

GAVLAK

Anthony Sonnenberg *Cannons Buried in Flowers*

May 20 – July 1, 2023

GAVLAK, Los Angeles, CA

When folks individually and collectively defy the limiting sex and gender roles prescribed by prejudicial societies to enact authentic self-expression, their queerness is resistant and performative. But can objects be queer? The answer—a resounding yes—can be found in Anthony Sonnenberg’s solo exhibition *Cannons Buried in Flowers* at GAVLAK Los Angeles, on view from May 20 - July 1, 2023.

Anthony Sonnenberg’s newest body of sculptures follows the development of unique processes, passions, and investigations undertaken over the past decade. Sonnenberg builds clay structures that he covers with silk flowers, porcelain tchotchkes, and yards of textile trimmings. Spraying on layers of liquid ceramic slip, he obscures finer details of the objects, and consolidates his sculptures structurally and formally. Through glazing and subsequent re-firings, Sonnenberg offers a variety of matte, glassy, and lustrous finishes and range from mauve and chartreuse to frosty blue and rusty pink. Sonnenberg’s sculptures are filled with texture and event.

Personal Monument With Pipe (2023) unites melancholy and celebratory sensations. The sculpture stands three feet tall, and mirrors the shape of a gravestone. Sonnenberg has adorned it with flowers, frills, and figurines of angels and teddy bears. As its title infers, the sculpture’s pipe turns it into a bong. With his utilitarian anti-monument to impermanence, mourning and memory, Sonnenberg establishes a productively tense orchestration between camp, aesthetics, and affect.

This exhibition’s title is a reference to Fryderyk Chopin, whose compositions were called “*cannons buried in flowers*” by the composer Robert Schumann, who recognized the ways Chopin embedded Polish folk song traditions in his Romantic music, stirring national sentiments in the aftermath of a war that left many Poles exiled. Sonnenberg appreciates such drama and coded meanings, as they’re present in his work too. Sonnenberg’s openly hidden messages operate as “safe harbors, opportunities to build community, and a refuge.”

Sonnenberg’s artworks also mark the artist’s personal journey with homosexuality and his experiences as a fat-bodied man. He reckons the pleasures of standing out against those of fitting in, and challenges normative standards of desirability. This potential for emotive content and discovery is surfaced in his ceramics through what Sonnenberg calls “soft power.” Challenging the status quo in the art world entrenched hierarchies, designations like art, craft, and design offer contexts through

GAVLAK

which artworks may be approached and appreciated; they can also feel like limitations. Sonnenberg contends that designating objects as decorative has long been a form of denigration in the visual arts. In recent art history, the term gets deployed to describe artworks as frivolous or lacking seriousness. “Used pejoratively, the term ‘decorative’ is especially marginalizing,” he says. Recognizing that the right to self-determination is a shining goal for queer folks, might we not cast an equally generous eye over objects, allowing them to exist in all of their uniqueness and contradictions.

The apparent pleasure Anthony Sonnenberg takes in creating works that magnify and celebrate queer identity is resoundingly evident in *Cannons Buried in Flowers*: His sculptures drip with flora, take pride in their difference, and are deeply imbued with queer feeling.

Dean Daderko

May 2021

Anthony Sonnenberg

b. 1986, Graham TX
Lives and works in Fayetteville, AR

Anthony Sonnenberg works reside in the permanent collections of the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR and the Archie Bray Permanent Collection, Helena, MT. Recent solo exhibitions include presentations for the Art Museum of South East Texas, Beaumont, TX (2018); the Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX (2015); and the Old Jail Art Center, Albany, TX. His work was featured in recent group exhibitions including the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH (2020); the Fuller Craft Museum, Houston, TX (2019); the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (2019); the Institute of Contemporary Art at MeCA, Portland, ME (2017); and the Texas Biennial, Austin, TX (2011).