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ART REVIEW

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It's time to paint the doughnuts

Artist's still lifes are open to interpretation

By Sebastian Smee
Globe Staff

Can a jelly-filled doughnut feel anxiety? The correct answer, of course, is “No. A jelly-filled doughnut cannot feel anxiety. Buzz off with your quacky conjectures.”

But isn't art a funny thing?

A *painting* of a jelly-filled doughnut is not at all the same as a jelly-filled doughnut. But if the painting is good, it may find a place in our hearts and minds right alongside the real jelly-filled doughnuts we have known—by sight, by taste, by texture—triggering Pavlovian responses such as salivating mouths or fears of obesity.

Depending on *how* it's painted, it may also insinuate itself into parts of the brain reserved for other phenomena, such as sense memories of our own bodies or of places we have known, and indeed our whole mental libraries of art, advertising, photography, and stories.

Suddenly, it is transformed from an object “out there” to an internal hinge for the movements of the mind. And since our minds are almost dementedly associative, we may quickly find ourselves in a realm of unexpected emotion: euphoria, fear, relaxation, anxiety.

It is we who feel these emotions. But our imaginations have a habit of collapsing distinctions between subject and object, so they can seem to emanate from the object—the doughnut—itsself.

Emily Eveleth, a resident of Sherborn, has been painting jelly-filled doughnuts with considerable prowess for almost two decades. She is keenly attuned to the associative potential of her imagery, in which people routinely see everything from boulder-strewn landscapes to violated corpses and pornographic close-ups of bodily orifices.

She is fascinated by the unpredictable responses it provokes. (“Sometimes I'm the last person to see something,” Eveleth says of her pictures, a selection of which are on view in a solo show called “Luscious” at the Smith College Museum of Art.)

Yet her art is compelling not because she takes these associative possibilities and runs rampant with them, like a dissipated Surrealist intent on turning doughnuts into symbols of sexuality or metaphors for life. Rather, it impresses by virtue of its restraint — by the carefully calibrated placement and lighting and scale of her subjects, and by her insistence on conveying so much and only so much.

Asked by e-mail why she began painting doughnuts in the first place, she answers: “What I immediately found compelling . . . was the appeal of the irony in presenting, in a seriously and formally painted manner and on a monumental scale, an object that was at once so ubiquitous, so ordinary, so everyday.”



Emily Eveleth has been painting jelly doughnuts with considerable prowess for nearly 20 years. (Matthew Cavanaugh for The Boston Globe)

“The object of my paintings,” she says in conversation, “is not necessarily the subject. But I do like that it keeps coming back to the object. I’m not trying to negate that.

Eveleth makes art, in other words, that asks us to stay in a place where thought and feeling remain open, undecided, unresolved. It’s a preference that carries over into the way she communicates. Asked a question, she tends to let it hang in the air for a second or two before answering. This can be disconcerting over the telephone, a medium that abhors silence. But it is strangely reassuring in the context of Eveleth’s two-room Framingham studio, an orderly place that seems premised on a kind of animating emptiness—just like her paintings and drawings, where objects occupy ill-defined, ambiguous spaces full of silence, devoid of visible limits.



"Pact" (2006), on display at Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton

Eveleth, 49, was born in Hartford. She has short, tightly curled hair and an easy, obliging manner. She seems

less interested in controlling the direction of any given conversation than in watching the way it unfolds, as if from an oblique angle. She then pounces on questions or ideas that engage her, taking them up with infectious enthusiasm, before stepping back to observe again.

Her father, now retired, was an architect, and her mother, also retired, a cellist and computer scientist who worked on the Gemini space program in San Diego. Eveleth grew up in a “math and art household,” she says, and for a while considered architecture as a career: “It seemed the perfect blend of both.”

At college she did a course on the history of science, which captured her imagination. She was struck in particular, she says, by all the ways in which the scientific body of knowledge is neither complete nor immutable. Registering this, she says, “puts you off balance.” It’s a phrase she uses more than once, and always approvingly.

Growing up, she says, art had always been “something that was just there.” She wound up studying art first at Smith College and then at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

“As I got into studio art, I became more and more sure that I wanted to go that way,” she says.

She married an artist—the abstract painter Penn Young. She had her first solo show at the Harcus Gallery in Boston in 1986, and her first museum show at the Danforth Museum of Art in Framingham in 1997. She shows regularly now at Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston and Danese in New York. She alternates between work on her signature doughnut paintings and depictions of other figurative objects: human heads and hands, stuffed toys, an 8-ball.

Eveleth speaks eloquently but with a certain unease about her own work. Like many artists, she is less guarded when discussing the work of others. Inevitably the things she notices reflect back in various ways on her own work — things to do with lighting, placement in space, and paint handling, rather than shared themes or subject matter.

When one looks at Eveleth’s paintings, her technical mastery of oil paint is hard to miss. But so too is her embrace of photographic ways of seeing, including shifting degrees of blur, and theatrical effects of lighting. So it’s no surprise that the names of photographers (Philip-Lorca diCorcia, William Eggleston, John Coplans, Weegee) come up in conversation as often as painters (Pontormo, Memling, Caravaggio). She says she paints both from photographs and from life. (She has no one regular supplier of doughnuts; they come from a variety of bakeries.)

As well as being an intent observer, she is an avid reader. She mentions “Utopia Parkway,” a recent biography of Joseph Cornell in which the author, Deborah Solomon, discusses the way both Cornell and Edward Hopper “employed empty space for the melancholy it could evoke.”



Eveleth stands with one of her creations on display. (Matthew Cavanaugh for The Boston Globe)

This in turn leads her to reflect on a problem she was trying to solve in one of her own paintings, an enormous triptych called “Circle.” The painting shows a single jelly-filled doughnut on a white surface surrounded by a vast field of empty space, blood-colored above and a warm gray below. The question, for Eveleth, was: “How much empty space would express a certain melancholy?”

It’s that word “certain” that stays in the mind. Eveleth knows, like any architect, that a few extra inches of space can have a dramatic affect on psychology. The exact proportion of doughnut to surrounding space in “Circle” has the effect of making the object virtually bleed anxiety into the void.

Nothing happens in Eveleth’s pictures; they’re still lifes. But strangely, she tends

to see them as portraits, and she even finds a narrative element in them.

“In pictures,” she says, “there is always a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the question is: Where do *you* come in in this?”

If she paints a number of doughnuts piled on top of one another, “they seem heavy and resting, as if they have been there quite a while. And so there’s a poignancy and maybe a melancholy that comes from that sense of the passage of time.”

Bright, overexposed lighting, on the other hand, or cropping that creates a lopsided composition, can create an impression akin to a candid photograph—a brief instant in time—“where you feel, ‘Oh! We’ve just caught them.’”

Painting a single doughnut positioned front and center of an image gives it a quality of direct address, like a formal portrait. But as soon as there is more than one doughnut, the image is less about a relationship between viewer and viewed, and more about that sense of being witnesses to a scene, a story we may not be a part of.

“You have to ask yourself, how specifically are you telling that story? If you’re too specific it becomes completely tedious, even odious.” It’s crucial to maintain a carefully calibrated ambiguity.

“On the one hand they’re doughnuts, and they’ll always remain doughnuts,” she says. “But then they are all these other things, too. And you don’t have to choose between those possibilities. They remain there hovering, in a kind of balancing act, being everything at once.

LUSCIOUS: Paintings by Emily Eveleth

At: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton.

July 9 through Oct. 24. 413-585-2760. www.smith.edu/artmuseum