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MUST-SEE: KATHLEEN RYAN'S BEAUTIFULLY UGLY JACK-O'-LANTERN 'JACKIE' AT THE NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

by Scott Cantrell



Artist Kathleen Ryan's, 'Jackie,' 2021, is on display at the Nasher Sculpture Center. It is an oversized pumpkin that is encrusted with semiprecious stones that convincingly simulate spreading mold.(Tom Fox)

Around Halloween, if you follow social media, you've probably seen those gag pics of jack-o'-lanterns vomiting their seedy, gooey innards. Those images may come to mind when you see artist Kathleen Ryan's Jackie, a gigantic carved pumpkin, its cutaway top resting a few feet away.

A new acquisition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, on display just inside the entrance, Jackie has gone to seed even more dramatically. This is a rotting pumpkin, its multicolored colonies of internal molds paradoxically rendered in tens of thousands of pinned semi-precious gemstones and glass beads.

Azurite-malachite, lapis lazuli, agate, black onyx, brecciated jasper, moss agate, rose and smoky quartz, ching hai jade — the list goes on. The body of the pumpkin is realistically sculpted in polystyrene, its surfaces finely studded with glass beads.

Jackie belongs to a series of "bad fruit" sculptures — including oversize lemons, oranges, peaches, grapes and watermelon — the California-born artist has created in recent years. The beauty and healthiness of fruits is ironically corrupted by grotesquerie and rot. Eat these and you die, or at least get really sick.

Beauty can grow out of decay. Multi-shaped and -colored mushrooms colonize

rotting trees. We fertilize flowers with disintegrating organic materials.

And there's a venerable trope of grotesquerie in art, from Van Eyck's hellscapes to Diane Arbus portraits of human faces distorted by pain and disease. Ryan's creations are also an ironic response to pop art's clean lines and (themselves ironic) images of prosperity, but they also manifest an organic abstract expressionism. We both recoil from the rot, a reminder of our own mortality, and admire the exquisitely detailed craft. A terrible beauty is born.

Ryan herself sees a broader message in these works.

"They're not just opulent," she told a New York Times reporter in 2019. "There's an inherent decline built into them, which is also something that's happening in the world. The economy is inflating, but so is wealth inequality, all at the expense of the environment.

"Though the mold is the decay, it's the most alive part."

Details

Kathleen Ryan's Jackie is on display at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. \$10; discounts for students, educators, seniors, DART riders; free for children under 12, military and first responders. Free for all the first Saturday of the month. Face masks are required. 214-242-5100, nashersculpturecenter.org.