

MoMA

Gina Beavers

Interview with Oliver Shultz
July 18, 2019



"How do I put something new into painting when everything has been done?," Gina Beavers asks herself when working. Beavers transforms images taken from the Internet into paintings composed from thick layers of acrylic medium. She focuses on the repeating fetishes of social media, including "food porn," bodybuilder selfies, and makeup tutorials. The result is sensual—both enticing and abject.

In anticipation of *Gina Beavers: The Life I Deserve*, her first solo museum exhibition, currently on view at MoMA PS1, curator Oliver Shultz headed out to the artist's studio to discuss life in Newark, New Jersey, the paintings in the show, and the struggle for originality in an image-saturated world.

Oliver Shultz: How long have you been in the new studio?

Gina Beavers: I have been here since January, and I'm happy having more space. My work has to lie flat to dry and I can do that a lot easier here. Newark has its own artist community, but I ended up moving because of Nell Painter's book, *Old in Art School*, which I highly recommend. She decided to start taking art classes at Rutgers in her sixties and has a chapter in her book about Newark—how much she loves it as a city. I have met a few artists locally, and other people in my neighborhood. A lot of my friends in the art world in New York don't really understand the move unless I'm buying a building or something, but I really like the pace out here. I'm much more relaxed, you can have a car easily, it's sort of a half suburban/half city life.

OS: These stock photos are so great.

GB: It's so crazy! I feel so bad for some of those models. Is that paint they have on their mouth? I can't.



OS: How does this [Painter Lips] differ from the original image? What's the manipulation here?

GB: I have collaged a few cropped versions of the original stock photos together. I feel that the original source images look more clean and appealing and my painting looks a little creepier. There's a darkness or a surreal spookiness that has crept in. Maybe it's all the true crime podcasts I've been listening to as I made this? But seriously, part of my process is trying for this idea of beauty in the original image, and failing, and just living with the reality of the result.

And ultimately, the original stock photos are surreal in their own right. They might be clean and beautiful, but they are quite haunting when you take a step back and try to figure out what is going on and why they exist.

OS: Can you talk a little bit about how you choose your images? I know that that's changed over time.

GB: I'm looking at things on my phone. I'm generally saving images of things that I think might have an interesting narrative if I flip them to the context of painting but also have an interesting composition or a color element. So there's a formal quality and also a narrative quality.

OS: Do you source directly from Instagram?

GB: Pretty much. Or Google searches or things like that. I've started manipulating images I've taken. I play around in Photoshop—repeating things and creating some of my own compositions—but they're very basic because I want to be cautious with how much I put myself into it.

I was thinking about this: We're constantly confronted on social media with how similar our lives are to others, so when I think about the images I post myself, I find them generic and uninteresting in terms of sources for paintings. In found images, I react to things that are not me but are still autobiographical in a more interesting way than my own photos! It's the way you might text a gif of an actor or celebrity expressing your emotion. It didn't begin with you but it expresses you better than you yourself can.

OS: Can we talk about the show's title that we came up with?

GB: Yes! It's the title of a painting that's in the show, which is of a rainbow ice cream cone; it's a foodie thing. The photo was just tagged with #thelifeldeserve. It's this very humble subject, a soft-serve cone, but at the same time, it's self-centered: what I deserve. It was your brilliance to hone in on that. Do you want to talk about what you were thinking?

OS: I was thinking those exact things. I think that's a key painting in a lot of ways. It distills what so many of your works do, which is to create a complete equivalence between the paint and the thing the paint is depicting. Especially looking at that piece in which the canvas is frosted, it's almost as if you had taken the paint out of a pastry tube or a soft serve machine. The ontological slippage between paint and the represented thing is really active there.

And of course, it's food you eat. Consumption—and consumption as a way of anchoring ourselves. We are what we eat in a metaphorical sense. So, I think almost all of your work has to do with how we secure ourselves, how we distribute ourselves out through social networks and the image of what we think we are.

GB: I don't really know how to talk about identity within my work without talking about consumption. I don't know how to talk about this existence without talking about consumption, and so I think that's the element in consuming other people's images. That's where that's embedded. We have to start with consumption if we're going to talk about who we are. That's the bedrock—especially as an American.



OS: That touches on the key question of originality. We all need other people's images in order to figure out who we are. I think that's echoed in the structure of how you work. You take other people's images and make them into objects that are, at once, seemingly just copies. But in no way are they copies, because they're something completely original that never existed before in the world. And then, they go back into photographs and recirculate in that same stream that you plucked them from to begin with.

GB: You're 100% right. Even with the makeup tutorials—they're so ubiquitous. If I had to go back and credit someone, I could never find that photo again. There are so many that look so similar, and so there's an anonymity in the sheer number of certain kinds of images.

OS: More and more, I feel like that is the realism of your work. Not even the fact that it's representational and figurative but that the realism comes from everyday life as lived in this moment in time, a technologically mediated existence.

GB: Right. Somebody had written in my yearbook, "You're the most down to earth person I've ever met." And for years, I thought that meant I was just boring. But then I realized, no, there's something about me where I'm always concerned with what's happening right now, what I'm experiencing right this second. I can only believe in that.

OS: There's a truism that we're not really living in the present moment. We're always looking at our phones. We're not really here. I think partly what your work suggests—and this is what's unique about it—is that to be present is actually to be present through your phone.

GB: That's so true.