

ARTFORUM

TORONTO

Stephanie Temma Hier

FRANZ KAKA

Entanglement, both material and affective, is the operating logic in Stephanie Temma Hier's ongoing series of sculptural paintings. Photo-realistic oil paintings of found imagery—much of it seemingly stock photography—are embedded in three-dimensional ceramic frames ornamented with clay renderings of everyday objects, including bell peppers, overgrown garden snails, and speckled spheres resembling gumballs. Although Hier replicates familiar forms, the way she juxtaposes them produces a mounting sense of unease. At the entrance to the exhibition, *Wonderful for Other People* (all works 2020) depicted a scene that could have come straight from a food magazine: Perfectly manicured hands pull apart a crustacean's body above a sauce-stained plate. The surrounding frame was built from stoneware shapes—some arching like gel nail talons, others curling like segments of a shrimp's shell—all glazed a traffic-cone orange. It was difficult to know where to train one's eye, but that was the point: The line between the inside and the outside of the work blurs, just as the act of eating ruptures the boundaries between bodies, producing intimate encounters and violent transformations.

Food, from the sites of its production to its consumption, was a through line across the nine works, and the precisely detailed figurative scenes immediately recalled the *vanitas*, with their overripe fruit and decaying flowers. Hier's most obvious nod to the genre was *More for Routine than Result*, a close-up of a fruit salad that emphasizes a sharply cut cantaloupe and menacingly angular strawberry wedges; red vines twist around the gray-green frame with serpentine tension. But whereas still lifes typically separate human subject from material



Stephanie Temma Hier, *Wonderful for Other People*, 2020, oil on linen, glazed stoneware frame, 20 × 17 × 2½".

object, Hier's compositions threaten to collapse the two. *Heart and Stomach of a King* offers up a pile of shiny purplish fish, haphazardly organized in a way that seems too unnerving to have been sourced from a stock photo. If food and product photography turns things into images to sell them, Hier's work turns images back into things to elicit not desire but disgust—here by highlighting how grossly textured the fish are, and how eerily human their eyes appear. As if to underscore the uncanny resemblance, the frame sprouts a glossy mauve human nose, two ears, and a tongue that protrudes toward the viewer in a comic gesture of repulsion. (The Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer's stop-motion animations, in which human heads constructed from found objects and food items engage in a disturbing cycle of consumption and regurgitation, are a source of inspiration for Hier.)

The artist makes her elaborate ceramic frames first, via a labor-intensive and time-consuming process of repeatedly drying and firing the clay. Custom stretchers are then fabricated to fit the borders of her ceramic constructions, sometimes creating awkward views of her paintings. *When Seagulls Follow a Trawler* featured the most ostentatiously adorned frame on view: Yellow-green ceramic peppers seem to march along the perimeter of an image of fishermen sorting through their haul while gulls circle overhead. Though set in the open air, the scene is claustrophobic. The men turn away from the viewer, and the angular masts and rigging interrupt the view rather than organize it. The contrast between the clarity of Hier's mimetic paintings and the chaos of their physical containers brought to mind the contradictions of hunting for images on the internet: The promise of an endless stream of images is crammed into the confines of rectilinear search fields and stacked browser windows. Although the associations between Hier's pictures and their ceramic environs are often vague—and made even more cryptic by her titles—the works' tactility and the visceral responses they evoke attest to the interconnectedness of food and animal systems, and to the damage that humans inflict by attempting to reorganize them.

—Gabrielle Moser