

Oliver Cain

Every once in a while, you are confronted with artworks that possess a strangely playful but vital presence. The architect of this frivolous oeuvre is Oliver Cain, an English/ New Zealand artist living in Auckland. His artworks, subverted linguistic paintings, ceramic sculptures and installations, bear a certain physicality and push the boundaries between conceptualism and post-pop art. The creative process behind Cain's artworks is the most important thing and therefore his artworks can be made of anything and take any form. Appropriated everyday objects transform stereotypes and famous art historical references become twisted. As proud member of the queer community, the artist uses his work to examine, question and criticize the relationships between gender, (homo)sexuality and societies' misconceptions about those themes. But, despite what it might look like to the contemporary spectator, a purely erotic and queer reading of the work would be misguided. There is an universal profundity at play revealing itself slowly for those willing to look and feel.

Oliver Cain was the winner of the Eden Arts Art school award (2019) and finalist at the Wallace Art awards.

The public restroom does not, upon first glance, appear to offer fertile ground for sociocultural analysis. But maybe the inattentive observer never went to a club in Berlin where the music still played when the kids already returned home from school. Or never heard of the groundbreaking sculpture of Marcel Duchamp and Sherrie Levine's, Maurizio Cattelan's and other artistic crusaders appropriation of the urinal as a sign of breaking artistic and social taboos. Apart from the pisspots artistic stardom, socially the comfort station is an all-male arena, a latently and even patently queer space. A place seminal for gay culture and the public's branding image as confronting, radical and questionable. With Cain's Fruit bowl, consisted out of a ceramic urinal filled with ceramic bananas, the spectator is invited into the world of homosexual males and their sexual indifference, guilt and anonymity.



First of all, formally there is an incredible dualism at play. Although the installation undoubtedly stems from personal experience, the artist conducts a broader conversation between avant-garde artistic production and human perceptions about queer sexuality. He taps into fears and desires regarding the taboo and profane and underlines art's capacity of cultural communication and questioner of social constructions. Moreover, the clinical setting, polished "pissoir" and shiny, fragile banana's, are in stark contrast to what is sexually happening in these public spaces of pleasure and rendition. When we see the bananas gaping from all sides, the installation transforms into a party of phalluses that, without referring to any particular person, emphasize the anonymity, transience and promiscuity of sexual queer life. In our hyper-sexualized society, bananas almost refer to the body (with sex as a natural extension) as a commodity, to a fruit that is tasted, eaten and thrown away. The viewer's voyeuristic position sets the scene as an openly interpreted performance, which brings to life the scenes the sculpture tries to suppress.

With its insistence on the soft erotic but strong carnal desires the artwork seems to slide from a representation of queerness to an object of the straight gaze. However, to prioritize one reading

over the others would be an injustice, a smoothing over of the very complexities that both enrich and frustrate queer histories. Far more difficult for a queer interpretation of the work is its fetishistic portrayal. Cain asks in an accessible manner where the line between fetishism and representation stands? He does not give any answers but only states that what must be overcome is not homosexuality as such, but the public opinion that hinders living homosexuality. The answer is simple, homosexuality should be described by homosexuals and not by judging heterosexuals. Homosexuals should speak and that is exactly what Cain does, the artist talks about an activity that many of the gay community are ashamed of. But his message sounds much louder than that, the visual talent shows that Freudian dreams are inherent to our human DNA.

Fruit Bowl II (2019) - White ceramic bananas presented in a white ceramic urinal - 54,5 x 33 x 35cm



The human body, abundantly (re)presented and celebrated in art history, is central to how we understand facets of identity such as gender and sexuality. People alter their bodies and style to align with or rebel against social conventions and to express messages to others around them. In this series of work, Cain has turned an erogenous zone such as the nipples into pliable and universal material. Even more eye-catching is that every ceramic nipple is different in size and formal set-up: spray-painted in different flashy colors and framed in an old-school wooden frame. Although small in size, their intensely theatrical design remodels the complexities we face around certain parts of our body into a performative, even appreciative act. Intersubjectivity comes into play: the framed nipples are taken up, interpreted, compared or contrasted with viewers library of mental images of the self versus others. As subconscious voyeurists of our own body we explore and perceive our uniqueness while celebrating the delicacy of differentiation. The framed nipple opens the door to a revived discussion on the convention of the beauty and sex(iness) and offers a new vision of the human body: imperfect, irregular, in constant evolution and dissolution but enchanting and remarkable. His fascination with representations of the body make conscious in a visual sense the very relationship between different ways of seeing. But only looking, no touching Cain said.

Grey & Pink (2019) - Ceramic nipples with background spraypainted in wooden frame 24,5 x 29,5 cm

