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Thousands of Gemstones and Beads Went Into These Moldy Fruit Sculptures

by Sarah Rose Sharp



Kathleen Ryan, *Bad Satsuma*, 2018

Artist Kathleen Ryan became the talk of the town last week, when images of her oversized sculptures of fruit went viral. Virality feels like an appropriate outcome for these works, given that they're meticulously beaded in thousands of gems and plastic beads to evoke states of florid decay.

Drawing from real rotting fruit much in the manner of a Dutch still life painter, Ryan translates nature's handiwork into intricate textural works that strongly balance attraction and repulsion. The gemstones and faceted plastic beads she uses to create the variegated topographies of her produce sculptures are recognizably precious materials. In microcosm they create endlessly fascinating landscapes pinioned on the roughly spherical surfaces of her sculptures by thousands of straight pins. But zooming out from them to a macro view reveals the form as a monument to the inevitable decline of vigor and health. Ryan frames these works as a critique of excess.

"The sculptures are beautiful and pleasurable, but there's an ugliness and unease that comes with them," Ryan said, in a recent profile for the *New York Times*. In this way, they serve as the same kind of *momento mori* that haunt classical still life paintings, reminding the viewer always of the transience of life. Truly, these ghoulish fruits instigate a deeply resonant tension between wonder and horror, a desire to draw closer and further in the viewing that find a faint echo in the surface-to-wide-angle viewing experience of an Impressionist painting.

Ryan's interest in materiality and repetition is evident in other aspects of her oeuvre; she likewise seems to enjoy topping metal armatures with hand-molded ceramic figures that roughly resemble flocks of perching parrots, as with her 2017 work, *Parasol*, or the austere and suggestive *Diana* (2017), that presents a delicately feathered chandelier-like blossom of rose quartz emerging from a giant seed pod rendered in rusted cast iron and hanging

from an industrial hook and chain. Though her moldy fruit works are turning heads at the moment, they are clearly not the only part of Ryan's multifold art practice that manages an arresting balance of opposites.