

Oysters and Bananas

by Kate Strain

It is difficult to think of two more loaded perishables than oysters and bananas. Zinc efficient, potassium rich. Both carry hundreds of years-worth of innuendo, are too-easily likened to female and male genitalia, and are known the world over for their aphrodisiac qualities. Oysters are exquisite, simultaneously innocent and filthy. Bananas are slapstick, suggestive and politically charged.

The paintings of Wieske Wester depict bananas, suspended in time, in the prime of their life cycle, just before being eaten. Her drawings show us oysters too, encased in worlds of their own, unwitting but ready, to slide down gullets. In the same exhibition space, a sculptural installation by Puck Verkade frames a chorus of enchanting oysters who guide us through an operatic video collage, flanked by stretched skin-like latex sheaths that peel away to reveal the simple shapes of ladies whose silhouettes we recognise from toilet doors.

Dürst Britt & Mayhew have brought these two bodies of work together in their booth at Liste Art Fair – Basel. Neither Wester’s painterly renderings nor Verkade’s animations reduce the symbolic potential of their subjects to their most base associations, but as those before them have done, both undoubtedly play with the underlying and clumsy references, if only to subvert, overcome and reclaim them as their own.

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Consider the oyster, the slimiest seafood, living in clusters on oyster beds where their shells filter passing waters into pearls and host crusty organisms on hard backs. Far from this aquatic lifestyle dwells the tropical banana, growing high up in bunches on leafy trees, shrouded in a thick skin, suspended upside-down. One a salty shellfish good with lemon and hot sauce, the other a sweet and stodgy fruit best served with cinnamon and ice cream. Both can be eaten raw, even alive in the case of the unfortunate oyster. Both can also be cooked. And both have been repeatedly cast, in starring and supporting roles, throughout popular culture.

Ever since someone first slipped on a banana peel, the humble fruit has had a firm foothold in the bastion of comic escapades. Marie Lloyd (1870-1922) was an English singer, comedian and musical theatre actress best known for her use of innuendo and double entendre during her bawdy, bill topping performances in the Music Halls of turn of the century London. She has often been credited with debuting the banana’s first entry into the comedic repertoire, having remarked, upon picking up a banana skin

from the stage floor 'If the man who threw this wants to get his skin back, he can come to my dressing room afterwards'. Throughout the gag-laden history of women in comedy, the banana was not only humorous, it was powerful. In the summer of 1926 at the Folies Bergère in Paris, Josephine Baker (1906-1975) descended from her onstage palm tree and danced her famous *danse sauvage*, dressed in little more than a skirt made of 16 rubber bananas. Swinging on stage, Baker 'brilliantly manipulated the white male imagination. Crossing her eyes, waving her arms, swaying her hips, poking out her backside, she clowned and seduced and subverted stereotypes.' Baker reclaimed her image through humour and seduction, qualities associated with the banana ever since, and echoed in Andy Warhol's explicit sexualising of the fruit on the cover for the Velvet Underground & Nico's 1967 vinyl. On the original record sleeve it was possible to literally 'unzip a banana' by peeling back the yellow and black skin to reveal a naked fruit underneath. But the banana also carries with it connotations of economic state capitalism where natural resources are exploited by commercial enterprise for private profit, from the exploitative Banana Wars of Latin America to the coining of the term Banana Republic. In 1956 Harry Belafonte recorded a version of the Jamaican folk song 'Day-O', a call and response work song thought to have originated in the docklands of Jamaica where banana boats were loaded tirelessly with bunches of the country's biggest export. Belafonte pioneered political activism through popular musical entertainment. Owing to these and other appearances, bananas are both poster boys for the exploitative effects of globalisation, as well as reclaimed emblems of empowerment.

William Shakespeare who famously claimed the world as his oyster, was no stranger to its capacity to evoke opposing qualities simultaneously. Disgusting and delicious, it was a popular venereal symbol throughout the literature and verse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with its likeness to the vulva, 'itching oysters' and other 'self-swallowing provocatives' cited in even the most respected theatrical productions. That oysters could retain their sophisticated appeal despite their slippery appearance was thanks in no small part to their growing scarcity as numbers of oysters from hauls across the Thames and along the New York coastline rapidly diminished or became too contaminated with pollution to safely swallow. Taste-makers like the enigmatic MFK Fisher kept alive the thirst for the briny slimy shellfish with her impeccable book 'Consider the Oyster' of 1941. Loaded with recipes and images explaining how oysters can and should be eaten, the book opens with a witty overview of the 'dreadful but exciting' life of an oyster. The book ends with nostalgic memories of other people's oysters experiences: the author's mother's schoolgirl treat of baked oyster loaf, the tale of a young virgin's wishful and exasperated overindulgence, and the recollection of a fleeting, poetic meander across an oyster bed at dawn. Aphrodisiac, mysterious, a source of pleasure and strength — another more

sombre literary take on the oyster comes from Anton Chekhov's 1884 classic 'Oysters'. This recounts the sorry tale of a starving boy who blindly gobbles up oysters to assuage his hunger, much to the amusement of onlookers who laugh and jeer at his pathetic seeming appetite for the delicacy. This childish innocence is again captured in the poem 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' by CS Lewis. Here an innocent posse of youthful oysters are tricked and led astray by two 'very unpleasant characters' who convince the curious dotes to follow them ashore only to devour them with little remorse. One can't help but draw parallels between this scenario and the one so vividly evoked by Puck Verkade in her latest video work *BAIT*.

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Perched on a wrought iron scaffolding structure, halfway between a cage and a bed, Puck Verkade's kaleidoscope of moving images shines down from above head height, inviting closer sonic attention via the headphones that are draped over the horizontal bars of the structure. At the centre of the work is the reclining figure of Ophelia, accompanied by a dozen oysters or so. With charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent Ophelia and the oysters lip-synch their way through the 1979 Barbara Streisand / Donna Summer duet 'No More Tears (Enough is Enough)'. The song could be an anthem for the recent #metoo #timesup campaigns that called out abuse of power and created a shared space of solidarity in which to speak out about sexual abuse. Shakespeare's Ophelia was never the star of the show. Repeatedly crushed and destroyed by the expectations put upon her by the men in her life, *BAIT* recasts Ophelia at the centre of the action, eyes open, wide awake, and in charge of her own destiny. The disco is interrupted by a male figure, towel casually draped round his shoulders, determined to add his voice to the production. Increasingly, the ambivalence and passivity of the potential perpetrator, Mr. Nice Guy, the oyster-shucker, and the violent vulnerability of the victim, is laid bare. The oysters are cast as the victims of inhumane treatment and systemic injustice. They carry their burden with dignified resilience, even when under attack. This is mirrored in the difficult and disturbing scenes of a female duck being set upon and raped by a gang of male ducks, at intervals throughout the video. Verkade has been working in the medium of video and installation since completing her first multi-screen installation in 2011. Her understanding of content, authorship, ownership and circulation is nuanced and responsive. She masterfully navigates watershed moments in collective consciousness with a familiar cast of characters and recurring tropes that ear-worm and hashtag their way into the contemporary agenda.

Far away from the cries of the oyster choir Wieske Wester suspends her bananas in a state of energetic stillness. They're on pause, captured at a particular moment, full of life and colour and bursting with ripeness. The bananas in her paintings are snacks waiting to be devoured. They are key

ingredients in some delicious recipe, or the leftovers of a hasty lunch. They could be interpreted as lovers - spooning, luxuriating, reclining in post-coital bliss as one lays a casual frond over the other. They could be phallic trophies, souvenirs in remembrance of times past, sprawling conquests laid out for display. Or perhaps a soft critique of the unthinking and untenable transport and circulation of food as cargo across the globe, a hint at global warming to see them strewn and forlorn. They could also simply be still lives, edible fare, a cyclist's snack eternalised in paint. The scale of Wester's work is significant. Enlarged, engorged, and painted more in the style of a nude portrait than a throwaway snack, the bananas once magnified become entirely more relatable. Humanised even. They are funny, suggestive, and not without political undertones. Like the picture of Dorian Gray they seem alive, almost as if they might continue to grow, ripen and rot even as paintings. Wester works from life and from photographs, painting quickly in clustered hours between school runs and time spent in the garden. Painting is like a second language she uses to describe states or things, objects or experiences that can become trapped in words.

Wester and Verkade work in strikingly different ways to one another. For Wester, who paints with rawness and a brutal honesty, the banana is a banana. She paints what is visually apparent and leaves it up to you to decide what it means, to project your own associations, desires, connotations and reading. To Verkade it seems that an oyster is much more than an innocent mollusc, a fleshy creature, a delectable temptress, or a helpless victim. It's the all singing all dancing narrator of the contemporary moment. Despite their undeniably different approaches, both artists strive to overcome and reclaim the symbolic potency of what they depict through the stories they tell and the voices they perform, with oysters or bananas.

Kate Strain is artistic director of Grazer Kunstverein, Austria and co-founder of the Department of Ultimology at CONNECT Centre for Future Networks and Communications at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Researching the overlap between performance and performativity in visual arts practice, Strain was acting curator at Project Arts Centre Dublin in 2014, and is one half of the paired curatorial practice RGKSKSRG. She is a graduate of History of Art and Architecture, Trinity College Dublin; MA Visual Arts Practice, IADT Dun Laoghaire, and participated in de Appel Curatorial Programme at de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam and Young Curators Residency Programme at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin. Strain regularly lectures in curatorial practice, art history and contemporary art, and has made presentations at Delfina Foundation, London; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; University of Missouri St Louis; and the Endangered Language Alliance, New York.