

BANANA BOY

The phallic ceramics of Oliver Cain.

Review by

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On a wet morning just before Cyclone Gabrielle rolled into town, the ceramic artist Oliver Cain and I surreptitiously crept into Te Uru gallery in Titirangi. Cain was carrying a bag containing three ceramic bananas - beautiful glazed objects of art and yearning and performance. Our mission (with the gallery director's approval) was to create a work of art in the men's urinal - a statement about freedom, discovery and maybe even, as Michel Foucault would say, the "secret side of our desire"

Cain has been doing this for a while now, placing his exquisite slip cast bananas into urinals in some of the most prestigious galleries in the world - the Museum of Contemporary Art and The Getty in LA; Tate Modern and Tate Britain in London. The Guggenheim in New York didn't have urinals, so he found an alternative - a small fountain in the foyer - and left his banana there. After all, Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal work was called Fountain.

I first met Cain in 2019 while admiring his work Fruit Bowl, a urinal jammed full of joyous clay bananas. I thought it should have won the Portage Ceramic Awards and told him so. The bananas seemed to me the very essence of nature crossing the gap into art.

Cain, you might guess, is a proudly gay man, interested in how we view sex and art, both separately and together. But there's more to it than that. Bananas aren't just phallic in form (although they certainly are that), they're playful objects that are damn good to eat. When god was busy creating things, I reckon that after he got through camels and platypuses and other silly things, he must have asked one of his attending angels what to make next. *I've got this idea, the angel said, it's called a banana. It'll be delicious and shaped like a penis and even have a foreskin.*

Well, they got something right.

Though playful, Cain is a serious artist with a long list of creative highlights and career accomplishments. He's a visual storyteller who imbues his work with hidden meanings and knows that the more we see into art the more art will speak to us. I asked him if we should stay and surreptitiously watch as males arrived to use the urinal as a piss pot and spotted the ceramic bananas. Cain wisely declined - I think a good decision. In the end, the charge of this particular artwork is a private experience between the urinator and the banana.

Cain grew up in a small town just outside of London called Milton Keynes, known as the hideaway for World War I codebreakers. He comes from a devoutly religious family, with two younger sisters, and as a child he enjoyed the outdoors, art and anything creative. His father, he tells me, is in creative marketing; he was always making things and was a very practical role model. The entire family immigrated to New Zealand in 2013. Cain's parents were very keen on coming to New Zealand, and it certainly worked out for the young Oliver. He finished his schooling at Takapuna Grammar, then studied fine arts at Unite in Mt Albert.



Cain thoroughly enjoyed the relationship he had with his art tutors, who saw his talent and his drawing skills. At Unite the teaching was very hands-on, not so theory-based - that fitted his modes of work and gave him the freedom to experiment and create.

When I ask Cain who influences him, he tells me without hesitation: Andy Warhol. Why? Because Warhol broke all the boundaries. He shook America out of the restrictive 1950s into accepting serious art that depicted known objects like Campbell's Soup and people like Marilyn Monroe and Chairman Mao. *"I love people who break boundaries and shake people into being aware of art, and what it can do for your wellbeing, and acceptance of the other side of life,"* he says.

Like Warhol (who made an iconic album cover for the Velvet Underground of, you guessed it, a banana), Cain takes the human figure as the most basic level of his art. He clearly loves working with people, rendering the body, drawing nudes and although these days he uses digital tools, he is absolutely committed to the human form.

Cain is always delighted when his models recognise parts of themselves in the sensuous combinations that he pulls together. One of his series, for instance, features slightly odd, fried-egg-like framed nipples. While Cain has run up against opposition to some of his images, he tries to push boundaries in subtle and resonant ways.

Cain is aware that the banana is a widely used metaphor. At Art Basel Miami Beach in 2019, artist Maurizio Cattelan duct-taped a banana to the gallery wall; the work, *Comedian*, had a price tag of US\$120,000 and several editions were sold. Later in the week, the displayed banana was snatched and eaten by a performance artist, David Datuna, in front of an astonished crowd. It made the cover of *New York* magazine. At least someone took it seriously.

"It tasted like \$120,000," Datuna said. "It was delicious." Cain's work, however, is a lot harder to eat. It's certainly hard to imagine someone trying to after they know where it's been.

It's only once you start thinking through the banana, really deconstructing banana-ness, that you realise how Ceramics similar we are to the fruit (strictly, it's a berry). A banana has a skin; we have a skin. Bananas bruise like us, decay like us. There is also that phallic link. Bananas, eggplants, cucumbers - all have phallic connotations, and once placed into a urinal, a banana is in a whole 'nother dimension of bodily functions and sexualities. Cain likes that bananas change depending on their context and where they are placed. When hung on walls, some look very phallic; others are not so overt. In neutral guises, a banana isn't offensive to anyone. This fact helps push Cain's work into spaces where it can be talked about more openly.

During Pride Month in February Cain opened his exhibition *Just a Little Gay* at Lake House Art Centre, Takapuna. It was a great success. Talking with him before the opening, I could sense he had some nervousness about how the intimate paintings that made up the show would be received. New Zealand, at its heart, can still be a very conservative place, unnecessarily nervous about art, sexuality, and sexuality portrayed in art. And a lot of art buyers are from an older generation, increasing the conservatism.

But Cain is undaunted about the choices he's made in his practice. "I'm young, fresh, different and unafraid," he says. "[Placing] bananas in urinals in public places is a development and turns the artwork into a performance piece.

The audience can choose to urinate on the banana, to have an intimate interaction where you are almost exposing yourself to the banana. I think that is something quite interesting and progressive in a way, exposing yourself to an artwork."