

Urinal Banana Art Drop

By Andrew Paul Wood

All art since Duchamp's urinal has been a deliberate attempt to drag discourse into the pristine white cube Temple of the Muses. Auckland-based Oliver Cain, an out and proud queer artist, took it a step further and invaded the urinals of the art gallery as well - the National Gallery, Tate Modern, and Tate Britain in London; the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, and MOMA in New York; the Getty and the Hammer Museums in LA.

This was accomplished with deft minimalism, a simple intervention, a single white anonymous ceramic banana in the white ceramic anonymous receptacle of stand-up easement.

Oh Banana. Recall Andy Warhol's 1967 album cover for The Velvet Underground and Nico. 'Peel slowly and see' it said, and if you did you found a pink banana and instant depreciation.

Bananas in art are almost always sexual. Gauguin's *Le Repas* (Musée d'Orsay, 1891). De Chirico's *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (Tate, 1913). The Guerrilla Girls...

And this is guerrilla art at its finest. Splashing soup on a Van Gough in protest (if they'd stayed awake in art history class they might have sought out a Warhol soup can) is passé. Why not hide your sculpture in a place they won't be looking for it?

Why a banana? Surely the question is why not? The banana is the first equal of iconic fruits along with the apple, and the apple only gets in thanks to Eve and Steve Jobs. I suppose I better namedrop Billy Apple as well or Auckland will never forgive me. The banana is comedic, phallic, and a bit camp – in short, it's fruity. It makes sense in the traditional, discreet, anonymous queer hunting ground of yore (especially in art galleries and museums) – the toilets.

Well, not the Guggenheim per se. They only have sit-down plumbing (including Maurizio Cattelan's 2015 gold toilet *America* until it was stolen), so Cain had to improvise with an ornamental fountain in the foyer. But then, from most angles the Guggenheim looks like a giant toilet anyway.

It reminds me a little of a work by Garth Lingard, *Hutch & Lure* (Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, gift of the estates of Grant Lingard and Peter Lanini, 1998) which consisted of a circle on the ground of old school white Jockey y-fronts with a piece of fruit, fashioned from soap, peeing out. It was sexy, playful, ironic, iconic all at once. Lingard was subverting masculinity, and given there are few places more masculine than a urinal, it's no great leap to realise that's what Cain is doing as well.

It's so ludicrously simple.

The banana is just there, like it has always been there, and isn't going away. Like LGBTQIA+ people. Look. But don't touch.

Cain's work is all about frivolous, carnal subversion – the ceramic copies of everyday objects, the polyvalent references to pop art, postmodernism, art history, and universal queerness (rainbow or straight) that cascade forth from every piece. Bananas, in particular, always seem to be erupting out of Cain's ceramics. Well, why stop at one, unless you're a prude?

Cain's banana-urinal interventions scale up to his *Fruit Bowl* works, urinals as vases stuffed full of ceramic bananas, making them completely unusable for their theoretical purpose.

Another artist that comes to mind when contemplating Cain's work is Robert Gober. Sometimes it's quite obvious – the fleshly simulacra of *Chewed Nipples* for example. Rather than the fetishist nibble we might imagine, there are amorphous-pink nipples of chewed pink bubble-gum, and more than a bit of skin, apparently chewed right off, asexual and anonymous, hanging from a rod like melting Dalí clocks.

These protuberances clearly echo Gober's disembodied wax limbs, simultaneously anonymous and autobiographical – the body deconstructed. Gober is likewise an artist concerned with drains, as voids, as metaphors for being emptied out, and fluid ambiguity. I am reminded of what critic Dave Hickey wrote about a Gober's installation at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1992:

...unshakable, primal certainty . . . that a 'real homosexual nature' exists, that there is latent in the world at large a whole Other construction of 'nature' and what is 'natural'—an Other reality coextensive with the Euclidean hegemony of heterosexual culture but *prior* to it, and eternally out of phase with it.

Cain's work lacks Gober's melancholy, and comes from a place in a far more accepting world than that of Hickey's analysis, but there is a similar feeling to it. Cain's evolution of *Chewed Nipples* is *Framed Nipples* – where the clinical and pristine are completely abandoned. It's like Jasper Johns' *Target with Plaster Casts* (Private Collection, 1955) had a love child with Tomislav Nikolic.

Let us return to toilets (can't seem to stay out of them), and Cain's *Communal Conversation*. Toilet cubicles are not normally places for conversation. Two upended toilets on plinths, internally illuminated in queer pinks and mauves, 'face' each other. In a Richard Reddaway-esque touch, heartbeats emanate from them.

There is an erotic inference, a sublimated sexual tension. Again, the public bathroom is a queer space, and more generally, a liminal space. The elements are mysterious, minimalist and oddly science-fictional – but then science fiction was one of the first places, after Oz and the Emerald City, where queer people could experience a non-judgemental space.

The real conversation is less the sounds between the toilets than the conversation it invites. Shades of *et* and *the fundamental practice* at the 2005 – or as it unfortunately came to be known, 'the donkey in the dunny'.

Of course, *et al* was always going to be outcompeted by somewhat overrated toilet humour gay shock pop duo Gilbert and George.

Which brings us back to the banana. A banana in a dunny is intrinsically funny, and emotionally generous in the manner of Félix González-Torres and his minimalist installations of everyday materials - lightbulbs, stacks of paper, or packaged sweets – meditating on queerness and the experience of queerness. It is an unavoidable invitation, but far from being a confrontational one.

Clearly Cain has made a splash and isn't likely to go down the drain any time soon.

February, 2023