

A decorative arrangement featuring a large white paper sculpture of a figure, possibly a woman, with a textured, layered appearance. The sculpture is set against a light-colored background. In the upper left, there is a circular inset containing a crab and a bird. Greenery, including a striped plant and a small evergreen, is scattered around the arrangement. The text "here and there pink melon joy" is written in a cursive font across the middle of the image.

*here and there pink melon joy*

Sabina Ott

Sabina Ott

*here and there pink melon joy*

with audio compositions by Joe Jeffers

Curated by Greg Lunceford

Catalog essays by Michelle Grabner & Daniel Orendorff

Chicago Cultural Center  
Chicago, Illinois

August 30 2014 - January 4, 2015

This exhibition is dedicated to Aaron & Rita Ott and Edwin & Thayer Hochberg.

printed on the occasion of  
Sabina Ott: here and there pink melon joy  
Chicago Cultural Center  
78 E. Washington  
Chicago, IL 60602  
August 30 2014 - January 4, 2015

ISBN: 978-0-9910112-3-0

Essay by Michelle Grabner  
© Michelle Grabner, 2014

Essay by Daniel Orendorff  
© Daniel Orendorff, 2014

all artworks copyrighted by the artist

photographs by Claire Britt

catalog designed by Alice Feldt

© 2014 Sabina Ott all rights reserved  
sabinaott.com

## A Fruity Impasto

By Danny Orendorff

---

I tried slicing my first cantaloupe today. Fresh melon wasn't a frequent fixture of my childhood home and, as with most foods not introduced to me during those formative years, I considered the cantaloupe on top of my kitchen table with a great deal of confusion. Food preparation always makes me nervous: performance anxiety and a carving knife. But, I was alone and I had read somewhere that cantaloupe was supposed to be good for muscle restoration, and I've been feeling sore.

Twelve minutes and three YouTube instructionals later, my melon is a heap of angular coral. Uneven edges and craggy surfaces with geometric chewables strewn about; I've created nothing but bite sized chunks of striated muscle surrounding a swollen limb. A fruity impasto.

At the center of Sabina Ott's exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center, here and there pink melon joy, emerges up a faintly fluorescent iceberg-volcano: a 12-foot styrofoam sculpture-fountain known as *having everything having been* (2014). Ott's ambiguous title points us to the past - before our plastic oceans, when we were better able to discern the natural from the manmade. Carved entirely from hefty industrial blocks of styrofoam, this muscular centerpiece has been made to resemble land ruptures older than time itself, but from a chemically derived dissolvable material indicative of our post-industrial present. Deep linear ridges punctuate the angular curvature of Ott's white towering mass, while exaggerated magma blobs of spray foam appear to grow like barnacles or geothermal mineral deposits along its bottom.



Study  
*having everything having been*

My little lumpy tower of cantaloupe is only a maquette compared to Ott's foam behemoth, but I believe we've both carved our way to these forms while on a shared quest for something called vitality.

Fountains of youth, fountains of power, fountains of wealth, eternal springs of hope: we tend to invest a great deal of wishful thinking, penny by penny, into these bubbling, often pompous and ridiculous, urban decorations. In Arizona, where I used to live and believe that palm trees grew naturally 10-feet apart from one another, fountains always seemed most appreciated by retirees freed from work and at last able to reconnect with their senses of health, wellness, and sexuality. The fountains there are a lark, a laugh. Never mind the surrounding



Installation view  
*here and there pink melon joy (purgatory)*  
styrofoam, spray foam, astroturf, artificial and real plants, mirror, canvas, water, pump, plastic, clocks  
2014

desert or the severe drought that defines the region; we won't be around all that long anyway, and the sun feels nice. Fountains provide sanctuary to our illusions of abundance and our willful suspension of the inevitable. In the meantime, they cleanse, they heal, they revitalize.

A fountain made of foam is obviously ironic, and Ott purposefully pushes the mood. Emphasizing the lack of water running through the fountain with a well-placed microphone amplifying the song of melon joy III, an audio piece by Ott's collaborator Joe Jeffers, it is her choice to adorn the paradisiacal scene with astroturf, plastic plants, and paper flowers that captures me. These familiar, artificial elements seem almost lifted from the spas of grandpa Cézanne and Matisse's house down the block.<sup>1</sup> Ott's imitation greenery is made just as strange, and sexy, as a painted body when perched like bathers amongst her idyllic fountain and basin. Yet, in the broader field of the work, it is us - the viewers, in all our ordinariness - floating into and out of Ott's three-dimensional version of a bright and blissful hot spring scene, lending it life. Despite ourselves, we've all become Ott's little nymphs.

---

<sup>1</sup> I'm referring here to such works as Paul Cézanne's *The Bathers (Les Grandes Baigneuses)*, 1899-1904, and Henri Matisse's *Bathers by a River*, 1909-1910. Both paintings are in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.



After all, Ott has structured the entire here and there pink melon joy exhibition on the premise of the Divine Comedy and, more specifically, Dante's three passages through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. The fountain sits squarely in the middle, where we all dwell currently.

To get there, though, one must first pass through the topsy and the turvy of Hell or, as Ott would have it, a clamorous gallery featuring a litany of her sculptures installed on the walls, on the floor, and suspended from the ceiling. Everywhere we look, Ott's styrofoam works surround us and, if you somehow forget, a smattering of circular mirrors are there to remind you. With the help Jeffers' audio-producing drum sculptures, Ott's exhibition even begins to enter our orifices. This is no docile introduction. Clocks tick, bulbs illuminate, ashen grids dangle, mirrors reflect, and sounds emit from her works that merge toxicity with the stuff of domesticity.

In her seminal 1995 essay "Monstrous Domesticity," feminist artist Faith Wilding calls for artists to "strive to create new models for envisioning the pleasurable, non-gendered reconstitution of life and work...beginning with the pleasure of libidinal making, the pleasure of daily competence, the pleasure of practicing skills for their own sake - and for the sake of new inventions, new formations, new embodiments."<sup>2</sup> Ott's ticking tower of wall clocks adhered together with spray foam, her sticky bundle of fluorescent lamps drooping dangerously upside down and near to the ground, and her distorted wonderland of mirrors smeared with latex and enamel all represent her own Frankensteinian efforts; the work is turned on, animated, alive. So are we.

Art historian Aruna D'Souza, in her book *Cézanne's Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint*, makes the persuasive argument that eroticism within Cézanne's artwork not only resides in visual apprehension of the nudes he composed, but "was a matter, above all, of *matière*, of the sensuality of the medium and of the process of making a



*of more which more which more*  
wood, mirror, polystyrene, foam, collage,  
wire, flashe, latex paint, light fixture, canvas,  
plaster  
2011

<sup>2</sup> Wilding, Faith. "Monstrous Domesticity," in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, Ed. Susan Bee & Mira Schor (#18, November 1995), 3-16.

painting."<sup>3</sup> We sense, much more than just see, how Cézanne handled his paint, blended his colors, thickened or diluted oils, and dragged his brush and palette knife across a coated canvas when considering, in full, one of his paintings. In that sensory information is knowledge that displaces the primacy of the visual and accounts for what we feel beyond what we see. It is, some will argue and many will agree, a deeply feminist way of knowing.<sup>4</sup>

Ott has frequently remarked that her recent sculptural and installation works in styrofoam have evolved quite naturally from her earlier work as a 2-dimensional painter in the 1990s and early 2000s. Sculptures and installations are but extensions of Ott's painterliness. Often composed of oil, encaustic, and enamel, Ott's highly ornate paintings blending pop, floral, and geometric motifs are lush, lyrical, and physical. Thick and gooey, early canvases of Ott's reveal not only the artists' willingness to defile clean tropes of both the stereotypically 'decorative' and 'feminine,' but also reveal her desire to expand outwards, explore density, and fill spaces till they burst, like a fountain.

Ott's expansive practice of sculpture and installation may represent her abundant desire to move from solely depicting pleasure in 2-dimensions (however thick), to providing pleasure in three. It is the added element of time that completes our journey into the fourth dimension and final gallery of Ott's exhibition: Heaven.

What outpourings of substance or cascades of fluid are absent from Ott's fountain are on view in abundance in her large four-channel animated projection to perceive the invisible in you (2014). In it, verses collected from many of Ott's favorite poets (Rumi, Rimbaud, Stein) describing love, pleasure, and the spiritual are showered and sprawl upon a large wall spotted with more mirrors. Stimuli and sentiment accumulate and accumulate just as they, simultaneously, disperse and flee. Light is projected all around us, and bounced back into us. Phrases spout and flow in every which direction, impossible to comprehend all at once. We are overwhelmed, we are awed, by the tangled brilliance and big feelings of our most radiant writers, animated by Ott into an epic poem all her own.

<sup>3</sup> D'Souza, Aruna. *Cézanne's Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press. 2008. P. 58.

<sup>4</sup> In her continued writing on the topic, D'Souza draws upon French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and his privileging of the visual, in order to open up space for considerations of more holistic and integrated modes of sensory apprehension and understanding. *Ibid*, p. 58-60.