

Vogue : 'Artist Chloé Wise Talks Sex, Consumerism, and the Presidential Election',  
by Mathias Rosenzweig, November 20, 2016

Artist Chloe Wise Talks Sex, Consumerism, and the Presidential Election



Photo: Ira Chernova

This past week in Montreal, Chloe Wise opened her newsolo exhibition, named *Cats Not Fighting Is a Horrible Sound As Well*. The 25-year-old Canadian artist's work spans across sculpture, oil painting, video, and digital art, often exploring the perceptions of consumerism, excess, and vanity of modern society. She relates the female form and its often-sexualized portrayal within art history to the consumption of food, which tends to be advertised in a sensual way that Wise aptly labels as totally comedic. *Vogue* caught up with Wise just days before her new opening to discuss her career and how art can mediate our country's worsening social dilemmas.

How is this new solo exhibition different for you than others in the past?

This particular show is much more complicated in terms of materials. Usually I would have sculptures that are finished, I send them to the gallery, and they hang them. But in this particular scenario, the space is 7,000 square feet. It's massive. I made the first room of the gallery into a labyrinth, sort of. So it's like an Italian cantina, like a cellar where you have sausages and cheese hanging. There are all these weird wooden bar structures, but they're sort of incongruent and don't make complete sense. But all these weird wood structures have vines and hooks and holes; it's a weird curiosity cabinet sort of scenario. There will be pomegranates hanging, and then on a ledge there will be a caprese salad and these little bottles of love potions that I bought at this weird store, antique plates filled with fake ranch and cucumbers dipping into it, and then mounds of fake pasta drying. You have to walk through this space and it becomes this very ornate experience where you don't know what you're going to see, and as you walk around, there are all these different components.

You're also working on releasing your first book. Can you tell us about that?

The book is images of work from the last two years. I've done five solo shows. There are paintings, sculptures, drawings, processed photos, photos from my phone, screenshots from my videos. There's an essay by Jeffrey Deitch, an essay by Loreta Lamargese, who's my best friend and the curator of Division Gallery, and a conversation of me with Eric Wareheim about comedy and humor and video art. Basically, it's my brain dumped onto pages. It's colorful images of what goes into the work, as well as the finished work. I think it's the first time you can see my body of work, which is so diverse and spans so many forms of media together, and it feels more cohesive even though it's really, really varied. I think that in itself is an art piece. So I'm really proud of it. I love it.

**Your work explores the relationship between the female form and food. Can you give us a bit of background on your thoughts there?**

I think that the comparisons between the female body and food items have a lot of levels. On the level of art history, the female nude is a very, very common theme where you'd see a female reclining, posing elegantly, sometimes without knowledge of the viewer or the male gaze. Sometimes the female might be looking away. You see paintings of women the same way that you see paintings of still lifes with bowls of fruits or paintings of family heirlooms or jewels. They're all kind of representations of things that denote luxury or wealth or abundance. But what I was saying about women's bodies and food and fruit is that there's the inherent knowledge that that thing is going to wilt or die. It's the idea that everything is mutable and everything will eventually decay. So you have a woman who's young and beautiful and displayed in a sexy way, or in an inviting way, and it's kind of known that they're only going to be young for this one moment. And the same thing can be said with bowls of food or a beautiful, bountiful harvest. That food is going to rot or we're going to eat it, and then there's going to be more.

We have this perpetual want. And that still rings true today. But I think unbeknownst to us, in a lot of advertising, you do see food expressed or advertised in a very sexual way, because it's capitalizing on the viewer's desires. So it's like cheesy pizza oozing, or Olive Garden commercials where they're spinning the fork and the grease is there, and it's in slow motion and erotic and it plays into our carnal desires. Our desires really are food, sex, money, and power. So food and sex really can be treated similarly visually, and when we talk about desserts on a menu, it'll be like, "sinful, decadent, ooze of chocolate cake, moist layers . . ."

Do you display objects in a certain way that helps emphasize this?

Stickiness or shininess really does denote desire. In any fashion advertisement, women will be really shiny and glossy, which really reflects youth. It's kind of sweaty and sexy. So there is this idea that shiny things are sexy. It really does trigger our consumer eye to see desire. Especially when objects get sensualized in advertising, like any mundane object with a model next to it, implying the good life. And the good life might be someone with a lot of money, or someone with luxury cars or a lot of sexual prowess. So this object gets viewed with this mystical power of desire. So long story short, I kind of play into that with the way that I represent women so that they're shiny and sticky and oily, and they're seen next to food on the blanket. It's like, which one's the object and which one's the subject?

It's an interesting thought because we can both criticize consumerism while still wanting to be a part of it. I don't know how you're going to avoid consumer culture. We're no longer making our decisions. We really are so enslaved to the fonts and the authority of advertising; we don't even know that we're being manipulated. That being said, there really is a beautiful visual language that comes out of that. Accessing the human desire psyche by using advertisements is an art in itself. It's very complex and psychological. I do appreciate the visual language that is bred from that. So I don't criticize that. Obviously we need to be woke, and we need to think about what we're consuming, what the media says, think about how things are being presented, think about how brands make you think that their object or product is more desirable than their competitor. All of that language is really something that we're surrounded by constantly, and it's really important to think about critically. However it's impossible to avoid it, so I think it's important to be aware of it and satirize it. I think satire and comedy are the best ways to negotiate the relationships that we have.

Within consumerism, there are fleeting trends that repeatedly come and go. Is this something you explore as well? All of my bread bags and all the stuff that has logos on it is sort of about the banality behind trends, where there is kind of an arbitrary nothingness behind them. It's trend forecasters who get together and decide what's going to be in style. It trickles down and then it trickles back up. There's this whole system, and the whole system is very morbid. It is meant to die. Fashion is this thing that's very aware of its own mortality, which is really interesting because art is not. Art thinks it's going to last forever. People are like, "This piece is eternal; this piece is about humanity; this piece is going to live forever." Newsflash: it's not. There are trends in art, too. Fashion is super aware of itself and sarcastic in that it's like, "I'm going to be in style for six months! And then you're going to get rid of me and I'm going to be embarrassing and cringe-worthy. But then I'm going to come back as retro." All forms in fashion are constantly haunting the present, so there's still the ghost of boho and floral headaddresses from Coachella or ombré jean shorts, kind of floating . . . like shoulder pads are floating and waiting to come out of irrelevance and be retro again. So there's never a moment where something's actually cool.

**But your work also explores trends outside of fashion.** Trends can be about cars or food, and art as well. Even like linguistic things, like “bae”—that was so last year. Or saying “AF”—that’s such a small micro thing, but they have this cycle and they are meant to die. With clothing, seapunk is the example that I always use. That thing was two months. For me, that’s just part of the inherent life and death cycle, which I think has to do with food and youth and money as well. All the good things really are fleeting, and that’s the nature of life. I participate in trends. We both can agree that you can’t avoid certain things because it’s not even a choice that you make. It’s just a part of how you live your life. You’re permeable to what’s around you. So I think we can say we are permeable to trends, and we are affected by the cycle.

As of late, you’ve used social media to voice your opinion on politics. As a Canadian, what are your thoughts on what happened? I was in Montreal when it happened, and it was like watching my house burn down on Google Maps. I was crying all morning. I haven’t stopped crying about this. I’m an American citizen. I voted and I don’t even know where to begin. I could talk about this for days. But if your question is as a Canadian, I’ll start there. As a woman, as a millennial, as a democrat, as a Jew, we’ll have to talk about it another time when I see you. And as a friend to the LGBT community and marginal groups, it’s just so sad. But as a Canadian, I’ll say that Canada’s not perfect. I mean, I’m one of the biggest supporters of, “Let’s move to Canada! It’s so beautiful there!” But to be honest, it’s not perfect either. It’s founded under the same colonial regime and there is a lot of the same inherent racism underlying here. But I do think that the Canadian Prime Minister (Justin Trudeau) is an amazing dude. He talks about being a feminist. He talks openly about how men need to be open about calling themselves feminists. But then he just made a statement basically saying “Trump, we support you”—we have to, because it’s our biggest importer and exporter. We don’t realize that we’re the same thing. It affects Canada, too. If the States blow up, we’re probably going to burn, too. And any sort of hateful rhetoric that goes on in the States, we hear it here, too. The children in schools here are going to be affected by that, too.

And as an artist? Nina Simone said, “An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times.” Do you agree with that?

As an artist, I think it’s a really good point you made. I think it is our responsibility. It was really hard to work for a few days. It’s such a sad thing. I’m setting up for my solo show but I can’t be happy right now. It feels really weird to post about it online or talk about my work right now when there are such bigger fish to fry, but then you realize that you come together with friends and artists and comedians and producers and you realize that we need each other more than ever. And every day I’ve been messaging my friends being like, “What are we going to do?” We need to use every visual channel that we have. We’re really lucky to have an outreach as artists or as musicians or whatever it may be. People are listening. You know, white women voted for Trump. [Lots of] millennials didn’t vote or voted for third parties.

This is not okay, and it’s being normalized. Even Obama is saying we should be accepting. But it’s like, “No, we should be turning the country upside down.” And I don’t know where to begin with that. But I’m telling my friends that they need to talk to middle America because they’re not listening. They think that our protests are crazy. I think there are ways to do it where we can maybe mend this divide by education or by art, by talking it out and finding common ground. We have to try to understand where they’re coming from, which is hard, because I want to unfollow the country, all right?

What do you think we can do to help the situation?

We have to try to spread love, not hate, and spread information that’s not propaganda or crazy right-, left-wing anything. Just straight up facts. I think a lot of the things that fucked us over in the first place are things Trump would say that weren’t true, but then they’re taken as facts. So one of the things is misinformation. I think we need to spread information, tell each other what’s up and support each other, especially minority groups. I’m going to go stock up on Plan B, buy all of it, give it to my friends, whatever . . . We’re lucky because we’re not going to see as much of that, but kids in school are screaming, “Build a wall!” We have to use whatever access we have. You have that responsibility, too, writing as a journalist. We have the responsibility to spread as much information and love as we can.



Photo: Logan Jackson / Courtesy of Galerie Division