

ArtReview

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Isabelle Frances McGuire: The Flattening of Visual Culture

Alexandra Drexelius Features 14 September 2023 ArtReview



Isabelle Frances McGuire, *Bust1* ("Elvis", "Modern Warfare II NVG"), 2023, animatronic Elvis bust, night-vision goggles, wood, 168 × 43 × 51 cm. Photo: Kevin Weil. Courtesy the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York

Through kitbashing and the hacking of readymades, an artist explores what digital visual culture might look like in material form

Chicago-based artist Isabelle Frances McGuire reworks readymade objects to examine the ways in which the body itself is worked on, influenced and displaced by technology. Yes, as that implies, the real-life body is no longer the primary reference for recognising and modelling human form; instead, the contemporary experience of the body – the way it looks, moves and behaves – is mediated, in the developed world, by screen culture. Appropriating both recognisable and esoteric content – from religious icons and minor videogame characters to prehistoric monuments and high-tech weapons – McGuire's sculptures are supplemented by motors, sensors and electronics as a physical stand-in for digitally circulated forms. Models of ships and bombs that have been 3D-printed dangle limply from

KING'S LEAP

the restrictive knots of lightbulb cords; recycled animatronics convulse repetitively like malfunctioning machines; and dolls and mannequins stand paralysed, overburdened by the heft of their cultural references. Deftly consolidating an ever-widening stream of open-source and second-hand content, McGuire's work realises a profound sense of consternation as bodily agency for many is displaced through increasingly dispersed and advanced technological means.

The works assembled for McGuire's recent solo exhibition *LOOP*, at Manhattan gallery King's Leap Fine Art, employ the readymade as a physical means of parodying the act of repetition inherent to mass media culture; like an 'original audio' refrain on a social media reel divorced from its native source, online images are cropped, distorted and circulated, no longer bearing a resemblance to the real thing, but the image of that thing. Digital media flattens even as it multiplies. The contemporary readymade emerges in content that has already been doubled. Whether parodying the revered likeness of Elvis – whose real-life persona has been filtered through recycled video and image content in magazines, on the silver screen, in merchandise and now on social channels – or imaginary nonplayer characters (NPCs) who reappear across virtual gaming campaigns, McGuire's sculptures accentuate the physicality of bodies that are manipulated on screens. Videogames, noted for their increasingly lifelike visuals and long-running franchises that regurgitate the same old story arcs, offer a particularly fruitful arena for McGuire to examine the flattening of visual culture amid an excess of sequels and reboots.

Interrogating the false equivalencies between real-life combat and first-person shooting games – as well as the cyclical feedback between game development and military technology – *LOOP* presented narrative cycles and repetitions as a manifestation of human behaviour interfacing with machines. *Bust2*{“*Assassins Creed NPC*”, “*Normandy*”, “*New United States Flag*”}(2023) comprises a wax bust cloaked by a flag and chainmail headdress. A motion sensor embedded in the sculpture triggers a cacophonous stream of battle bombs and cries, sourced from a *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017) scene depicting the US military storming Omaha Beach on D-Day. Elsewhere, a worn-down animatronic WowWee Alive Elvis bust performs on a ten-minute looped cycle. The head of *Bust1*{“*Elvis*”, “*Modern Warfare II NVG*”}, (2023), accessorised with night-vision goggles, twerks back and forth. His mouth widens and contracts as he recites canned quips in a lush drawl dampened by the squeak of ageing internal motors: “Are you looking for trouble? You came to the right place.” McGuire's assemblages resemble 'kitbashing' – a method of combining open-source kits – real or digital – to create new forms. However, rather than propose something wholly new, McGuire's mashups

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emphasise their disparate, recycled source materials. A lack of continuity – epitomised by Elvis's iconic face obstructed by clunky toy goggles – is mirrored in the artwork titles, which bracket various references from gaming accessories to character names to geographic locations. These sculptures repeat what's already been done, an attitude mirrored in the repetitive sounds and movements performed by the sculptures as they cycle through predetermined protocols.



Bust2{*Assassins Creed NPC*; *Normandy*; *New United States Flag*}, 2023, wax, resin, cotton, chainmail, leather, motion-triggered sound device, wood, 168 × 38 × 36 cm. Photo: Kevin Weil. Courtesy the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York

In the gallery's basement, McGuire envisions a scene in which content is still loading. A shimmering partition (*RoomDivider1*{*Loading Zone*, *Jasmine*}, 2023) creates a barrier between two sculptures. Referencing the interstitial zones in videogames where visual assets are still being rendered – picture a frozen or glitching screen due to poor internet connection – the flimsy barrier demands that the viewer slow down and pause. It's a simple gesture in space that inserts a palpable moment of anticipation and disconnect in lieu of instant gratification. On one side of the divider, a diminutive, childsize model of *Call of Duty* operative Simon 'Ghost' Riley (*SelfPortrait2*{*Ghost*}, 2023) camps behind a column. Motionless, he faces the foil curtain, armed and ready to mark an unwitting target. On the other side, slumped on the floor, a feeble baby Yoda doll (*SuperBaby2(Unmanned)*{*The Child*, *Reborn*}, 2023) cries for help. Augmented by motion-responsive robotic components, the creature's head shifts erratically, scanning its surroundings for something to respond to. These puerile figures stall for time, awaiting a sense of purpose or duty that may never come. One imagines a circle endlessly buffering.

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SelfPortrait2 ("Ghost"), 2023, PLA plastic, fabric, children's tactical vest, cord, leather boots, metal, children's knee and elbow pads, 124 x 74 x 61 cm. Photo: Stefany Lazar. Courtesy the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York



SuperBaby2(Unmanned) ("The Child", "Reborn"), 2023, vinyl doll, acrylic paint, robotic components, 33 x 15 x 24 cm. Photo: Stefany Lazar. Courtesy the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York

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McGuire's sensitivity to the spatial and temporal dynamics of sculpture can be traced to their studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where they focused on the history of new media, technology and performance. Hindered by stage fright but eager to move beyond a practice mediated by screens, McGuire turned to tangible objects that could be animated in real time, developing a practice supported by technology but not defined by it. Earlier works made use of unstable materials like stale dough and preserved bugs that suggested imperceptibly slow processes of decay. Installations consisting of handmade miniature dolls implied the potential for action, even as the figures lay flaccid or stood frozen in a dynamic gesture.

Mechanical parts began to appear in 2020: *Digesting Duck Entry Level Position* is an abject drinking-fountain in the form of a vomiting figure, a silicone lifesize doll with pallid flesh and stringy black hair, crouching inside a beat-up cardboard box as it expels liquids. Inspired by an eighteenth-century French automaton of a gold-plated duck that would appear to consume, metabolise and excrete kernels, McGuire's work animates the body's basest functions. As liquid leaks from the figure's mouth into cups or bowls, you get the uneasy sense that the work is dying. Notably, this body doesn't move – it's merely a receptacle through which fluids pass. The down-on-its-luck figure rehearses the icky discontents of the passive work required to keep the body alive.



Digesting Duck Entry Level Position, 2020, cardboard, foam, silicone, synthetic hair, resin, liquids variable, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Courtesy the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York

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Emblems of progress – propelled by technological advancements – obscure underlying narratives of failure. McGuire's latest work, to be shown in a two-person exhibition at Detroit gallery What Pipeline, engages a kind of zombie media, putting into motion relics that are all but obsolete. *Robot Donkey 2* (2023) is an animatronic donkey on a stage. Deaccessioned from Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, the pneumatically powered burro originally starred in an interactive museum display that walked visitors through the history of the Pioneer Zephyr, a high-speed, steel-clad streamliner famed for its dusk-to-dawn commute between Denver and Chicago from 1934 to 1960. At the museum, the automaton narrated the story of the train in a cartoonish, dopey voice; the animatronic references the real-life donkey, Zeph, that rode aboard the train as a mascot. The donkey and the train, the latter displacing the former with the expansion of the railroads to the West, are by now both out of work, artefacts fit for a museum. McGuire has further stifled the donkey by removing its voice box; the animal is silent, save for the twitching of its neck, mouth and eyes. In an ironic turn, the donkey now carries a set of amplifiers on its back, a displacement of sound from the inside to the outside. A nod to its heyday as a cargo-carrying tool, the animal now supports sound rather than makes it.

McGuire is scheduled to play alongside the donkey during an opening performance on 2 September with their band Suicide Moi. For McGuire, the donkey still has a use – something can still be eked out of it – but as a symbol, it resoundingly imparts a failure to keep up. Rather than model the future of society's discontents, McGuire looks to an excess of past associations that stick briefly only to peel away. In McGuire's art, one thing is always being superseded by another, rehearsing a sense of fatigue and obsession as the latest invention depreciates as quickly as it is dreamt up. The compulsion to repeat is perhaps the greatest defence against the inevitability of loss. McGuire clings to the humanity of failures and flops, conjuring clichés before they are ever uttered.

Work by Isabelle Frances McGuire is on show at What Pipeline, Detroit, through 14 October

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DAZED

Link: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/56002/1/inside-chicagos-booming-art-scene-city-artists-brandon-breux>

Inside Chicago's booming art scene

Dazed meets the artists transforming Chicago's artscape – a scene now characterised by its DIY culture, camaraderie, and love of the city

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - LONGREAD

Text Vanessa Murrell

28th April 2022

ISABELLE FRANCES MCGUIRE

A Chicago local, artist [Isabelle Frances McGuire](#) combats depression with their artwork at [MICKEY](#) in [EXPO Chicago](#). They explore how people cope when losing agency or power, especially during times of climate disaster or accelerated political turmoil. The artist's sculptural machines, coded to move and generate a symphony of sounds, evoke emotion. Their silicon faces are sourced from sex robots and their oversized female bodies are modeled after child mannequins. Being plus-sized in their childhood, they are interested in the complexity of human form in relation to society.

The sculptures, which have youthful faces with aged features, cosplay a movie incarnation of 16th US President Abraham Lincoln and a videogame avatar of German philosopher Karl Marx. It's no surprise that people turn to games and movies for solace amid today's chaotic conditions. In the words of McGuire, they seek "a simulated control or a sublimated release of anxiety, disenfranchisement and powerlessness." In their practice, they explore minimal means of making people comfortable and use this tactic to awaken people's repressed feelings about the world.



Isabelle Frances McGuire Photography Martin Mayorga © DA



Link: <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13881354/isabelle-frances-mcguires-time-capsule-of-pandemic-isolation>

THE DO LIST

Isabelle Frances McGuire's Time Capsule of Pandemic Isolation

By Sarah Hotchkiss Jun 10, 2020



Installation view of Isabelle Frances McGuire's 'P**** B**** ARENA' at Et al. (Courtesy the artist and Good Weather)

Isabelle Frances McGuire's *P**** B**** ARENA* (asterisks the artist's own), which opened in Et al.'s Chinatown location on May 30, is shrouded in sickness.

The work itself was made under Chicago's stay-at-home order, during which McGuire created a diaristic set of embroidered textile works, the date of each piece's making stitched into its fabric. The show marks time: 50 days of making, 50 days of anxiety, loneliness, boredom and steady production. It's a state McGuire sums up in an accompanying text as "Stressful Leisure Limbo."

Viewed now, with the world still in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, but within the context of a nationwide and urgent movement for racial justice, *P**** B**** ARENA* functions as a highly specific and already dated time capsule, documenting one artist's experience of working alone in physical stasis, fashioning plush proxies for friends and garments for absent audiences.

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Installation view of Isabelle Frances McGuire's 'May 3, 2020' above Union Cleaners and Et al. (Courtesy the artist and Good Weather)

To see the show, presented by the itinerant gallery **Good Weather** (originally a single-car garage in Little Rock, Arkansas) and hosted by Et al., viewers make an appointment for a 20-minute private viewing window. Gallery representatives wait outside while visitors have the run of the place—in this case, both Et al.'s regular basement space and an additional two rooms above Union Cleaners.

Just one item in *P**** B**** ARENA* preexisted the pandemic, but it too, speaks of sickness. *Digesting Duck Entry Level Position* is a figurative sculpture on all fours, its human body replaced by a cardboard box. Periodically, the sculpture vomits red wine out of its mouth and into a waiting aluminum bowl, resulting in a tang of tannins wafting through the air. This piece is encountered upstairs, on a stained red carpet, in a series of rooms with mysterious signs of activity and storage options. (A mirrored wall with shelf mounts but no shelves being the most mysterious.)

Digesting Duck Entry Level Position started out as a party sculpture, its name a reference to an **18th-century automaton** that mimicked a duck's digestive system. When it was shown earlier this year at **From the Desk of Lucy Bull**, a table-top exhibition space in Los Angeles, viewers held their glasses beneath the sculpture's mouth for drink refills. Without the party context, the sculpture's kinetic aspect is now legitimately startling in those ghostly, desolate rooms.

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Detail of 'Digesting Duck Entry Level Position,' 2020. (Courtesy the artist and Good Weather)

Downstairs, McGuire's daily project offers an alternative to an in-person communal gathering like the one in L.A., this time imagined by the artist in their studio. A grid of folded garments on the gallery's beige-painted floor could outfit dozens of people. Instead, eight stuffed animals (all ducks), face each other across the arrangement, recalling Mike Kelley's *Arena series*, comforting and somehow "off." In an additional nod to art historical antecedents, the textile works mark the days On Kawara-style, starting March 20 and ending May 8 (the previously planned opening date of McGuire's show).

The varying level of detail in McGuire's alterations offer a potential view into the artist's emotional state over that time. Some days, the embellishment is just the date, almost offhandedly so. *April 15, 2020* features red thread across the chest of a black Gildan tee—and its sizing sticker, which they didn't bother to remove. But just a day before, their elaborate additions to a gray coat capture the experience of mindlessly scrolling through social media in a pandemic. Square images of teacup chihuahuas line either side of the buttons, and the phrase "now more than ever" repeats, stitched in different colored thread, across the garment's bottom third.

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Isabelle Frances McGuire, 'Touch,' 2020; 'Target,' 2020; and 'April 10, 2020,' 2020. (Courtesy the artist and Good Weather)

In *P**** B**** ARENA*, the loneliness of making art in isolation is echoed by the loneliness of viewing art alone. (The lack of a gathering to celebrate the show's opening even made me miss the refrain "Let me know if you have any questions about the work!") The ducks, made out of Wubby fabric (a kind of fleece), reversible sequins and pillows, bearing giant plastic eyes, were once stand-ins for artistic companions. Now they're fellow gallerygoers.

Through repetition and the tally of days, *P**** B**** ARENA* marks time in a way that's been lost to many during the pandemic. Weeks of sickness tend to blend together, the same goes for weeks of isolation. But in recent days, time has demarcations again, punctuated by rallies, reckonings and a critical need to see change happen.

The day after I visited McGuire's show, Market Street bore the signs of the collective anger that fueled both peaceful protests and late-night destruction. Shattered safety glass lined the sidewalks and gutters; six-foot-tall "ACAB" graffiti repeated across boarded-up storefronts.

These are reactions to another sickness—America's systemic, institutionalized racism. When I think of *Digesting Duck Entry Level Position*, the sculpture now looks like it's vomiting in disgust, trying to purge the toxins from the very fabric of American society. But unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a sickness of our own making.

*'P**** B**** ARENA'* is on view at *Et al.* (620 Kearny Street, San Francisco) through July 11 by appointment only. [Details here.](#)

CHICAGO ARTIST WRITERS

Link: <https://chicagoartistwriters.com/isabelle-frances-mcguire-im-a-cliche-at-prairie/>

Reviews

Isabelle Frances McGuire “I’m a Cliche” at Prairie

By B. Ingrid Olson
February 26, 2018



Isabelle Frances McGuire 'Untitled (I'm A Cliché)' Sugar glass, yeast. 2017.

In order to thrive, activated yeast needs warm-not-hot water and sugar to eat as it grows. Most doughs contain salt, but too much salt will kill the yeast. Looking at Isabelle McGuire's frames made of what they have coined 'dead dough', I imagine the yeast in this dough was once alive, because 'dead' implies its own opposite: in order to die, something has to live.

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The pluralistic structure of McGuire's exhibition, *I'm a Cliche*, at Prairie comes as a manifold stacking: three separate layers of activity accumulated one on top of another within the gallery. The base layer of the exhibition is a succinct installation of small-scale sculptural works made of organic matter, photographs, and hanging hardware. Slightly sagging sugar glass shelves hang on the walls with cast sugar glass bottles set on top, interspersed between four photographic constructions. A floor sculpture—also comprised of cast sugar glass bottles— shares its name with the sugar glass shelves: *Untitled (I'm a Cliché)*. The floor sculpture has been degraded and cracked by pouring activated yeast onto and into the bottles in situ. Having eaten away the bottles' inner and outer surfaces, the yeast remains present in the exhibition as a stain, having spilled onto the gallery floor. The cast glass works are something like a recycling bin version of a Morandi tableau. The bottles' functional form and implied use, suggesting their capacity to be held and to hold liquid, serve as a bridge between the exhibition's first layer of seemingly-static art objects and the subsequent performances.



Isabelle Frances McGuire, *There is always someone working harder than you. I am that someone* Dead dough, shrink plastic, June bug, 2017.

The photographic works in the exhibition consist of images framed by bread and adorned with perfectly intact insect carcasses. The frames' structures range from a simple ribbon of dough to more intricate designs, alternately baroque and skeletal. Of the latter ilk, *There is always someone working harder than you. I am that someone*, 2017, is comprised of three separate translucent scrimms of shrink plastic, each inset into a separate branch of a spindly circuit of dead dough. The finishing touch is the June bug placed delicately on the surface of the bread's crust with the bug's underbelly presented vulnerably, facing the viewer. On the central sheet of shrink plastic, a printed photographic image has been manipulated and effaced to an almost illegible effect. Hidden behind scrawled hatch marks, a figure kneels with legs bending below the weight of an ambiguous, spherical object held overhead. Whether the object overhead is a boulder, or another body, or something else altogether, the burdened figure recalls something Sisyphean— especially when paired with the eponymous text embedded in the frame above and below the image: “There is always someone working harder than you” and “I am that someone.”

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The shapes and forms of the dead dough show evidence of the material's initial doughy softness and its inability to hold surface detail. The frames veer from smooth symmetry, shift away from measurement, toward confident gestures and direct construction. The small images of camouflaged figures are not identifiable as portraits, nor as documentation of a performance, but rather, the images appear to be posed and performed specifically for the camera. These images are consciously made, manipulated and constructed: disguised photographs that are embedded in mannered, baked frames of inedible, continuously drying bread.

McGuire's use of organic materials, or ingredients, recalls the work of Dieter Roth, and his use of chocolate, seeds, bananas and other miscellaneous foodstuffs. Roth discovered his predilection for food as an art material in a moment of impulse.

"He had covered some >>dirty pictures<< that he had drawn with sour milk and was pleased: >>that they became very beautiful. Subsequently, I always wanted to pour sour milk over pictures that aren't beautiful or that don't work out. Sour milk is like the landscape, ever-changing. Works of art should be like that – they should change like man himself, grow old and die<<." ¹

Roth's works involving food— blooming chocolate, molded cheese, rotten banana peel prints, dried sausage skins stuffed with macerated book-pages—barring marks of decay, exist today as though preserved on life support. The sculptures and prints are now held in climate controlled rooms, encased in frames or under vitrines. Though Roth invited the rot and decomposition, hoping to mirror his own mortality, institutions and collections are preserving his work by way of containment. McGuire's work, however, is new, raw, and out in the open. The bread and sugar glass are only a few months old, at the very beginning stages of deterioration.



Isabelle Frances McGuire, *Untitled (I'm A Cliché)* Dead dough, shrink plastic, female Green darner. 2017.

In the aftermath of the performance, between the exhibition's second and third layer of activity, the evidence in the gallery space (absent of the audience, fresh bread, butter, and ginger-ale) is perplexing: a table with bread crumbs and a stray smear of butter; a ravaged set of instructions scrawled onto a piece of paper shoved into a broken sugar bottle; drops of fake blood and a prosthetic fake thumb; a water drawing on the floor of the Earth flocked with a dusting of flour. On top of the table, on a thick makeshift serving platter, is an image of a nude woman laying on a pool table, decapitated, surrounded by a swarm of flies. A text below the image reads:

'i just only wanted to stretch my neck for seeing farther suddenly i heard a pop sound from the top of my neck, and then my head was gone but at the same time found that my vision was not limited anymore.'

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In its imbrication of food, imagery, text, and sound, the experience of the exhibition elevates common rituals surrounding food, albeit in an absurdist fashion. The figurative photographs framed in bread initially suggest that the bodies pictured are offering themselves for consumption, visually or orally. The performance then proceeded to allow viewers to eat bread while looking at the bread frames hung on the surrounding walls, satiating their appetites, analogous to watching pornography while having sex. Ingesting bread while looking at artworks made of bread makes physical an otherwise entirely imaginative, visual experience. Yet, the inclusion of insect carcasses, placed onto the hand molded frames seem to serve as an interruption, issuing a *mori* warning to the consumer. Is the viewer made to feel like a fly, attracted and then shooed away? It seems to be less about repelling the viewer than it is a surreal allegorical questioning: why is a dragonfly beautiful, even when dead, when a fly only reminds us of shit and decay? Why is one body read as a dragonfly, and the next as a pesky fly?

What if McGuire's dead dough is actually just a salt dough? This would mean there was never yeast in the 'dead dough' frames, just flour, salt, oil, and water. Salt dough is used as a way to create sculptures and crafts that will harden when baked but will not rise, melt, or move past predetermination. What begins with a controlled material, formed and baked, is just the starting point. The works will continue to change: the sugar glass softening and cracking; the bread hardening and cracking. Stiffened and brittle, will they rot? Will live insects find them and eat the leftovers?



Isabelle Frances McGuire, *Untitled (I'm A Cliché)*, Dead dough, shrink plastic, flies. 2017.

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Endnotes:

1. The exhibition opened with Act One on November 17th, 2017.
2. A performance, Act Two, happened on December 8th, 2017. The artist served studio-made bread, butter, and lacto-fermented ginger ale.
3. The exhibition ended on January 7th, after Act Three, featuring musical performances in the gallery space by Isabelle & Kira, Ratko Radojčić and Bloodhaver.
4. Excerpt from introductory text by Dieter Roth for *Paintings, Drawings and Multiples* exhibition catalog, David Nolan Gallery, New York, 1989:

“Perhaps somebody comes and asks, what all this stuff was made for. Then I cannot say any-thing but: Me one cannot ask, since I have only so few words to say, like: I do not know!

Yes, but! somebody says at that moment, perhaps. But! somebody says, it does smell mock here, burny somehow, like as if some sugarbomb of the bigger kind or make has fallen explosion-wise to the walls and on the floor and ceiling. Look, smashed sugarcane everywhere! The bits and tids are hanging up and down all the walls, along the whole run. Sure, securely, somebody says to that, the same moment: I am sure, he says or she says, or, as we in big G. say, IT says: This must have been an all encompassing sugarbomb of the biggest width or size, with special chocopuss fillings, since otherwise it does not hang up or down like this in any way but Sugar-puss itself-Miss Neverdry or Mister Everwet. It must have made a hell of a pressure on the walls and floors and on it's maker, the sugarbomb maker's mind. Or, if it should have been sugarload of a backfire grenade, then we should say: What a mammoth's pressure under the maker's heart, where the belly is! may I ask! somebody says, then, often,-why! somebody, then, often says or ask,-how come, it shmears like this and cries like hell?”

1. Dieter Roth, as told to Ira G. Wool, 'Homage to Dieter: A Rot(h)iana of Annotated Anecdotes', *Paintings, Drawings and Multiples*, David Nolan Gallery, 1989 ↩

B. Ingrid Olson is an artist working primarily between photography and sculpture. Olson received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010. Solo and two-person exhibitions include: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2018); The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2017); Simone Subal Gallery, New York (2015); cura.basement, Rome, (2014); and Document, Chicago (2014). Select group exhibitions include: Picture Fiction: Kenneth Josephson and Contemporary Photography, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018); Being: New Photography 2018, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2018); Small Sculpture, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago (2017); The problem with having a body / is that it always needs to be somewhere, The Approach, London (2017).

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Link: <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/isabelle-frances-mcguires-bread-and-butter-is-their-art/>

ARTS & CULTURE

Isabelle Frances McGuire's bread and butter is their art

"I'm a Cliche" at Prairie Gallery uses yeast and fermentation to explore issues of identity.

by Tal Rosenberg
December 6, 2017



Isabelle Frances McGuire, *There Is Always Someone Working Harder Than You. I Am That Someone*, 2017
Credit: Courtesy Prairie

When you hear the word “bread,” what do you imagine? A bakery? A sandwich? The beginning of a meal? Isabelle Frances McGuire, who rejects gender binaries and doesn’t seem to approach anything in a straightforward way, thinks of the artist’s own body.

“I use bread and yeast and sugar . . . so that it will transform [my art] into something else,” McGuire says. “It’s about being constantly placed into roles that I feel are violent, especially a lot of things about having a woman’s body is extremely violent and oppressive.”

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McGuire, 23, holds a BFA in film, video, and new media from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but “Isabelle Frances McGuire: I’m a Cliché,” on view at Prairie Gallery in Pilsen through January 8, doesn’t exhibit much in the way of video or new media. The show instead features two kinds of works: bottles mutated by yeast and sugar, and tiny photographs, distorted by sugar-coated glass or plastic and framed with stale pieces of bread and insects.

“I’m obsessed with bread, but the part of bread that I’m obsessed with is the science behind it: how yeast and bacteria can assist our lives,” McGuire says. “I use bread and yeast and sugar on the glass so that it will transform the piece into something else.”

The title “I’m a Cliché” comes from the song “I Am a Cliché” by 70s British punk band X-Ray Spex, whose lyrics often dealt with feminism and anti-consumerism. Relatedly, the setup at Prairie Gallery is somewhat spartan—a small, windowless room whose walls and floor are painted white. Prairie is a new gallery operated by Tim Mann and Jack Schneider. They hope to draw attention to local artists who aren’t being covered or shown much around town, in particular those who address ecology and identity in their work.

Both those subjects are covered one mixed-media piece. McGuire prints “There will always be someone working harder than you” in small text, jammed into a frame made out of thin loaves of bread. The message seems to allude to capitalist culture’s relentless demand to always work harder, but at the bottom of the frame is a line written in the same font, “I am that someone,” an indication that McGuire’s frustrations are directed as much inward as at the culture in general.

McGuire doesn’t want “I’m a Cliché” to be a conventional art show, so plans to add performance and musical elements to the exhibit. (McGuire describes “I’m a Cliché” as “an event in three acts.”) This Friday, McGuire will serve bread, butter, and fermented ginger ale. There will be a block of butter about the size of two laptops stacked on top of each other, and underneath the butter will be images, which people can see once they swipe the butter with their bread. What are these images? McGuire says you’ll have to come and eat some bread and butter to find out. 