

‘THERE’S A REASON THE NOSE FELL OFF THE SPHINX’: URS FISCHER ON HIS ROTTING FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AT KARMA IN NEW YORK

by Nate Freeman



Urs Fischer, Faules Fundament (Rotten Foundation), 1998, at Karma.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA

Many of New York’s creative industries slow down considerably in the dog days of August. Take the art world. Many galleries just straight up close. Calls go unanswered. Things get pretty quiet.

So it seemed like a bit of a gift earlier this month when Karma, the beloved bookseller and gallery outfit run by Brendan Dugan, announced that, in the middle of August, it would be opening a new show with a work by Urs Fischer never before shown in the states. And it wasn’t opening at Karma’s Amagansett gallery, where many collectors are summering, but at its space in the heart of the sweaty, empty East Village.

Lo and behold, when the show opened Wednesday night, crowds flooded out from the gallery and onto the tree-strewn block of East Second Street that the gallery calls home. A good number of artists came to support Fischer—I spotted Rob Pruitt, Dan Colen, Carol Bove, Jordan Wolfson, Josh Smith, Sam McKinness, Richard Kern, Darren Bader, Eric N. Mack, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Brian Belott, and many others—as well as curators such as Cecilia Alemani, Massimiliano Gioni, and Simon Castets and collectors and dealers like Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. Aren’t these people supposed to be in, like, Mykonos?

The work on view, Rotten Foundation (Faules Fundament) (1998), is pretty special: a wall of concrete cinderblocks laid in cement by Fischer over the course of two days, with fruits and

vegetables strewn on the bottom. There are carrots, potatoes, cabbages, apples. The wall is mock-Trumpian before the fact, and the produce is ready to rot. It's nice to have it in the East Village—once again, Fischer has taken a break from showing at far-flung outposts of the Gagorian Gallery empire to moonlight at a tinier outfit. Last summer, he showed at JTT's old storefront space on Suffolk Street, a few blocks south of the current exhibition. (JTT has since moved to a larger space on Chrystie Street.)

As the crowd bled from the gallery to the open-air Italian joint next door for drinks and cured meats, I caught Fischer out on the street, and asked about why he chose to restage a work from nearly 20 years ago, here in the city in the dead of summer.

"It's like this, you know, the experience of looking at a carrot is somewhat similar 20 years later—it's still a carrot, and I always wanted to see it again," he said, recalling that the piece was last shown in Zurich. "It still looks like it did, it doesn't put on age, it's still, you know, now. It lives in the present."

He said the install was pretty standard: three hours Tuesday, three hours Wednesday. Fischer himself laid down the blocks on the wet cement.

The fruits and veggies on the ground will remain there until the show closes on September 10, getting more rancid as the days goes on. When the work is restaged, the fruit is always replaced, Fischer explained. It operates not unlike his wax works, where, if the owner chooses to melt one down, his studio fabricates a new one for just the cost of remaking it.

"It's a conceptual work if you think about it," he said when I asked about how the work changes, and doesn't change, as the fruits rot. "A van Gogh, you look at it a hundred years later and the colors go. In the end, it's always about decay. There's a reason the nose fell off the Sphinx."

He bent down to tie his shoes, which were Adidas Stan Smiths.

"Much of these fruits are genetical sculptures, if you think about it, because they are engineered by people," he said. "It's not different from having a fabricator."

As we talked, many of his fellow artists came up to see hello, and because many people haven't seen each other in a bit, they wanted to catch up, inevitably asking where they had been traveling, and what kind of leisurely activities they were pursuing. It was, in Fischer's words, "very chill."

"You come to a show, you see it, you hang out, and you have a nice evening," he said, as people took their beers out to a series of lawn chairs placed directly on the street, block party-style. "I like summer shows—I know they have the worst reputation, but I love 'em."