something perverse about poring over all these half-meaningless, never-ending photos, and putting all this work into it," Beavers admitted of her practice, which might artfully memorialize a stranger's ephemeral snapshot of a lobster dinner as a painting with real-world weight and permanence.

Does she think that the Internet has changed our brains, the way we process the world around us, I wondered? Beavers, who studied anthropology before turning to art, answers with a maxim borrowed from that field: "Things are never getting better and

they're never getting worse," she said. "They're just what they are. We are test cases in this weird experiment — and what's going to be the end result?" In the attention-deficit of digital oversharing via social media, Beaver's strange, unwieldy paintings — her peculiar, delectable perversion — might simply be a way of hitting pause, of investing everyday images with humorous significance, one layer of acrylic medium at a time.

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