



Still Life with Cell Signal, 2010
oil on canvas, 16" x 10"

DELIGHTFUL, DELICIOUS, DISGUSTING

MIA BROWNELL MIXES ART AND SCIENCE

In the still-life paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries, memento mori motifs – “remember you will die” – often appear.

The works might portray a sumptuous table laden “with luscious fruits, gleaming oysters, wine poured into thin crystal; it may also be seen to display a melon split and rotting, scavenging mice, invading insects – all rendered with delicate precision,” Carolyn Korsmeyer, a professor of philosophy at SUNY-Buffalo, has written. “Spilled cups, broken lute strings, even the occasional grinning skull might be included in the scene to bring to mind the transience of human life in the midst of the sensory enjoyments of the table.”

In “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting” – a traveling exhibition of approximately 30 works that will make its final stop at the Housatonic Museum this fall, Southern Connecticut State University professor of painting and drawing Mia Brownell once again revisits these ideas, but places them within the context of developments in our time.

Brownell began to develop the body of work that forms this 10-year survey as a graduate student in the 1990s, exploring the adage, “You are what you eat,” on a grant. By the late 1990s, the human genome project was in the forefront of daily news and people were already consuming genetically modified foods, even if

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didn't realize it, she said. The daughter of a sculptor and a physicist, Brownell had grown up steeped in the worlds of art and science. She was questioning, she said, "What it means to be human in the age of biotechnology."

Her inquiry proceeded, she said in a recent telephone interview. The scientist in her had concluded, "there is nothing still about life." Her works in oil began to reflect that, as she superimposed graphic representations of proteins in motion and double exposures upon her gleaming still lifes.

While her paintings are rich with Old Master allusions, they are also abstract. And her art also has strong conceptual elements, which lures the viewer to her paintings with the beauty of their composition and then asks them to consider their sometimes-surprising content.

Is she challenging the American food system, with its genetically modified foods and disregard for seasonality? "Do her paintings put us in the artificial paradise of commodity culture or the artificial paradise of art, as Baudelaire called it?" art critic David Kuspit inquired.

Brownell says her initial paintings start as abstract expressions that elicit responses, which she then edits heavily and layers. Her subjects "are in fact dynamic, their swirls and strands and helices suggesting ever-ending motion across the canvas," Darra Goldstein, managing editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, has written. "Yet her essential forms – her beautifully rendered fruits – inexorably bring us back to earth, grounding us in the painting once again."

And so Brownell's work leaves the viewer with questions – as the fruits and meat she presents appear to be both concrete and soon-to-be immaterial, barely contained by the molecular forms surrounding them. Organic forms remain material even as they challenge the viewer to interact on other planes.

SHE HAS INVENTED A UNIQUE AND CONVINCING WAY TO SYNTHESIZE OLD MASTER REALISM AND MODERN MASTER ABSTRACTION – AND MAKE A METAPHYSICAL AS WELL AS SOCIAL POINT BY DOING SO.

From Kuspit's vantage point, "She has invented a unique and convincing way to synthesize Old Master realism and Modern Master abstraction – and make a metaphysical as well as social point by doing so."

At the same time, Housatonic Museum director Robbin Zella said, "Her use of color and form and shape – it's amazing. This is a work you don't get enough of – you never walk by it."

| Kristin Nord

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