

Empty calories

by Sarah Fisch



courtesy

Mmm ... sacrilicious: Priscilla Monge's chocolate-covered baby Jesus, on view at SAMA for FOTOSEPTIEMBRE

I am of two minds about themed exhibitions. On the one hand, I can see how they would present an almost-irresistible lure for the curator of contemporary arts; conceptual photography, in particular, can be a tough sell to the general public, and providing a fun, “pop” focal point around which art can be grouped and shown is as good a construct as any — especially if the four artists on display each come at the theme from different parts of the world, from varying traditions and using divergent techniques.

And why shouldn't the unifying theme be chocolate? Who doesn't love chocolate? Thank you, Aztecs, for your invaluable contribution to human gastronomy. Lauded for its health benefits and touted as a safe inducer of a neurochemical firestorm of love-like chemical impulses, chocolate is a bona-fide wonder of the world.

On the other hand ... why chocolate? It seems on its face a thin sort of theme. The text accompanying the San Antonio Museum of Art's FOTOSEPTIEMBRE entry, *Chocolate: A Photography Exhibition*, curated by SAMA's David Rubin, offers that “the works of these artists reflect a currently widespread artistic practice of finding metaphoric

meanings through the use of unconventional and innovative materials.” OK, fair enough.

And in the case of one of these artists, San Antonian Chuck Ramirez, the show seems to get off on a whimsical note, but one with real depth ... dark chocolate, let's say. The stark, hyperreal, outsized images of his “Candy Tray Series” both glorify and undercut the idea of value — two images of Godiva trays, “Godiva 2” and “Godiva 3,” evoke devotional art with their densely, intricately ridged golden alcoves. They're simply beautiful, while still calling into question, with their severe focus, the idea of “luxury.”

Tellingly, his images of the more plebeian of chocolate containers — the inkjet print “Fannie Mae Debutants,” with its workmanlike yet still feminine white-on-white of petticoat-like wrappers nestled in their unadorned box, or the lurid red-brown plastic of “Whitman's” — are animated by a kind of pathos. It's mysterious to me how Ramirez's unadorned, unexplained images have the power to evoke so much mental activity, but they do. His “Dark Heart,” which depicts in black and white a heart-shaped chocolate box, fairly pulsates with loss.

Interestingly, Ramirez is the only artist in the exhibition not to use chocolate as the actual medium. Frédéric Lebain of France coats every objects he photographs with it, as does Costa Rica's Priscilla Monge. Lebain's meditation seems to be on the transient, consumable nature of electronic equipment — his matte, chocolate-

sprayed record player against a cocoa backdrop is especially, fetchingly nostalgic. Monge appears to be making a comment about the Catholic church — in her series of photos, a bas-relief of “The Last Supper,” holiday angel ornaments, and a Virgin Mary statue are all bathed in a chocolate coating. Making iconography palatable, maybe?

While these artist’s images are technically well-executed, I found myself distracted by the arbitrariness of the chocolate link. Whereas Ramirez absents the actual chocolate from its moorings, thus meditating on it as an object of desire, Lebain and Monge seem to use the stuff as sugar to make medicine go down.

And as for Vik Muniz, he uses chocolate as paint, deftly dripping chocolate syrup onto a white lightbox to evoke past masterworks by other people. Somewhere amid the art-historical references and the strange ... grossness of the stuff, which is less delicious-seeming than unnervingly fecal, I get lost.

For me, the mini-collections do little to dialogue with or amplify each other, and rather than capturing the joy of chocolate, seem to point out the shortcomings of it as art material. They’re interesting photos, to be sure, but don’t really address the why. Only Ramirez’s photos, like chocolate itself, induce joy. •

FOTOSEPTIEMBRE

Chocolate: A Photography Exhibition

10am-9pm Tue,

10am-5pm Wed-Sat, noon-6pm Sun

Through Jan 11

\$5- \$8 adult; \$3 child; Free 4-9pm Tue

San Antonio Museum Of Art

200 West Jones Ave.

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