

# ARTFORUM

## Gina Beavers CLIFTON BENEVENTO

The paintings in Gina Beavers's solo exhibition "Palate," we are told, were based on images of food found online, mostly through social media. Sounds ho-hum, no? Why must a painter so strenuously declare the JPEG provenance of her reference points? What gave rise to the trending sentiment that Google Image Search serves up a more convincing

representation of the world than anything encountered *en plein air*? What genre—if that term even applies—of online photography could be more gratefully anodyne than the compulsively shared cataloging of last night's dinner? Is this some flailing attempt to inject contemporary relevance into the exhausted tradition of *still life*? Well, in a manner of speaking, yes—and with splendidly gross results.

The Titian scholar David Rosand is fond of quoting Willem de Kooning's observation "Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented." Beavers works with acrylic, not oil, but the same principle applies: If Florentine perspective forged a metaphoric connection between windowpanes and painted surfaces, Venetian brushwork stirred up associations between paint itself and the material stuff it portrayed, such as gleaming silver, bunched silk, translucent glass, weathered stone, and above all flesh, with its palpable allure and vulnerability. By invoking old-master tradition, I don't mean to elevate Beavers's practice through distinguished comparison, but to plunge it into painting's muck. Her canvases are a mess of acrylic clots—packed, pinched, swirled—that, through visceral punch rather than waxwork likeness, conjure up food's crunch, crumble, drip, and glisten. Beavers piles on the paint so thickly that it protrudes like relief sculpture, and she often mixes in unorthodox materials to further convey a dish's physical attributes, using pumice stone for the porous texture of blueberry-pie crust, or glass beads for the slippery gleam of oyster dipping sauce. The showy luxury of the painting depicting the latter, *Oysters at Grand Central* (all works 2012), hung wryly beside the down-market *Applebees!*, which stood out for the acrylic's convincing turn as mayonnaise-drenched coleslaw.

Gina Beavers, *Food Porn! (Chicken & Waffles)*, 2012, acrylic and pumice on canvas, 16¼ x 16".



The most pungent passages of painting were those assuming the attributes of flesh: the puckered plumpness of deep-fried chicken, or the larded sizzle of pork loins on the grill. The title of one canvas gives away the game: *Food Porn! (Chicken & Waffles)*. Indeed, Beavers's source images are all food porn, though not the strain endemic to *Bon*

*Appétit*'s exquisite spreads; they come closer to the amateur aesthetics and POV camera angles of Internet pornography more generally. Call it gonzo gourmandizing. Beavers's treatment of flesh attempts to restore the blemishes and bulges that pixelated smartphone snapshots fail to register.

Compare Beavers's *Red Velvet Cake*—which is unabashedly a somewhat crusty crotch—with any of Wayne Thiebaud's buoyant frosted confections, and it's hard to see his work as anything other than the fantasy of sex without the mess. "Palate" harks back to the butcher-aisle orgy of Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, 1964, or, of course,

the lewdly anthropomorphic luncheonette fare of Claes Oldenburg's "The Store," 1961. "I am for the worms [sic] art inside the apple," wrote Oldenburg. "I am for the art of sweat that develops between crossed legs." By drawing from social media, Beavers points to the diminished availability of such sensuous immediacy, but she also shows how painting's traditions speak back to a thoroughly digitized culture. Smearing food porn with painting's muck is more forceful and rankly erotic than applying an Instagram filter.

—Colby Chamberlain