

JOHN YAU Review in HYPERALLERGIC October 28, 2021

Emily Eveleth's paintings of doughnuts are lurid, funny, unsettling, sexy, off-putting, luscious, puffy, bawdy, and excessive.

How Much Syrup Can a Doughnut Leak?



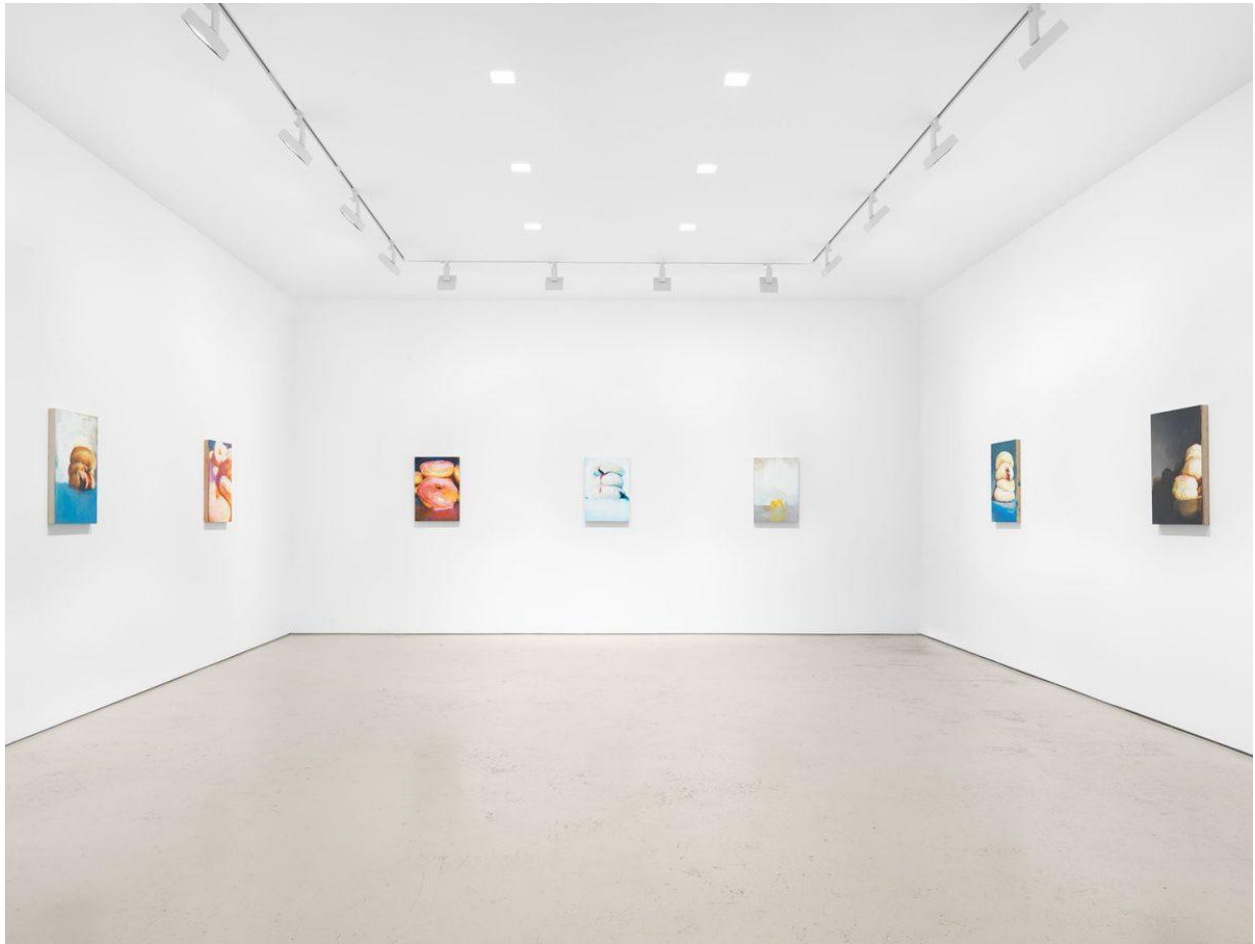
Emily Eveleth, "The Organization" (2020), oil on panel, 26 x 18 inches
(courtesy Emily Eveleth/Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

I distrust artists who have a signature style or subject, or what is called branding, but I also recognize that there are exceptions. Emily Eveleth is one of them. For 30 years she has painted doughnuts, those doughy round orbs slathered with frosting or powdered sugar, whose interior is filled with a syrupy substance, often dark blue or cherry red in her works, which leaks out of a single orifice.

Eveleth's donuts are not Wayne Thiebaud's pies and cakes. For one thing, because of the close-up views, cropping, and lighting, you can almost forget that you are looking at a doughnut, while in Thiebaud's depictions a cake is always first and foremost a cake.

Eveleth's paintings are lurid, funny, unsettling, sexy, off-putting, luscious, puffy, bawdy, and excessive. They are inventive flights of dislocation, in which the artist uses doughnuts and oil paint's creamy sensuality to connect a limbless torso and the sexual without become literal. This is a hard thing to do, but to keep doing it for more than three decades is astounding. Think of using doughnuts to riff on Gustave Courbet's view of a woman's genitalia in "Origin of the

World” (1866), Peter Paul Rubens’s zaftig women, and Anaïs Nin’s erotic stories, and you get an inkling of what Eveleth is up to.



Installation view of *Emily Eveleth* at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York
(image by Christopher Burke Studio; courtesy Emily Eveleth/Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

There are 14 oil paintings on panel, all measuring 26 by 18 inches, in the exhibition [*Emily Eveleth*](#) at Miles McEnery Gallery (October 21-November 27, 2021). Despite working within strict limitations of scale, and with the same subject, Eveleth does not repeat herself; her doughnuts do not become stale. From painting to painting, the lighting, composition, color, and even paint handling change, as does the mood.

This is one of the dilemmas of going to an Eveleth exhibition: it threatens to become too much. However, I think exorbitance is also one of the subjects of her work. Her paintings remind us that we live in an imprudent, redundant, and needless society. And yet, even as I say this, I want to emphasize that nothing is didactic about Eveleth’s paintings. For all their directness, fleshy sensuality, and dramatic lighting, they are neither simple nor preachy. Unpacking these paintings is one of the deep pleasures they offer. They are not only about surface.

Eveleth's work is about paint, not just as paint, but also as a generator of associations and connections, a viscous materiality that possesses metaphorical possibilities. She has taken to heart Willem de Kooning's statement that "flesh is the reason oil paint was invented" and done something with it, which cannot be said about many contemporary painters. Her convincing manipulation of oil paint's creamy materiality — her deft handling in service of her subject — is something I rarely see in contemporary art. She works on an intimate scale, as her subject calls for it. She wants to pull us in close.



Emily Eveleth, "The Quintessence of Debauchery" (2021), oil on panel, 26 x 18 inches
(courtesy Emily Eveleth/Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

When I was looking at "The Quintessence of Debauchery" (2021), I realized the only likely time that you would get so close to a doughnut would be when you are putting it in your mouth. By working in a zone of intimacy where taste and smell play a bigger role in our apprehension of the immediate world, Eveleth is connecting sight, taste, and touch. This is what distinguishes her work. While painting has historically emphasized the optical, Eveleth breaks down and deliberately unravels the categories.

I don't think it is quite right to say that Eveleth makes paintings that exist between abstraction and representation. Given that we know the subject, she explores the blurred area between legibility and illegibility. Her reasons for this are not purely formal.

In “The Quintessence of Debauchery,” Eveleth seems to have returned to one of her recurring inspirations, Courbet’s famed close-up view of a woman’s crotch, by closing in on a haphazard pile of doughnuts until nothing is seen in its entirety. We see the triangular top of a red-tinged opening extending up from the painting’s bottom left edge. Above and to the right of the triangle’s apex is a nearly black globule, evidently leaking out of another doughnut. A stack of four leaking orifices is directly above the triangle and globule. On the right side of the painting is an angled view of what looks like the side of two stacked doughnuts, but, as I began trying to decipher the paintings, I sensed the folly of what I was doing.

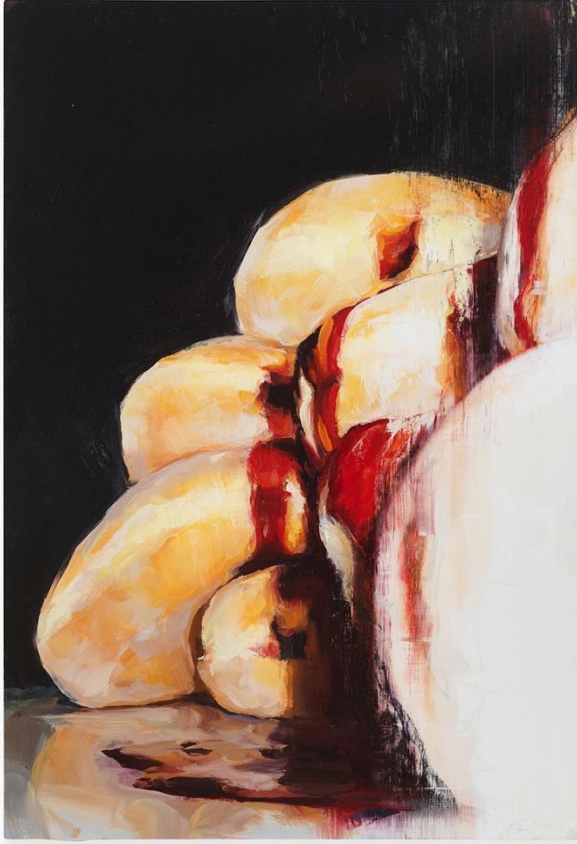


Emily Eveleth, “Boudoir” (2021), oil on panel, 26 x 18 inches
(courtesy Emily Eveleth/Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

Isn’t the inability to exactly name what you are looking at one of Eveleth’s subjects, her push back against Courbet’s stark view? Isn’t she celebrating a body dripping excess fluids? That frankness mixed with humor is one of the delights of her work. One of the greatest things about Hokusai’s woodblock print “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” (1814) is that it depicts a woman dreaming of being fondled by two octopi. We see her floating in a state of ecstatic abandon in which men are extraneous. Eveleth goes one step further. In her paintings, we see only the “torsos,” some of which are slowly leaking a thick, deep blue-purple liquid.

At the same time, what does it mean to be looking at syrup-filled torsos? Is this a body or a body part? This infuses the work with a disquieting edge. Are we looking at them as scenes of violence? This sense of possible violence is particularly true of “Curtain” (2021), a stack of doughnuts seen close up, all of which seem to be dripping cherry-red syrup.

What are these views the sights and sites of? Are they scenes of gluttony, post-coital exhaustion, sexual surrogates, aversion, savagery, and an endless push-pull?



Emily Eveleth, “Curtain” (2021), oil on panel, 26 x 18 inches
(courtesy Emily Eveleth/Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

And I haven’t even gotten to her use of color and lighting. Think of the doughnuts as characters in a nameless drama, and how the stage and costume designer, along with the lighting director, can inflect the mood. The pale pinks, yellows, and opalescent whites in “Boudoir” (2021), and the angle of the doughnut’s pose, pink frosting melting down its front edge, brought to mind the paintings of Jean-Honoré Fragonard, particularly “The Swing” (1767).

From “The Quintessence of Debauchery” to “Boudoir,” Eveleth covers a lot of ground. She is a masterful painter working on what might, at first, seem a frivolous subject, but it soon becomes clear that it isn’t. In her paintings, a doughnut is a doughnut and isn’t. That is the ambiguous zone we are invited to enter. In an age that prefers the literal, and the display of assets, from material goods to physical appearance, Eveleth asks us to connect the dots through the lowly doughnut, cheap, sweet, and readily available.

[Emily Eveleth](#) continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (520 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 27.