

TO MARKET, TO MARKET a response by STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE

We break paintings down when we look at them, cleaving “imagery” from “content,” “content” from “form,” paint from picture. We can isolate gesture or surface quality, tease out sinews of style and influence, identify traces of the artist’s hand or note their absence, assessing each component against intangible measures of provenance and price. A painting needs to be butchered before it can be consumed.

To “read” or “situate” or even hang a painting is to reconstitute its parts, processing and reincorporating the less desirable bits and packaging the result to meet industry standards and consumer expectation. Painting’s capacity for discursive disarticulation and reconstitution has been a key factor in its remarkable shelf life.

In the studio, paintings preserve a measure of integrity. The components, though identifiable, are less easily pulled apart. Viscous and volatile in the early stages, we talk about the paint’s “body” and liken the paint film to a “skin.” A painting fattens as it’s raised, tended to like livestock until it matures. Painters select for certain attributes, breeding out illusionism, perhaps, or hybridizing historical lineages. Personalities emerge.

The destination is the auction block in any case. From there, it’s off to the rendering plant to be readied for market.

On the surface, Ufuk Gueray’s *Market* series targets the connoisseur, an informed consumer attentive to *terroir* and anxious to oversee each step in the

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Market, Ufuk Gueray, oil on canvas, 28" x 33", 2013

Market, Ufuk Gueray, oil on canvas, 22" x 30", 2013

Market (detail), Ufuk Gueray, oil on canvas, 22" x 30", 2013



Alternate Endings, Ufuk Gueray, oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2013

journey from farm to table. On the surface, Gueray seems happy to oblige. Thoughtfully composed and carefully executed, his reductive still lifes and well-ordered abstractions are minutely tuned to the medium's formal and historical vicissitudes. They're also self-evidently the work of someone who enjoys moving paint around.

There's a showmanship to his approach, a confidence bespeaking a well-practiced routine. The paintings share a restricted palette of motifs, colours, and methods of applying paint that recombine to yield limitless iterations. Gueray dashes off new arrangements and cycles through an extensive repertoire of stylistic and art-historical references, showing off his talents and wares with salesmanlike panache.

For the right audience, he convincingly performs the role of "Painter's Painter," the type of artist for whom "content" represents little more than an irksome precondition for material play and medium-specific reflection. If imagery and its concomitant layers of interpretation were really incidental, though, Gueray probably wouldn't paint pictures of sausage.

Hanging limply against the picture plane, alone and in rows, sliced up, extruded, and exploded, sausage asserts and reasserts itself with the blunt finality of a punch line. The jokes write themselves.

The motif inscribes impertinent connotations into the painted surfaces, threatening to overpower their subtle formal relationships, but the cartoonishly overdetermined subject matter opens the paintings to a host of improbably nuanced, far-reaching considerations. Gueray makes paintings "about painting" that acknowledge the absurdity of that project (by also being "about sausage"), exploiting many of the medium's intractable contradictions. Sausage comes to seem like a fitting allegory, if not the most appetizing: a piece of meat several times removed from the living source, an uncertain amalgam masquerading as a cohesive whole, a consumer good, a phallic object.

What's funny is that sausage does seem to present Gueray with an adaptable framework for exploring material concerns, modes of image-making, and diverse historical references. He manages to stuff five centuries of Western art into a handful of preposterous sausage paintings, a feat he manages with palpable satisfaction.

In his statement, Gueray name-checks 17th-Century Spanish *bodegones*, austere Baroque-era still lifes that often showcased cuts of meat. Stark compositions, a palette of varnished earth colours, and sporadic nods to illusionistic rendering all reinforce the connection to early Modern painting, while the deadpan

re-presentation of consumer goods show a clear affinity for Pop (Wayne Thiebaud's high-contrast hot dogs come to mind).

Gueray reduces the sausage to an oblong stadium "cut" to reveal elliptical slices. The sparse modelling comprises gradients from black to burnt sienna that minimally establish three-dimensional form, while a few stray marks delineate puckers and folds. In one canvas, Gueray unfurls the sausage in a cylindrical projection, flattening it into unequal, adjacent bars of black-brown casing and exposed pinkish filling. Hard-edge geometries invite half-serious comparisons to Suprematism and Color Field abstraction, the nearly-nonpictorial arrangement mischievously invoking the likes of Malevich, Albers, and Rothko. Depthless backdrops done in ashy green earth and slate grey stand in for butcher-shop chalkboards. At their most conventionally pictorial, Gueray's crisp renderings bring to mind hand-painted signs, Duchamp's chocolate grinder, or Magritte's humdrum Surrealism.

In stark contrast, meat itself is transubstantiated into roundels and *tondos* of viscid, imitation action painting. Bubblegum pinks fold into lifeless beiges streaked with black and crimson, tortured, textural globs of viscerally unappealing flesh tones. Looking almost collaged in place, the sharply-delineated *impasto* breaks with the prevailing flatness, effecting a rupture between surface and substance that further complicates pictorial space: They reveal Gueray at his most unabashedly "painterly," yet they represent a contained release at most—more extrusion than "expression."

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For all his commitment to painting as a physical act, Gueray seems equally comfortable in its conceptual register. A diptych, *Not Good/Good* is one of only a few works to fully abandon the still life format. The first, mostly blank primed canvas reproduces figures from an old painting manual, a pair of diagrams illustrating compositional technique. The other half is a paroxysm of sausage painting, a gleeful, gloppy rebuttal with no casing to contain it. Like all the others, its composition is symmetrical, central, and (despite its frenzied brushwork) "static"—"Not Good."

With its impish sendup of received wisdom, the piece invokes John Baldessari's text paintings skewering art discourse and art nonsense ("Art is a creation for the eye and can only be hinted at in words," he painted in 1968, savouring the contradiction). With similar wry humour, Gueray makes an extrinsic, arbitrary measure of "quality" the paintings' explicit subject, tacitly acknowledging the influence other, more insidious value systems in the process.

(As an aside, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, possibly Baldessari's best-known text painting, advises that still lifes remain "free of morbid props.")

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Gueray likens his studio to a butcher shop, but he displays the paintings like products in an store window. The series title and transparent meat-market allusions position the work squarely in the consumer sphere, a sense further built into its mixed art historical pedigree and the circumstances of exhibition itself.

In July, Gueray showed excerpts from the series in a decommissioned shipping container set down within sight of Old Market Square in Winnipeg's Exchange District, former epicentre of the Canadian grain industry and longtime nexus of the local art scene. Rather than committing to the polite fiction that paintings might support themselves, the conspicuous setting framed them as transactional units, contingent objects in a state of physical, financial, and ontological flux.

Typified by the innocuous, portable still life, easel painting marked Western art's proper entrée into a burgeoning free market economy, an ongoing collusion that Conceptual artists, with their penchant for dematerialization and institutional critique, would identify and explicitly reject three centuries later. Sharing Pop Art's ambivalent embrace of consumer spectacle, Gueray throws down with the devil he knows, luxuriating in paintings' rarefied surfaces while seditiously highlighting their function in broader transactional arrangements. As in the Baroque still life, the veneer of conspicuous consumption masks a lavishly-appointed moral lesson.

Even in its most self-critical guises, the canon that Gueray so tenderly eviscerates and methodically reconstructs is a total sausage party, and to attempt critical dialogue with the Tradition of Painting necessarily entails confronting more and less explicit masculinist tropes. *Market's* unvarnished Freudian overtones playfully caricature the castration anxieties of a medium that,

despite its unassailable, position at the head of the table, imagines itself continually besieged.

Gueray helps justify such fears: circumscribed with surgical precision, *Market's* meatiest passages burlesque Ab-Ex heroics, reducing "expression" to discrete areas of gendered surface treatment, a stylistic convention. Gueray paints discourses of formal autonomy and psychological angst in a distinctly abject, masturbatory light, reducing the project of painting for its own sake to a factory line of flaccid dick jokes. With repetition, the sausage and its connotations start to come apart, and the paintings are just paint again.

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In the sixties and seventies, Dieter Roth pulped actual books, seasoning them according to traditional recipes to create his *Literaturwurst*. Gueray is similarly concerned with how history and culture are processed for consumption, but rather than grinding his references to an indeterminate slurry, he leaves each constituent part distinct, laying out every adulteration and phase shift with diagrammatic clarity.

In *Market*, Gueray takes an irreverent delight in showing us how our sausage gets made, even if we'd rather not know the gory details, though he never sacrifices quality even as he tests the boundaries of good taste. In some respects, he really is a painter's painter, but for what it's worth he's also a vegetarian.

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