

BANANA ART

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Across cultures, fruit in art is inherently sexual. That seems to be particularly evident in Western art. Consider the naked little perverts in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510, Prado) noshing down on giant berries. Looking at Oliver Cain's ceramic bananas in their various situations, it's easy to see that they fit within a much broader, if little considered, art historical context.

Cain's works allude to the experience of gay men with a sly, but whimsical eye, exploring sexuality and the social constructs of shame and anonymity, without getting bogged down in them, before cycling back to the self-reference of the art world. The art world and the rainbow world are linked through often feeling performative of intimacies in public spaces and often misinterpreted by those who exist outside those communities. Within these works, bananas have a powerful instrumentality.

The earliest depictions of bananas in Western art come at the brushes of Dutch artists who travelled to Brazil and the East Indies in the seventeenth century. Albert Eckhout's *Bananas, Guavas and other fruit* (seventeenth century, National Museum of Denmark) may very well be the first such example. Bananas were incredibly exotic to the European eye well into the nineteenth century.

From the start, the banana was typecast. Eckhout's still life is a *memento mori* and a *vanitas* – a reminder that all sensual and sensuous pleasure is fleeting and will eventually rot away. This is a theme Cain picks up in his ceramic bananas, though inverted – punning on subversive sexuality by placing them in the urinals of major international art museums as 'fruit bowls' with a nod to Duchamp, but also acknowledging, that being ceramic, they cannot decay and exist forever as some kind of Platonic ideal.

When we look at Gauguin's *Le Repas* (1891, Musée d'Orsay), there is nothing overtly sexual about the huge bunch of bananas on the table between the dining Tahitians and the viewer. Surely, it's just a visual device to enhance the sense of perspective and space? Surely, as a European, he must have been struck by these exotic fruit rarely seen in his native France? Surely sometimes a cigar is just a cigar?

But the way Gauguin, the notoriously randy old goat, has teamed them up with the gentle feminine roundness of other fruit on the table, curiously positioned like a pair of breasts, there is more at work here. With Gauguin, the phallic gets into everything, with or without Freud. And post-Freud, the banana as fruity penis is impossible to avoid.

The morphic correspondence is overt in De Chirico's *L'Incertitude du poète* (1913, Tate) where, in the artist's typical desolate town square, a huge bunch of bananas is inching its way, slug-like, towards the crotch of a headless, legless, armless marble torso of Venus. The apotheosis of this association in the male gaze us probably when Warhol (no stranger to bananas himself) designed the peel-back banana cover for The Velvet Underground & Nico's debut album in 1967.

Josephine Baker became the most famous black woman in the world in 1926, dancing at the Folies Bergère in a skirt made of bananas. Today it might be regarded as pandering to racist stereotypes, but at the time it made her a rich and powerful superstar when back in the United States of her birth segregation and widespread racism was the reality.

The female gaze would get their own back. Although Linda Nochlin is better known as a theorist, in 1972, to prove a point, she counterpointed an old nineteenth century French pornographic photograph of a nude woman holding a tray of apples on which her breasts are also balanced - *Achetez des Pommes* – with her own photograph. *Achetez des Bananes*. A nude man with a tray of bananas positioned accordingly, a blow for the female gaze.

At about the same time, Polish artist Natalia LL (Lach-Lachowicz) was taking huge risks in the ultra-conservative Communist country with her *Consumer Art* photographic series (1972-5), critiquing the commodification of women's bodies by having her beautiful models provocatively eat certain foods, including bananas. Some things never change. In 2019 the work was removed from display at Warsaw's National Museum at the direction of the Polish culture ministry.

The Guerrilla Girls appropriated and recycled Warhol's banana to protest the lack of work by women artists in various public collections. I'm not sure if this one is in the bundle of posters purchased by Auckland Art Gallery, but I think it might have been more to the point if they'd spent that dosh on works by New Zealand women artists.

The Sarah Lucas photographic self-portrait *Eating a Banana* (1990, Tate) shows the artist echoing the Natalia LL work, but glaring defiantly at the camera instead of anything seductive as she reclaims female sexuality from the male gaze. Lucas' late friend and YBA Angus Fairhurst's *The Banana Skin in the Hall of Mirrors* (1995, Tate) is a giant black banana. It was a testament to the continuing relevance of memento mori in contemporary culture, though a giant black banana is perhaps more problematic these days.

Gay artists were not averse to using fruit, punning on and reclaiming the slur, to explore the patriarchal masculinity that often seemed to exclude them, and in response to the AIDS crisis. Grant Lingard Hutch and Lure (1998, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū) consists of a circle of pristine white Jockey y-fronts with pieces of fruit made of soap (including a banana) poking out of the crotch. There's a kind of sympathy there with Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1992-1997, Philadelphia Museum of Art), where the artist sewed together empty fruit skins to commemorate and mourn her friends who had died of AIDS.

It's probably in this neighbourhood that Cain's art most obviously fits. Sex, in particular gay sex, often with the element of the anonymous bathroom encounter playfully repurposed as a commentary on the art world and society at large. The art world can often feel like that.

It's the unavoidable phallic shape of the banana that makes it so ridiculous. How many safe sex campaigns put a condom on this particular fruit? Sex, absurdity, and commodity are intractably entangled in the banana, which is what Maurizio Cattelan intended when he duct taped a banana to the wall at the Art Basel Miami in 2019 and called it *Comedian*. How else do you top Duchamp's urinal? But it was subtler than that, recalling slapstick pratfalls on banana skins as well as being a kind of entropic *memento mori*. It sold for US\$120,000 – point proven, a work of art that must be replaced every seven to ten days.

The ubiquity of conceptual art, the ready-made, the idea that the object is the metaphor, had made this inevitable. *Comedian* is now the problem of the Guggenheim's conservators, although not before another artist, David Datuna, made it a kind of performance piece by eating it. You can't eat one of Cain's ceramic bananas, but their placement in various art institutional urinals (though not the Guggie – they only have sit-downs and a foyer fountain had to substitute) fulfil a similar function.

Bananas don't always have to be a sexual metaphor, however. In 2017, Nicole Won Hee Maloof took up the banana as a metaphor for the condition of Asian Americans in the photographic *What color is a banana?* This image depicted a grid-like montage of bananas on supermarket shelves, punning on the socially constructed stereotype of being 'yellow' on the outside and feeling 'white' on the inside, while being exploited by American corporations and late capitalism.

Capitalism will eat itself and everything else, bringing us full circle. In 2020 the global fruit company Chiquita Bananas created a marketing campaign called *Banana Masterpiece* which took works of historical art from Magritte's *Le fils de l'homme* (1964, private collection) and Arcimboldo's *Summer* (1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), replaced a prominent piece of fruit with a banana, and used it on their fruit stickers.

Will bananas survive capitalism? The species we eat is infertile and can only be reproduced by a kind of agricultural cloning. We might ask ourselves if the human species will survive capitalism. I certainly hope art does, and with artists like Cain there is always hope that we all will.