

“In the Big Rock Candy Mountain”

by Will Heinrich

A pure white cake, decorated with a heavily-outlined, blood-red rose, floats against a perfect black emptiness in the middle of Tracy Miller’s large oil painting *Donuts*. Extending from under the cake in all directions, at once produced by it and contained within it, is an exploding cornucopia of flowers, bananas, plums, berries, a pineapple with red and yellow highlights, grapes dissolving into circles of abstract color, a fire-engine red pear that’s also a beautiful cartoon turd, scruffy beer cans rescued from the garbage, a pat of butter, a notionally infinite series of atomic glazed donuts, and the delicate, semi-transparent arm of the Statue of Liberty, beckoning from the heights of sublimated sophistication to the most primitive part of the viewer’s brain. A starving person doesn’t imagine a simple meal; and art, because it doesn’t satisfy any basic human need, must satisfy them all at once.

In *Continental*, a pink tabletop is both canvas and landscape, displaying doilies, glass candleholders, sweet corn, lobsters, wine, and bananas till it ends, about three quarters of the way up, in a gently curving horizon line against a satiny interstellar void. Rising on the left with the geological self-confidence of Kilimanjaro and the abruptly stepped verticality of the Empire State Building is a pink and white layer cake, its footprint lined with roses. Ms. Miller’s juxtaposition of similar forms—tabletop to landscape to altar, red glass candleholder to glass of red wine, doily to planet to eyeball to asshole—is essentially mystical, using resemblance not to reveal truths about particular objects but to allude to some other, unknowable prototype.

In *Saltwater Taffy*, a twelve-foot-long panel whose size and color scheme bring to mind Max Beckmann, this referential remove goes further, making clear that even the body is directed at something else. The two lobsters, orbiting around a black platter with two yellow lemons, have emerged, like the lobster in a Rider-Waite tarot card, from beneath psychological symbolism. They come from a level of strange forms that mean nothing but themselves because they precede further complication. In *ShrimpShapes*, amid the overwhelming noise of conflicting colors and depths—from the giant golden PBR can in the lower right corner, whose cap is also a platter, past the pink and red graffiti bunny ears and the six-pack of Budweiser displayed under a jaundiced arc of urine terminating in the outline of a flower—mystical displacement is tempered with the resolute honesty of the deliberately unsystematic thinker: resemblance does not mean equivalence; each figure must be taken for itself.

By the time we get to *Tiny Bubbles*, our bright fantasies have filled the universe, or we’ve found, at least, a way to live entirely within them by treating them as material to be denatured and rebuilt. In the foreground are a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a display of petit fours, and another white cake with a retro-futuristic green jello mold on top and a single long green drip serving as a candle. Behind the food, pastel blues and pinks, creamy white, and frosting-yellow form shapes as loose and approximate as the crowd noise in a movie. But are these colors the primordial ground of being that culminates in specific objects, or are they the background—formal, tonal, emotional—implied by coconut cake and champagne?

The answer is both. The specificity of Ms. Miller's subject is unmistakable—the brand names on the alcohol, the glints on the lobsters' claws—and everything in the painting that wouldn't, by itself, be as singularly located is enlisted by the names and objects into a project of one to one correspondence. But if your real subject is one that has no body, a process or practice that exists only in what it makes, how much closer could you get to it than by seizing on the fantasies that lie closest to the source?