



Visiting the Studio of Gina Beavers, the Painter of Modern (Instagram) Life

By Tatiana Berg
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Gina Beavers's paintings can be hard to process.

At first glance, you can't quite tell how they're made, or even what you're looking at: textural and bulbous, they most often depict food or close-ups of body parts—sometimes both—rendered in all their horrifying HD glory. Acrylic paint juts out with sharp crags and deep crevasses that land the image somewhere in the uncanny valley.

"Sometimes when I see people repost a painting of mine in the comments, someone will say, 'what the hell is that!'" Beavers laughs. "Because they don't know what they're looking at. They know it's not real, and they're like, 'Why the hell would anyone spend the time making something like this?'"



We're in her Newark, New Jersey studio, visiting to talk about her upcoming museum exhibition at MoMA PS1, "The Life I Deserve," which opens this Sunday, March 31. It's located at a busy intersection just above an old-school Jewish deli that looks like something from "The Sopranos." (It is: episodes have filmed there.) "Lady in Red" plays from a soul music record store next door while we look around at the canvases leaning across the walls in different states of completion, oozing paint.

The artist only recently moved to New Jersey after years spent painting out of a space in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The move has afforded her more room to spread out, which has come in handy: Her most recent pieces have grown in scale to include patterned, collaged compositions that feature repeated motifs, like the close-up of an eye from an online makeup tutorial swathed in purple eye shadow.

The PS1 show marks a significant turning point in Beavers's career, who has been steadily painting for over 20 years. She has had been exhibited at galleries like James Fuentes, Cheim & Read, and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, but hasn't yet been the subject of a museum solo show—until now.



The title of the MoMA PS1 show comes from a 2016 painting by Beavers of rainbow-colored ice cream. The image, like most of the source material for her work, originally came from a photograph posted online. The poetic caption that accompanied it, "The life I deserve," became a touchstone for MoMA PS1 curatorial associate Oliver Shultz, who organized the show.

"I think it's a key painting that distills what so many of Beavers's works do," Schultz explains, "which is to create a complete equivalence—almost in a Jasper Johns-y way—between the paint and the thing which the paint is depicting. That's a piece in which the canvas is frosted, almost as if you took the paint out of the frosting tube, or out of a soft-serve machine onto the object. The ontological slippage between paint and represented thing is really active there."

How did Beavers arrive at that particular photo of that particular ice cream cone among the millions that proliferate the internet? She looks on her phone, combing through Instagram or Google Image Search for pictures—often from the internet's most popular genres, like post-workout selfies and food snapshots—that speak to collective desires and consumerist habits.

"I don't know how to talk about this existence without talking about consumption," she explains. "We have to start with consumption if we're going to talk about who we are. It's the bedrock, I think, especially as an American."

Ironically—or appropriately, perhaps—Beavers’s work has found success online. It’s not uncommon to see her works shared and reshared—sometimes credited, sometimes not—and find their way to both art-world Instagrams and obscure Tumblr accounts. One work in particular that often pops up is “Cake” (2015), which depicts a person’s bare backside with a big slice removed from their right buttock, revealing the interior of a yellow layer cake. It’s surreal and slightly unsettling, making it unforgettable in that way that a good viral image can be.

Even though the digital version of the painting is arresting, it doesn’t come close to capturing the experience of seeing it in person. That doesn’t seem to bother Beavers too much, though.

“The paintings live in two worlds, the way that we do,” she says. “They have one life in the gallery and one life online, and we do too.”



Even though she’s working with found material, Beavers’s work remains autobiographical. As she points out, if nothing else, social media has revealed how much our lives all look the same. So many of us buy the same Ikea furniture, watch the same streaming shows, and post selfies from the same Instagram traps that scrolling through our social media feeds feels repetitious. So why can’t an image taken by someone else still be about you?

Ultimately the realism of Beavers’s work comes not from their high attention to detail or their hyper-rendered surfaces, but rather in the way that they authentically capture a technologically mediated life. Her approach manages to do something that her source material rarely achieves: force you to slow down and live in the moment.

“Somebody had written in my yearbook, ‘You’re the most down-to-earth person I’ve ever met,’” she reminisces. “For years I thought that meant just boring. But now I think, no, I think there’s something about me where I’m always like, what’s happening right this minute? What’s happening right now? And I can only believe in that.” At the end of our interview, we head downstairs to the deli for lunch. The staff heralds Beavers’s arrival with the warm welcome of a true regular: making jokes, updating her on the latest neighborhood gossip, and asking how the painting’s going. It’s a mark of how potent her artistic world is that the meal we have—sandwiches overflowing with salted meat, knishes with sour cream, and a platter of cookies the owner sends over—seem straight out of the Gina Beavers painting universe.