

Frieze

Troy Chew's Hip Hop Symbolology

At CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, the artist presents a series of *vanitas*-inspired paintings about Bay Area slang



Troy Chew, "Yay Area," 2020, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco

Troy Chew's oil paintings in 'Yadadamean' at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco, burst with semiotic energy. A graduate of California College of the Arts and a highly skilled realist painter, Chew pays tribute to the lexicon of hip-hop culture through his images. In 'Yadadamean' – Bay Area slang for 'You know what I mean?' – his lush and luminous still lifes play with words coined from the 1990s lyrics of seminal West Coast rappers such as Too Short, Mac Dre, B-Legit, E-40 and the duo Luniz, among others.

In a recent conversation, the artist told me that his entryway into art history was through reproductions of 16th- and 17th-century Flemish *vanitas* or still lifes that he encountered in a high school art class. Drawing inspiration from these historical works, Chew creates his own *vanitas* and, staying

faithful to the genre, depicts each object in his paintings as both signifier and signified. In the Flemish tradition, a bowl of strawberries, for example, might symbolize heaven; pomegranates, fertility; medlar fruits, death and decay as *momento mori*. Chew's symbolism, however, is devoid of such allegory and, instead, is more focused on the *bon mot* of urban slang. For example, in *Yay Area* (all works 2020), a chocolate cake, a bowl of vanilla ice cream and a Coca-Cola bottle are displayed on a reflective glass surface, bringing together different archetypes of sweet treats as stand-ins for *yay*: the Bay Area's playful term for cocaine. Similarly, in *Five on it* – a direct reference to Luniz's hit track 'I Got 5 on It' (1995) – cauliflower, broccoli, grapes and Girl Scout cookies are framed by crutches, recalling terms used to describe marijuana.

Investigating the 'slanguage' – as the artist calls it – used to speak about money, women and drugs, and re-contextualizing it within *vanitas* still lifes, Chew plays on notions of appropriation – not only in terms of his use of European painting traditions, but also in relation to how slang and hip-hop culture have been co-opted and even effectively killed off through capitalist exploitation. Chew is sensitive to the debates

Natasha Boas, "Reviews / Troy Chew's Hip Hop Symbolology." *Frieze* (November 23, 2020), accessed online.

around what is contestably referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) – or, even more problematically, Ebonics – and understands that communities of colour create their own forms of communication as a reaction to systems of social and economic inequity and erasure, and that ‘slanguage’ is as viable as any other language. The artist expands on the unfortunate irony that sees the culture of marginalized groups being monetized for profit. For example, in *Ball Street Journal* – named after the eponymous E-40 album – loaves of bread lie next to cabbage, basketballs and paper: all symbols for money. Yet, the painting’s imagery equally points to the poverty and food insecurity in the same communities where these vernaculars are born.

Like tic, tic – a still-life painting of sticks of dynamite and a used juice box branded with the artist’s name – addresses the lifespan of the phrase ‘the bomb’. The dated term, once used as flattering hyperbole, is now perhaps reborn or rebranded, but teetering on the edge of obsolescence. Chew seems to ask: what is our role in consuming and using these expressions? Is it to celebrate Black culture, or wipe it out? By framing and re-framing the richness and pervasiveness of Black language, Chew embeds it into the history of art, exposing language’s power to both reify and deny the antagonisms and commoning around representation and race.

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