

Eden Arts Awards – Winner
Oliver Cain
Communal Conversation and Chewed Nipples 2019

I think it is important to stress that this offering was very strong. Every finalist has produced work of integrity. To be selected by your teachers, who see extraordinary numbers of work, is no mean feat, and you all deserve a big round of applause.

Having said that, I now have the pleasure and honour of speaking about the overall winner. That winner is Oliver Cain, who created *Communal Conversation* and *Chewed Nipples*. Cain's presentation immediately impressed all three of us engaged in judging. The artist took something of a risk in presenting two works. I say that this was a risk, because more is so often less. It's very easy for one piece to diminish the power of another, and it's rather safer to go with a single work that has been carefully refined. Cain has managed to pull off something more challenging: a sort of mini show.

The most prominent element of the presentation is *Communal Conversation*, with its noticeable, but not overweening, use of light and sound. The work includes two toilet bowls, recontextualised—in what is surely a nod to the landmark *Fountain* (1917), conventionally credited to Marcel Duchamp—on top of two truly immaculate plinths (Cain's attention to detail here, as elsewhere, is exceptional). *Communal Conversation* strikes an excellent balance between seriousness and levity, centring on gay sexual encounters in bathrooms, and touching on questions of community and gender.

A member of the Webb's staff made the observation that the sounds emanating from the bowls are rather like a heartbeat, but they will also be familiar to anyone who has been in a bathroom in a nightclub, the dance music though a wall or two muffled and curiously abstracted. I am charmed by the fact that while a number of the ingredients of this work—the loos, the blue and pink palette, the club references—are familiar elements of queer art, there's nevertheless a distinctive artistic voice in operation. The pairing of the entities, making them into a sort of gateway, but also putting me in mind of tanning beds and interactive scientific displays at places like MOTAT, is unusual, intriguing, and highly effective.

Ioana, Sara, and I were still more captivated by the second work, *Chewed Nipples*. Sara commented on the Daliesque nature of the melty, chewing-gum forms, also noting that they echo paint skins (some of you might know Helen Calder, who drapes her paint-skin creations in a similar manner). Ioana observed that the work leans into the bodily, in contrast to *Communal Conversation*, which is of course more clinical, sterile. The installation of *Chewed Nipples* in the corridor leading to the Webb's toilets at once ties the two works together, suggests Cain's awareness of other artists who have recently played with similar spaces and concepts (for example, Shannon Novak), and adds an element of surprise. *Chewed Nipples* is sort of hidden away, and it's all the more appealing for being something you happen upon.

The work brims with associations. Nipples are things some people enjoy chewing on or having chewed. Gum is something you might chew if you're about to kiss a stranger in bar or nightclub, to make sure your breath smells okay or to lube up a drug-parched throat. The nipple-forms are reminiscent of condoms, with their teet-ish reservoirs. The artist aptly refers to strings of anonymous sexual encounters: 'experiences hung out to dry'. The phrase 'dirty laundry' might also come to mind. While the placement of the nipples on their lines appears fairly casual, their crafting is full of care and delicacy, suggesting the intimacy that can attend even more fleeting sexual encounters.

Ioana comments: 'Looking at each pink drop, I can't help but think of them as made from saliva and slipperiness, a careful pinch, singular moments of intimacy fixed as the gum hardened.' Sara also homes in on memory, referring to 'each nipple suspended like a droplet about to fall, like moments in time remembered'. I'm delighted by the curiously de-gendered nature of the entities (they seem to me as feminine and masculine), and their simultaneous appeal and grossness. What does it say about you if you kind of want to pop one in your mouth? Is it more upsetting to chew on someone else's gum, on the nipple of someone you barely know, or on an artwork? Great wit, great texture—a most deserving winner, whom we'll all be watching closely, I'm sure. – **Francis McWhannell**