

ARTFORUM

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CRITICS' PICKS: KATHLEEN RYAN

by Jessica Simmons



View of "Kathleen Ryan: Bad Fruit," 2020.

Los Angeles

Kathleen Ryan

FRANÇOIS GHEBALY

2245 E Washington Blvd.

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Kathleen Ryan's exhibition is a study of grossly overripe fruit: Fleshy chunks of festering "watermelon" are dispersed across two rooms while a twisted stem of deflated "grapes" regally occupies a third. Glimmering and putrescent, these enlarged, human-size sculptures of spoiled fruit are adorned with a seemingly infinite number of multicolored glass beads and semiprecious stones whose placement convincingly replicates the otherworldly abstractions of creeping mold spores. As contemporary bedfellows to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* of rotting food, they entangle excess with refuse and rebrand abjection as seduction.

The underbellies of Ryan's six bejeweled watermelon sculptures reveal sharp slivers of aluminum, dispelling the illusion of organicity. Fabricated from the hull of a scavenged Airstream camper, these metal rinds make up another experiment in dissection, this one executed on the manufactured object. In *Bad Melon (Big Chunk)* (all works 2020), the Airstream's window and antennae protrude from what appears to be a huge, studded mound of rancid fruit pulp. The large flap of metal in *Bad Melon (Wedge)* resembles a Sputnik fragment with a teeming outgrowth of cell-like gems. Strewn about the space, these

equally repulsive and attractive objects create a strange mortal-industrial wasteland tinged with the trappings of luxury.

Despite their predominantly man-made media, Ryan's *Bad Melon* pieces remain metaphorically anchored in the realm of the natural via the presence of kitschy cast-iron and brass flies. These campy insects act as curious markers of time, folding the faux matter into the ongoing process of decomposition. While in the Dutch *vanitas* tradition, flies often symbolize the imminence of death and the futility of pleasure (a response to the novel indulgences of mercantile capitalism), in these works, especially within a contemporary gallery, they suggest a damning portrait of both viewer and collector: Like flies on shit, we gleefully engorge ourselves on needless waste if it's billed as gilded luxury.