

Art in America

A SQUARE MEAL

Gina Beavers;
Kimchi Hot Dogs,
2014, acrylic on
canvas, 30 inches
square. Courtesy
Retrospective
gallery, Hudson,
N.Y.

In a series of paintings based on Instagram photos, Gina Beavers puts food hype and social-media oversharing into 3-D relief.

by Elisabeth Sherman

TWO OVERSTUFFED HAMBURGERS push out of the canvas in Gina Beavers's 2014 painting *In-n-out burger*. Bun mouths agape, the greasy Double-Double burgers, the revered fast-food chain's most popular item, sit below their accompanying orders of fries. The 16-inch-square painting, some areas built up in high relief, taunts and repels the viewer with its fidelity to its subject, which becomes both hunger-inducing and sickening.

In a series of paintings begun in 2012, Beavers copies images uploaded to Instagram with the #foodporn hashtag. While 30 million photos and counting have been posted with this tag, each picture conveys a particular meaning to the user's followers, be it the value and status of an abundant tray of oysters or the locavore righteousness in choosing free-range lamb. In her paintings, Beavers assumes the viewpoints of others to underscore and critique an occurrence specific to our cultural moment, in which images circulated through social media serve as a means of self-definition.

Beavers has been painting steadily since 2000, when she earned an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She spent years as an abstractionist, taking inspiration from the language of advertising. In 2010, she made pared-down works based on camera-phone photographs

of objects cropped in so tightly that the canvases appeared nonobjective.

Around this time, she started using acrylic molding paste to build actual depth onto the canvas. The process of painting onto a sculpted surface eventually led to the return of representational imagery, and, for the next few years, Beavers experimented with a range of subjects. She copied portraits from "how to paint" books, surrounding them in high-relief picture frames based on JPEGs of those on old-master works. She also painted male and female torsos from movies and advertisements, and depicted store-bought children's watercolor sets, reproducing their saturated wells of paint and cheap plastic cases.

As Beavers said during a studio visit, it occurred to her that there was a connection between her process and the practice of body painting, in which the human form is decorated in washable paint to resemble an object or image entirely different from itself. By 2012, she was making paintings based on Internet images of painted bodies. Beavers's interest in this practice was twofold. First, while she had been constructing raised surfaces that conformed to the topology of her subject, copying the painted bodies allowed her to create works where depth and image were in conflict with each other.¹ Second, this subject matter

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
A solo show of Gina Beavers's paintings, at Clifton Benevento, New York, Sept. 6–Oct. 25, 2014.

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Mondrian, 2012, acrylic and joint compound on canvas, 40 by 30 inches. Courtesy Clifton Benevento, New York.

allowed her to tap into a facet of popular culture that is separate from high art but related to the skills it entails. Furthermore, the images adorning the bodies were themselves drawn from both high and low culture. In her 2012 exhibition of this series at New York's James Fuentes gallery, *Scream* and *Mondrian* (both 2012) hung side by side. The former depicts a body disguised as Ghostface from the 1996 horror film. The gilt frame Beavers has painted around the figure denotes its status as a "work of art." *Mondrian* shows a female form from neck to knees covered in the black lines and primary colors of a Mondrian painting. She holds a picture frame around her body. Beavers treated the disparate subjects of the two works equally, building up a thick underlayer of milky acrylic medium that forms the ridges and protrusions of both the bodies and the frames. She then applied paint onto the textured surface, just as the original body painter had ornamented the figure. By translating the images of these painted bodies onto canvas, Beavers continues the play of illusion. A temporary, two-dimensional picture on a three-dimensional body, photographed (by someone else) and thus flattened, is reinflated by Beavers's hand.

THAT SAME YEAR, Beavers moved from bodies to food. She wanted to continue working through another person's point of view, as she had with the paintings on human figures. This time she selected Instagram images, most of which are by amateur photographers. She enlarged the compositions and put them onto square canvases, retaining the format native to Instagram. These food paintings are titled with the texts posted underneath the original images, often with informative and sometimes amusing results, such as *Totally fig heaven* (2013), *Food Porn! (Chicken & Waffles)*, 2012, or *Grillin'* (2012). Adapting her technique to these new subjects, she began adding pumice or glass beads to the acrylic base, to better replicate the textures. As with the body paintings, Beavers furthers—and comments upon—a process begun by other photographers, whose cameras turn life-size objects into miniaturized representations. While such translations typically distance the viewer from the subject, Beavers's works forcefully collapse that space, bringing the viewer closer to the visceral effect of the original food than the photographs had.

Beavers has always veered toward classical genres: nudes, portraits, still lifes. (As does Instagram, which also includes self-portraiture and landscape among its common tropes.³) Far from the first artist to revive these traditional modes for the sake of contemporary critique, she picks up the baton from the Pop artists, who famously turned to food in their explorations of burgeoning consumerism. Claes Oldenburg's installation *The Store* (1961) and his soft sculptures of hamburgers, cake slices and the like are clear predecessors to Beavers's acrylic comestibles. Lumpy and imperfect, his sculptures elevate the everyday to the status of high art, while undermining the appeal of otherwise tempting food. Oldenburg offers an obvious antecedent to Beavers's work, but Tom Wesselmann's combinations of collaged and printed advertisements, plastic reproductions of packaged goods, real objects and painted surfaces speak more directly to her formal investigations. In his mixed-medium paintings of kitchen interiors from the '60s, as well as works from the "Great American Nude" series, Wesselmann includes a dizzying array of constructed and natural realities. Three-dimensional bottles of soda sit on protruding shelves and window frames reveal wallpapered landscapes, while a reposing nude remains flat and featureless nearby.

Like Wesselmann, Beavers highlights objects in relief by keeping many of her surfaces flat. In a show of paintings this summer at Retrospective gallery in Hudson, N.Y., she turned to the composites created by Instagram users to present multiple photos in one square. *Kimchi Hot Dogs* (2014), for example, is divided into three panes, each of which offers a different close-up of the eponymous subject. The upper half is a low-angled view; the puckered ends of three sausages nestled in their buns protrude from the canvas. The kimchi slathered on the hot dogs appears as semitranslucent bits of red and orange, nearly indistinguishable from bodily innards or fluids. The whole concoction rests on a simple black plate.

The lower half has two panes, each displaying a view from above. The three sections are separated by white borders, which Beavers molded from acrylic paste. In this painting, as well as many in the series, the sculptural depth Beavers creates abruptly gives way to a level ground. The floral tablecloth supporting the kimchi hot dogs is painted flatly, with no trace of relief.

Oldenburg and Wesselmann, along with Rosenquist and others, used representations of food to deflate dichotomies of high and low, proposing that the most common subject matter was worthy of grand scale and museum presentation. Yet, of course, these dichotomies still exist, and Beavers forces us to confront them again. She asks us to evaluate the qualities that make a painting high art. For some years, abstraction has been the fashion for the savvy, emerging painter, but Beavers's unembarrassed realism, along with that of a number of her peers, attempts a dethroning. This summer, her painting *North Fork Lobsters* (2014) appeared in a New York group show at Zach Feuer gallery that focused on up-to-the-minute realism, including works depicting birds by Ann Craven, tacos by Katherine Bernhardt and the Statue of Liberty by Keith Mayerson.

Considered in an even broader art-historical context, Beavers's paintings could be said to function like Dutch still lifes, which explored the increasing wealth in Northern Europe while moralizing on the fleeting nature of life itself. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Beavers labors in reference to this historical mode in order to remind us that, today, culture is consumed, digested and regurgitated before you can even finish scrolling down your social media feed.

Beavers is always cognizant of the future distribution of her works, that is, how they will appear in reproduction. While she paints many of the shadows and highlights captured in the source photographs, she also carefully considers the way light plays off of her three-dimensional surfaces. The depicted and physical contrasts merge in her work, creating the detail that Instagram artisans and professional art photographers alike so desire.

IN UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS America today, food has risen to an exalted position. As author William Deresiewicz writes, food "is a vehicle of status aspiration and competition, an ever-present occasion for snobbery, one-upmanship and social aggression. (My farmers' market has bigger, better, fresher tomatoes than yours.)"³ Beavers conflates signs of cultural communication, giving us food *and* art. But rather than celebrating this phenomenon, she smacks us in the face with its grotesqueness, and our own self-obsession, overshadowing and false individuality.

And then there's sex. "Porn" is right up front in the hashtag she has been searching. The #foodporn photographs mime portrayals of food on television and in advertising, both of which use the camera angles, styling and touch-ups employed in pornography. Instead of seducing for sexual arousal, however, they seduce for consumption. Beavers denies none of this. She delivers the phallic hot dogs, the



A pot of mussels at La Gare, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 16 inches square. Courtesy Clifton Benevento.

vaginal oysters, the oozing sauces and the donut holes that we want and expect. The textures are hyped up, the colors enticing. It's dirty and disgusting, and you feel full, sticky and worn out from looking at all of it.

For a current solo exhibition at Clifton Benevento in New York, Beavers moves beyond food, opening up her Instagram wanderings to include images from makeup tutorials on how to apply the perfect smoky eye, and shots of proudly displayed nail art creations, the penises of Greco-Roman sculptures and gleaming towers of discarded carburetors. Ultimately, Beavers's paintings are funny and sinister. They treat pots of mussels, fast food burgers and fresh figs as equals. Each meal deserves elevation; each personal declaration is worthy of repeating as a title. The mundane writ large lets us laugh at our own idiocy, our participation in this culture that tricks us into believing in our individuality, our ability to communicate a unique life through a ubiquitous technology. If Wesselmann, Oldenburg and their peers were poking holes in an American culture of sameness, Beavers is reminding us that today's attempt at hypersubjectivity is nothing more than an illusion, a replica of the unique. A meal is intensely, corporeally personal yet exceedingly banal. Beavers captures these soon-to-be digested provisions, asking the viewer to look, look again and look some more at a meal that has already become waste product, its utility as both sustenance and self-definition long gone. ○

1. From the artist's notes.

2. For more on this topic, see Ben Davis, "Ways of Seeing Instagram," *news.artnet.com*, June 24, 2014.

3. William Deresiewicz, "A Matter of Taste," *New York Times*, Sunday Review, Oct. 26, 2012, p. 5.