

Fiona Kinsella, *Chapel (rose)*
Transit Gallery, Hamilton
September 30 – November 2, 2008

The confectionary served at this particular tea party sticks uncomfortably in your teeth, like some hard-boiled sweet sent from the old country to be purloined from your hostess' candy dish. *Chapel (rose)*, Fiona Kinsella's solo exhibition at Hamilton's transit gallery, brings together the existing language of her wondrous mixed-media cake sculptures with new experiments in oil painting inspired by her recent travels in Scotland. Forms and manners flow in dialogue between these two methods, generating a vision of domesticity gone awry. The artist's otherworldly cakes repose in glass cases set on top of the white right angles of various plinths. The surrounding paintings are like neatly squared confectionaries, similarly framed with a modernist, clean-edged hush that infuses the gallery with an ambiguous sort of sanctity.

The cakes function as miniature *vanitas*, sheathed in a fondant icing that appears as chillingly crisp as a marble tomb. Contrary to this apparent immortality, however, is Kinsella's use of foodstuffs, which offers the potential to rot. In fact, her choice of materials is reminiscent of the food-sacrifices set out to delight the gods of ancient belief systems, a fetishism reinforced by the works' use of animal skulls and human hair. The latter, in particular, draws a thread between worlds, from witchcraft and voodoo to the locks of hair treasured as keepsakes by mothers and lovers. Within a framework suggesting genteel Victorian values, the dubious origin of these objects speaks to an underlying syncretism: appropriating the gallery as a private chapel to a non-denominational notion of the sacred.

The breadth of the work's intermarrying of cultures and commodities is apparent in the title cards that accompany Kinsella's *cakes*, icing further meaning onto the heavily encrusted layers of her work. For example, (*cake*)

dove (white niche) (angel) (2008) boasts the following listing of media: “Royal icing, skull, brass, blue eyes, glass, stones, hair of a small child, apparition, music, wings, gold, beads of light, dove coloured rhinestones, earrings, white roses, wood, redpath, fondant icing.” Leaving aside the odd ephemeral quirk of materials that are not materials at all, the artist goes on to list the names of sites invested in the work – from Hamilton and Burlington, Ontario, to England and the Czech Republic – before lapsing into the question marks that perhaps speak most tellingly of the work’s uncertain kitchen of origin.

Kinsella’s *cakes* find a fitting analogue in her new *chapel (rose)* paintings, succulent things of a substance apart from her sculptural practice. Despite the perceived safety of this more traditional art-making practice, the artist’s foray into oil painting continues her preference for transforming materials into new, sticky forms of life. There is something both playful and primordial in her use of oil paint as sculptural clay. Kinsella builds dense surfaces over an inch deep on square panels that can end up weighing upwards of 50 pounds each; the weight itself becoming another layer in the elaborate scheme of her titles.

Fascination with the lush materiality of oil paint, common enough among first-time oil painters, supersedes any concern for either colour or subject matter: the surfaces of these paintings are essentially uniform in hue and the paint crests into whorls and peaks that coalesce into bird’s beaks and claws as readily as the artist’s intended roses. The violet-crimson sameness of the surfaces helps to create the impression of roses that bloom then disappear back into the glucose-rich viscosity of paint, creating a constant transience of perceptions, like clouds dispersed on a windy day. The paintings are uncannily alive, growing in a way that roses never would.

In imagery and colour, Kinsella’s paintings project a whiff of the feminine, a trait highlighted in the exhibition’s press release as an explicit challenge to

the supposed masculinity of painting. While not without validity from an art historical perspective, this outdated gendering of the medium does little justice to the artist's work. Any description of the *chapel (rose)* series of works as feminine appropriations of the "macho" attributes of painting fails to appreciate a wealth of trends in the contemporary practice of oil painting, and neglects to acknowledge the artist's use of paint as a sculptural medium. If her work is in fact a gendered confrontation with the heroics of a masculine art history, it would be equally fitting to read her *(50 lbs) chapel (rose) (white & red) (of sweet sleep)* as an effort to blatantly exceed the narrow parameters of minimalism – the floriferous result one tenth the weight of one of the four 500-pound lead plates that comprise Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969).

Ultimately, though, there is little to be gained by pitting Kinsella's so-called feminine art against its masculine predecessors, a purely provocative stance that robs the artist's practice of its considerable psychological depth. She is feminine without agenda, spiritual without religion, and as surgically precise as the most meticulous chatelaine – deftly transgressing the public face of the domestic and the sacred to embark on a journey that is profoundly private.

Stephanie Vegh

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