

HYPERALLERGIC

Emily Eveleth's Doughnuts Bleed for Our Sins

In Eveleth's work, debauchery and decadence meet in the lowly doughnut, which we are invited to read as a limbless torso with a dripping orifice.

By John Yau | 26 February 2024

I was first wowed by Emily Eveleth's paintings in the fall of 2021. Her debut exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery, *Emily Eveleth* (October 21–November 27, 2021), included 14 of them, all measuring 26 by 18 inches. Aside from size, what the paintings shared was a subject that Eveleth has insistently and relentlessly pursued for more than 30 years: a doughnut, either slathered with frosting or dusted with powdery white sugar, often leaking a blue or red syrupy substance from a single orifice. In my review, I wrote that they were “lurid, funny, unsettling, sexy, off-putting, luscious, puffy, bawdy, and excessive.”

The 32 paintings in her current exhibition at Miles McEnery, *Emily Eveleth: Everything but the Truth*, range in size from 5 1/2 by 6 3/4 inches to 92 by 76 inches and, along with oils, the artist has added powdered mica, metallic paint, wax, and silver and gold leaf to her toolbox.

Eveleth's paintings provoke wild associations. In her work, debauchery and decadence meet in the lowly doughnut, which we are invited to read as a limbless torso with a dripping orifice. These doughnuts bleed for our sins. In one case, it occurred to me that I was looking at the body of a beheaded swan, but more about that later.

In her previous exhibition, Eveleth's subjects, depicted in close-up views, were ambiguous and comically obscene. Working on a larger scale, and granting an important role to the background, the artist's mute forms become characters in a silent opera — passive, tragicomic bodies unable to determine their own paths. They fall, slide, pile up, and tip over. They are couch potatoes (or should I say doughnuts?), at once sexual and sexless. It is these contradictions and the uncertainty of Eveleth's presentation of them that makes the works as singular as Wayne Thiebaud's paintings of pies and cakes.

Anyone who sees Eveleth's artworks will gather how much she loves to paint. She loves paint's smearable, buttery materiality, the way it can conjure up a layer of pink frosting or syrupy drool. She is a master of effects, from the scene's dramatic lighting to the object's careful positioning. I suspect that she has watched lots of movies, in black and white and in color, as everything in her painting seems heightened.

Yet even though the situation is staged, none of it seems contrived. That is what is magical about the paintings. Eveleth always convinces this viewer that what I am looking at exists in some world that is simultaneously real



Diary of a Thief, 2023, Oil on canvas, 58 x 49 inches

and imagined, a fairy tale realm corrupted by adults with their penchant for sweets. For all her painting chops, she never takes herself too seriously, never devolves into didacticism or attempts to claim social relevance.

The exhibition's largest work, "Storm Clouds" (2023), depicts four pink-frosted doughnuts slumped in a pile on a mirrored surface against a gray background. Some of the frosting has melted and accumulated on the reflective surface. Above the pile is an ornate golden archway of what I read as tarnished, cut metal leaves, branches, and fruit. Deep blue above the archway suggests either sky or wall. Where is this place? Is the painting intended as a still life? The setting does not add up. What is outside and what is inside? What is going on? And yet, it all makes perfect sense in a way, starting with the oversized doughnuts, which occupy nearly a quarter of the painting. Eveleth makes the preposterous almost ordinary.

"Pompadour's Dream" (2023) portrays a golden yellow doughnut covered with a thin layer of pink frosting. It rests atop its twin, whose pink coating has dripped down on one side, forming a puddle on a blue ground. Above the doughnuts we see part of a patterned blue satin pillow. Are the doughnuts lovers lying on each other? There is something ludicrous about "Pompadour's Dream" and its suggestion of luxuriant indolence. The absurdity of the situation is lovingly and even tenderly depicted.



Pompadour's Dream, 2023, Oil on canvas, 80 x 62 1/4 inches

In "Diary of a Thief" (2023), with its view of the doughnut leaking cherry red syrup from its powdered white body, the image of a beheaded swan came to mind. The grotesque isn't overt in Eveleth's paintings, but it is always there.

Working on a larger scale, as she does in this exhibition, and evoking different time periods through the often brightly colored and patterned background, Eveleth has opened up an imaginative space that is all her own. As straightforward and direct as the paintings are, there is nothing simple about them. If we are unsure whether Eveleth is being absurdly funny or bitingly satirical, she is likely doing both.

And her paintings have become more outrageous. In a world where the accumulation of unlimited wealth is considered an honorable pursuit, Eveleth's paintings remind us of how bizarre and ridiculous human beings can be.