ALMINE RECH

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Chloe Wise: Thank You For The Nice Fire

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Chloe Wise's powerful *Thank You For The Nice Fire* is, deceptively, an installation. If we follow the work in checklist order, first entering the gallery's eastern viewing area, we think we're seeing a show of paintings. A hint that this is not the case first appears in a pair of wall sconces apparently made of romaine lettuce. Romaine lettuce, a prime source of E. coli, is a motif here and appears both in painted and sculptural form, most strikingly in *Caesar Salad Chandelier* (2021), a urethane sculpture hanging from the ceiling in the west side of the gallery with an ominous faux drip, also urethane, on the floor below it. As we walk into the gallery's west room, we pass illusionistic building siding with a multi-colored glass brick window embedded in it. Suddenly, we realize we've been hearing snippets of a conversation that might be going on in the imaginary room behind the fake window in the fake house, a conversation whose meaning we will never possess. Then we notice the two free-standing butter sculptures, butter being another motif repeated in several paintings.

We might, justifiably, be befuddled. If we go back to the eastern side of the gallery, we find an extraordinary portrait: *Love in the time of Hydroxychloroquine* (2021). The title, a riff on the title of García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of the Cholera* (1985) conjures up the fake cures for COVID-19 promulgated by the former president of the United States and stands in lieu of the sitter's name. The young lady in question, who looks vaguely like the actress Scarlett Johansson, stares at us in a state of utmost disquiet. It is as if she were unhappy to see us, whoever we are, and that our presence merely heightens her sense of isolated loneliness. Wise's psychological technique here is fascinating: where portraits usually represent exalted or simply self-important personages commemorated in paint, this one expresses the anxiety of our times. Alone, we are unhappy; with others, we run the risk of infection.

Despair and anguish permeate the many faces that constitute the majority of the oil paintings here. *Either it's raining or it isn't* (2021) depicts a naked woman with someone behind her, his or her hands draped over the subject's shoulders, while yet another figure lurks in the background. The unhappiness on her face makes us wonder whether those hands and those hovering presences are comforting or constraining the miserable girl. The same motif reappears in *All that free speech is very expensive* (2021) a large (72 by 100 inch) painting of a woman holding a glass of bottled water, with a man's arms protectively or repressively wrapped around her. That her breasts are bare signals sexual activity, desired by her or imposed on her we cannot say. *Promises are like pie crusts* (2020), another large oil-on-linen work (72 by 60 inch) depicts the fragility of relationships: one figure places her hand on another's arm, but other hands intrude into the composition, suggesting infidelity. The multicolored nail polish on one of the intruding hands hints at mutability, the fickleness of our affections.

The sculptural pieces here hark back to satiric representations of US life in the style of James Rosenquist's *F-111* (1964–65). Instead of Rosenquist's mass of canned spaghetti, Wise piles up butter. She even hints that the butter may be phony by including ears of corn, margarine substituting for the real thing. All that glitters isn't gold: it may simply be emulsified corn oil. The painting *An American in America (*2021) confirms this suspicion: a profile painting of a young man effaced by a stack of butter or margarine slices. The fragmentary image also shows Wise's affinities with Baroque art: she too crops her images to focus on a dramatic point—be it socio-political or psychological—in this instance, the idea that industrial food products dehumanize us, eclipse our humanity.

Chloe Wise's moving show speaks directly to our historical moment, but at the same time transcends it. Her innovative use of portraiture turns the tables on tradition: her subjects challenge us, demand that we consider their plight, which, inevitably, is our own. We live, Wise says, in a new edition of W.H. Auden's " The Age of Anxiety" (1947), where the intimate relationships we crave may be dangerous traps, where what we eat to stay alive may poison us. We are, irrespective of gender, her unhappy young women: like the girl in *I'm so-and-so and I exist!* (2021) we are distressed and melancholy, hoping that some alchemical process will turn our margarine to butter and our unhappiness into joy.