

MELON SKIN

KARINNE SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH SAMUEL STAPLES

SAMUEL STAPLES IS A BERLIN-BASED CURATOR & WRITER. SAMUEL FREQUENTLY WRITES FOR DIFFERENT PUBLICATIONS & ARTISTS. HE IS CURRENTLY PART OF THE CURATORIAL TEAM OF THE SCHINKEL PAVILLON, BERLIN.

Between September and November 2021, the New York-based artist Karinne Smith took over Chinatown gallery M23. The exhibition *Melon Skin* included various found photographs transferred to collagen film and applied to the surface of melons. The rotting photographs and melons were replaced with fresh melons and new images each week by the artist in the ever-evolving exhibition. Visitors entered the gallery space in various stages of rot, decay, growth and life.

“Can the beautiful be sad? Is beauty inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning?” pondered French philosopher Julia Kristeva in her seminal essay, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, “Or else is the beautiful object the one that tirelessly returns following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible?”

Smith’s ephemeral artworks speak to legacy and the human desire for remembrance and meaning, to impact the world around us and leave something of ourselves behind after death. Smith creates art with a lifecycle, examining human mortality through ephemerality. Found photographs, their family histories and once cherished memories and legacies, are not immune to the inevitable deterioration and decay of the fruit-flesh they occupy and, like Smith’s melons, are shown to be ultimately impermanent.

Samuel Staples:

Your latest body of work presented in the exhibition Melon Skin at M23 features six melons in plexiglass domes which populate the gallery's walls in various states of rot and decay. How did you come to work with organic matter, and particularly melons within your practice?

Karinne Smith:

The melons belong to a body of work I've been working on since 2019. It started one summer. It was a really hot day and I was eating a cantaloupe. I had left the rind of the melon on my trash pile, which I guess means I probably should have taken the trash out already.

I remember I was looking at the imprint of the teeth marks I'd left in its flesh and thinking about how, if I were to die, my mother would find these imprints, these traces and how the rind would then take on an entirely different meaning for her. It would no longer simply be 'trash' and would instead become a record of something once in existence. I began to think about the things left behind in our wake.

SS You transfer various images onto the surface of these melons; could you walk me through your process on a technical level?

KS I had been working on this method at the time to transfer images onto collagen surfaces, and so I decided to put the two together and began to use the melon as a substrate for the images I had collected. I use collagen film, which is primarily used in the casing of sausages. The film is spread over the surface of the melon's flesh and the image imprinted over it. As the melon begins to decay, the image transforms, moulding, crumpling and bubbling beyond recognition.

I think when a lot of people view the work there is an initial read of death, which is present, but actually I'm much more interested in the ideas surrounding archiving. What does it mean to create a collection of images that ultimately elude capture?

SS The melons are encased in these large bubble glass domes. It's this combination of the synthetic, almost sterile, with the organic that I'm interested in. I'm assuming these were created out of necessity, but could you tell me a bit more about the domes and your thinking behind them?

KS The melons only last around a week before they start to liquify and so I had to find a way to contain the mess.

This is when I developed the domes. I was looking at a lot of Victorian portraiture at the time and was really fascinated by the oval-shaped glass frames that appear in a lot of Victorian objects. It looks almost futuristic and Jetson-like. I find myself intrigued by the new ideas in fabrication, spirituality and science that were happening at that time. The domes were thermoformed in California. I had made a 3D-rendering for them to follow, as I wanted the works to be very specific even down to the hardware used for their installation. For instance the bolts were tamper-proof bolts of a cone-like shape that required a specific tool to tighten them. In my imagination, with this show I looked at the domes as vessels or devices that attempted to hold and preserve the objects inside. Yet they ultimately failed to stop the 'unstoppable' or 'inevitable'.

The shelves the melons rested on were made of plaster which I had cast with balloons in order to shape them with my hands. I kept them white because I found it unsettling, almost haunting, to have this organic shape drained of colour.

SS What were the challenges of working with something as ephemeral as the flesh of fruit? I understand the exhibition lasted eight weeks; how did the show evolve and change throughout its duration?

KS I knew the melons would only last about a week before they got really disgusting so I decided early on I would change out the melons every week. I was inspired by the show *Every Week There is Something Different* (1991) by Felix Gonzales-Torres where he changed the work within the gallery space each week of its duration.

Each week I would come to the gallery and replace the melons after doing a deep clean of the dome structures. Some melons would be covered in mould resembling white, rabbit-like fur, while others would be covered in orange almost moss-like growth. One particular photograph of a young girl – who had seemingly won a beauty pageant of some kind – developed boil-like blisters all over. I organised the images on the melons into eight different themes, one theme per week: "Tenderness", "Structure", "Refusal", "Dog Supremacy", "Understanding Your Feelings", "Endurance/Repetition", "As Above So Below" and finally "Self-Portraits".

The photographs in the "Refusal" series featured women with their backs turned to the camera. Another, "Dog

Supremacy", featured images of various frilly dogs, inspired by rich, young white folks and their dogs (a commonality in posh, mostly-white neighbourhoods and areas).

SS Interestingly, this last theme also featured self-portraits, from what I understand. You bring the self into the work in the last week of the show. What was that like?

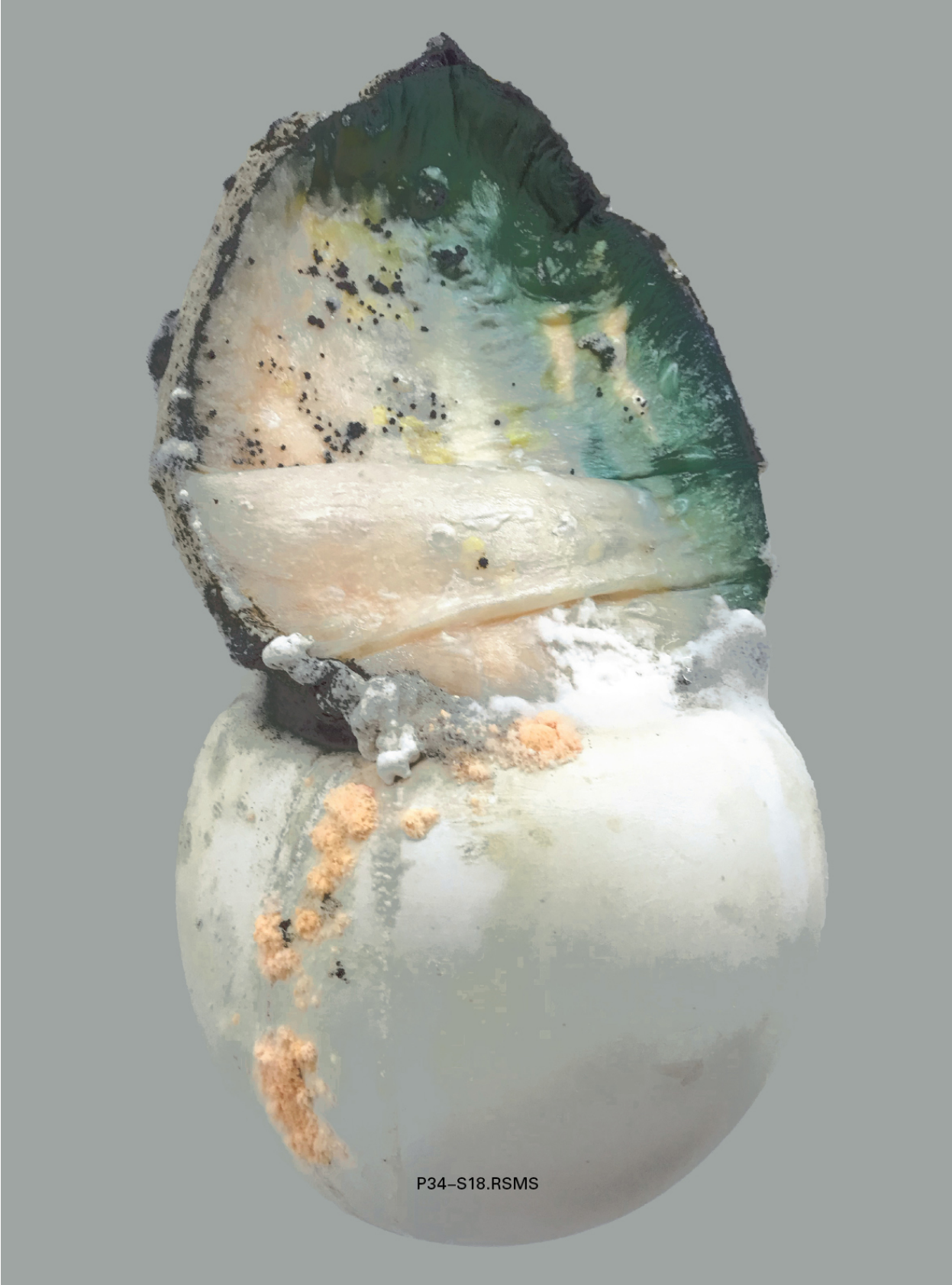
KS Yes, the last iteration in the last week of the show featured self-portraits. One thought that always came to mind when sourcing imagery is what if I were to find an image of myself in here? Many of the images I use are likely sourced from estate sales so this was a demonstration of my awareness of the source material.

SS The exhibition was presented at a gallery and I wonder how you reckon with the role of the market within your practice which is largely impermanent?

KS The question of the market is interesting to me. I worked for the Felix Gonzales-Torres archive and, knowing his work and the kind of tenants and contracts he had made with collectors of how to display and treat his work, I know collectors buy work that is ephemeral. One of the melons presented was fake. I wanted there to be something slightly off in the exhibition, and so one melon was always suspiciously preserved and there were indications that it was different from the others. I looked at it as an example of how this work could live on in a collection. The agreement with buying a melon was that the buyer could request a real melon from me within two years of purchase to experience the life cycle of the work. Despite this, however, I'm still left with questions surrounding the concept of ownership. What does it mean to make work that on principle resists collection yet in the end is collected?

I really admire the way that Felix Gonzales-Torres put the onus on galleries and collectors and institutions to arrange the work and left it very open-ended. So the way I'm moving forward now is thinking about how I can reduce the labour I put out to save some of that for myself. The show has left me with new models to consider in making art because the current model isn't sustainable and I guess, in some way, that's the point.





P34-S18.RSMS





P36-S19.LSMS

All images courtesy the artist, Karinne Smith, & M23, New York

- P33-S16.RSMS Untitled (piece of Pinkie II), 2021, collagen dyed with soda, silicone, baby powder, ribbon, scrotum clamps, cotton rope, cast plaster melons, 124 x 52 x 36 inches (310 x 132 x 91 cm)
- P34-S18.RSMS Keeper 4, 2021 (detail; 30 October 2021), found photograph, melon, collagen, glass beads, plaster, plexiglass, resin, hardware, 29 x 20 x 8 inches (74 x 51 x 20 cm), (KS7)
- P35-S18.LSMS Keeper 1, 2021, found photograph, melon, collagen, glass beads, plaster, plexiglass, resin, hardware 29 x 20 x 8 inches (74 x 51 x 20 cm)
- P36-S19.LSMS Keeper 5, 2021 (18 September 2021), found photograph, melon, collagen, sewing pins, glass beads, plaster, plexiglass, 29 x 20 x 8 inches (74 x 51 x 20 cm) each
- P38-S20.LSMS Keeper 2, 2021 (20 September 2021), Found photograph, melon, collagen, dried carpenter bees, sewing pins, glass beads, plaster, plexiglass, 29 x 20 x 8 inches (74 x 51 x 20 cm)

P38-S20.LSMS

