

Choke Me in The Shallow Water Before I Get Too Deep

Sofia Defino Leiby at Sweetwater, Berlin

It's the very banal decisions we make which distinguish us. How do you spend a day? What do you eat—or not eat? How much time do you spend lying down, standing, sitting, walking, or running? On the street or on a treadmill? Where does your money come from—and where does it go?

Everyone asks themselves these questions, artists in particular, because it is unclear what can be understood as “work” in the field of art. Every artist sets their own rules, whose relationship to earning money is particularly unresolved. Perhaps this is where the idea that “every artist is always also a con artist”¹ comes from. Yet, the assertiveness that imposture requires is always hard work.

Sofia Defino Leiby intentionally engages with aesthetics located in our reality in which every object has become a commodity. In the past, she worked with company logos, which she broke down into their parts, revealing them as purely aesthetic phenomena equally associated with identification, demarcation, desire, and discomfort. It is fitting to use terms borrowed from other fields, like popular culture and (life)style, to describe Leiby's work. The motto here is rather “nothing is more”: not “more is more,” nor “less is more.” Not “no make-up make-up,” but simply “no make-up.”

“If a drop causes a container to overflow, more liquid will follow this drop,”² writes Georg Simmel. Likewise, the decision against consumption, abstinence, can also be carried out in an aggressive way—and can itself become a type of consumer behavior. Anorexia means eating up emptiness, consuming nothingness—and lots of it.³

In her exhibition at Sweetwater, *Bathos*, one of the reappearing motifs in Leiby's work is compositions of bottles. They contain liquids of unknown origin, signifying different contexts: some are water bottles, some resemble cosmetics, others are filled with painters' linseed oil. Only few have labels. Lacking a “world,” they only reflect one another. They meet as scraps of society, covering each other up, lying on top each other, engaging with each other in humorous convergence. Like a landscape of a city, or a person's character, every composition in Leiby's work is unstable.

Alongside the bottles, the filled coffee cup is a recurring motif, as are baked goods. For example, tartlets, or, as the French would say, *petit fours*, here take the form of a cultural appropriation by a German organic bakery. The sight of the dessert immediately inspires fear: I can indulge, but I shouldn't. Because, as Simmel writes, once you've eaten a bite, there's no holding back: one dessert is naturally followed by the next.

A similar empty indulgence, window shopping, can also trigger abstinent despair. In Leiby's case, window shopping becomes painting—although not window painting. Both the artist and the viewer are drawn to the objects, as if actually acquiring them. But we are stopped, like by the glass of a shop window, via multiple forms of mediation and repetition of the motifs, which enforce the futility of possessing the goods. Painting, superficial by nature, here becomes an act of consolation.

Bathos (not to be confused with “pathos”), is an eighteenth century literary device, first introduced by British writer Alexander Pope, in which two juxtaposing elements ascribed different values—one higher and one lower, often a “serious” versus a “light” occurrence—result in an anticlimax, with an ironic or tragicomic result. Rarely illustrative, and inherently unmemorable, the term often attaches itself to situations in retrospect and by repetition.

In Leiby's painting *10.08.23*, common sparrows sit on a hunter-green table and squabble over a croissant after its patron has paid the bill. The idiom “pearls before swine” turns into “like croissants before sparrows.” It reminded me of a particular scene I haven't been able to forget:

1 Jan Verwoert, “A Codex for Con-Artists? Or: An Ethics of Disappointment!,” *Cookie* (London: Sternberg, 2010).

2 Georg Simmel, “Philosophie des Abenteuer,” *Der Tag. Moderner illustrierte Zeitung*, 1910. Author's translation.

3 Marcus Steinweg, *Philosophie der Überstürzung* (Leipzig: Merve Verlag, 2013). Author's translation.

SWEETWATER,

A friend once described to me at length how he slowly lured a sparrow with crumbs of cake during a business meeting taking place in a café, only to catch it in his right hand promptly at the end of the meeting and not let go for a long time. The little game had taken place solely for his own amusement, not for the amusement of the bird, who in the end, when that friend let him fly away after losing interest in the living toy, staggered off rather traumatized.

Leiby's themes do not seek the extraordinary within the generic—on the contrary. She affirms precisely the “basic”—a degrading term used to describe those (usually women) with conventional interests, like croissants and coffee⁴—and emancipates it from its bad reputation. In doing so, she draws a cheerful utopia-dystopia in which desire and resistance, near disgust, coexist.

Leiby often tells the story of a student in her early painting course who repeatedly chose her partner as her subject. When the professor asked her why, the fellow student said: “I love my boyfriend, and that's why I paint him.” While not explicitly visible, Leiby's relationship is also present, including in the exhibition postcard, which features a hairy arm, and a man's jacket and sneakers. Never simply naive, Leiby's work seeks a direct address and secure kind of purity—often found in a state of adolescence—which she transforms into a tender, grown-up melancholy.

You could say her classmate made art about her life, and Leiby makes art about lifestyle. But isn't every lifestyle alive in some way—and doesn't every life have a kind of style?

As Nietzsche wrote: “What does the artist paint? What [s]he likes. And what does the artist like? What [s]he can paint.”⁵

And, to counter Nietzsche with popular culture (an act of bathos): *Choke me in the shallow water before I get too deep* Edie Brickell. Even in shallow water, it's easy to drown.

Olga Hohmann

⁴ Charlotte Alter, “How Conformity Became a Crime,” *Time*, April 20, 2014, <https://time.com/77305/how-conformity-became-a-crime/>. Accessed June 5, 2024.

⁵ Max J. Friedländer, *Von Kunst und Kennerschaft* (Ditzingen: Reclam Verlag, 1992). Author's translation.