

Kianja Strobert: when is brunch? at Art Omi



Installation view, Kianja Strobert, when is brunch?, Art Omi, Ghent, NY. Photo: Bryan Zimmerman.

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Art Omi

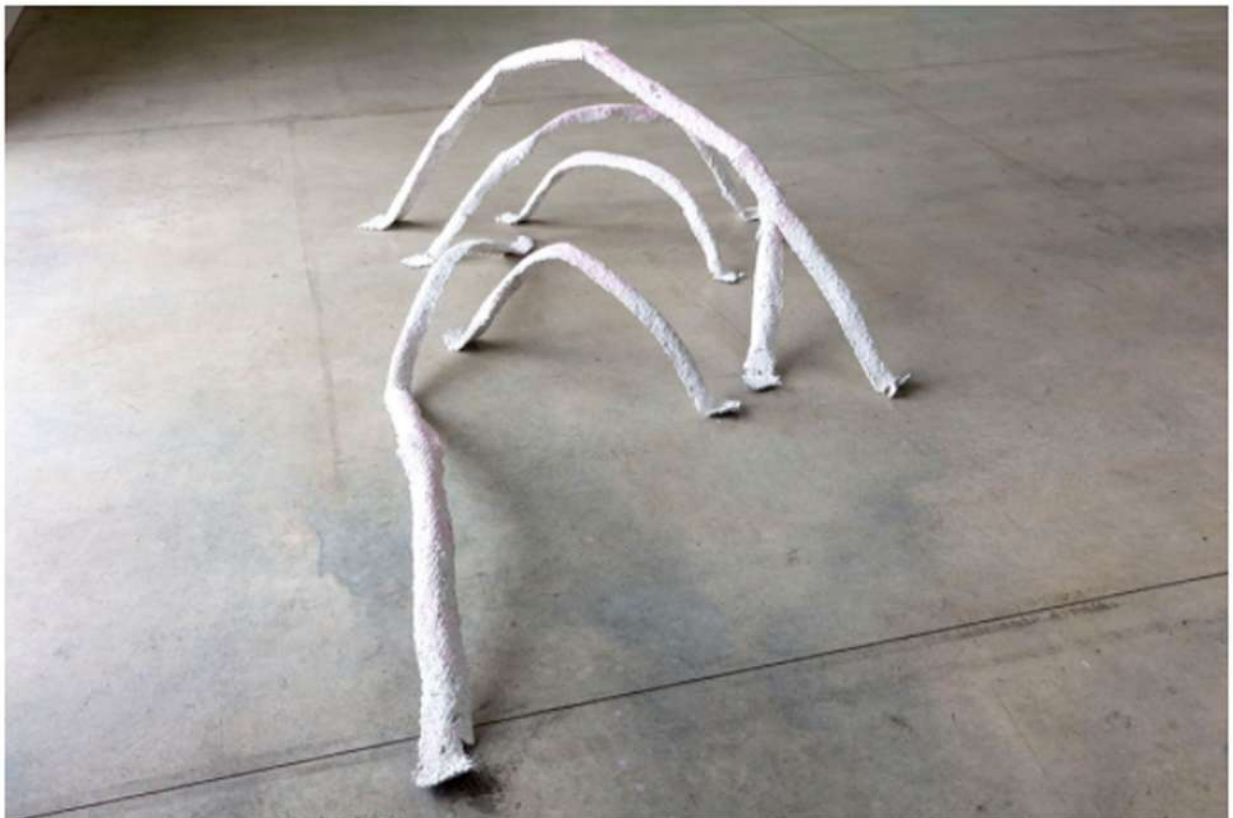
March 20 through May 16, 2021

By ROBERT R. SHANE, May 2021

If you were an archeologist living a few millennia from now unearthing the remains of our present-day consumerist society, your find might look a lot like Kianja Strobert's exhibition *when is brunch?*. The haphazard assemblage of painted papier mâché cookware and food, mass produced objects, and photographs all mounted on the walls of Art Omi's Newmark Gallery are revealed within clean rectangular borders, as if carefully excavated. One zone painted in grass green expressionist gestures titled *Factory* (all works 2021) extends the length of an entire wall; another titled *Lobster* wraps a corner. Composed of Pop colors and puffy textures, the discovered objects at first appear playful, and one could get lost in the visual hedonism the exhibition offers. However, we are also asked to take posterity's critical view of capitalism and its art by other pewter-colored objects, rough and ashen like the

charred remains of Pompeii, as well as a series of arcing bone-white structures on floor.

Fugue, the tallest mural in the exhibition, is shaped like a simple Neolithic home with two ladder-like structures propped against its small rectangular doorway. Colorful expressionist marks fill the background of this life-size architectural elevation host to an assemblage of objects handcrafted in papier mâché over metal lathe armatures. These includes rectangular pewter-colored troughs, filled with solidified paint in the colors of plastic Easter eggs; dinnerware, ladles, and flattened skillet; and food, including sticks of butter, a loaf of bread, and a halved grapefruit. The handmade objects find themselves surrounded by mass produced, plastic food replicas, such as a rubber orange branded with its company name and model number. Often wrapped in pearls, Stobert's citrus fruits reference 17th century *vanitas*. But whereas lemons and oranges in Dutch still lifes were tinged with decay and mold to remind viewers of their own mortality, Stobert's plastic fruit will never decompose, as our landfills and the oceans will attest to future archaeologists.



Kianja Stobert, Untitled Lines (detail), 2021. Papier mâché, metal lathe and paint. Dimensions variable. Art Omi, Ghent, NY. Photo: Bryan Zimmerman.

A series of three-dimensional *Untitled Lines* on the floor also provides subtle reminders of mortality. Sculpted in papier mâché and lathe like the wall objects but left white—only a few have sparse washes of color, as if weathered over time—they read as bones crawling across the floor, often in groupings like small families. Sensitive to the space, these bones are not only *memento mori*, but ancestral guides moving us through the exhibition. We follow one linear grouping in a spirited rhythm, rising and falling, along two walls and a corner.

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Above them, three peach and periwinkle paintings and two pewter troughs hang in a row like portraits on the wall. The arcing expressionist lines in the paintings resonate with the sculptures below. One trough, *Pewter Trough* is filled, while *Sunset Trough* is empty save for a photograph of a sailboat at sunset buckling in its corner. Both pewter troughs face us like silvered mirrors too dull to reflect anymore. If they reflect anything, perhaps it is our own emptiness.

Collaged in the center of each of the three paintings, simply titled *1*, *2*, and *3*, is a photograph reproduced on printer paper. It shows a Black woman's hands while she plays piano. This photograph also appeared three times in *Fugue*—echoing the three simultaneous voices of the work's namesake musical form. Here, separated from the *Fugue*'s cacophonous melee of objects, the photograph slows us down. Its quality nostalgically recalls a 1980s family snapshot: warm tones, fuzzy detail, light from a camera-mounted flash. The woman's fingers, one donning a wedding band, rest tenderly on the keys a moment before depressing them. Through this tenderness we feel not only the pianist's love of playing, but the love the photographer had for her and her music.

Throughout *when is brunch?*, touch—and the possibility of tenderness it brings—is a tactic for preserving a sense of emotional and sensory intimacy amidst a consumerist society that seems impossible to escape. Unlike forms of Pop art that cynically replicate consumer culture—what Donald Kuspit has critically called “capitalist art about capitalism”—Strobert transforms the products of capitalist society, such as materials off the shelf from big box hardware stores, into poignant visual, tactile, and kinesthetic experiences. The archaeological and nostalgic perspective of the exhibition takes us to the end of our civilization as it comments on mass production, waste, and consumption, but Strobert also offers life-affirming resistance to it. **WM**