

GAVLAK

On Tony Sonnenberg's Recent Work

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Queerness comes in many forms. The refusal to subscribe to normative expectations is one of its many expressions. This is readily apparent when folks individually and collectively defy the limiting sex and gender roles prescribed by prejudicial societies. When queer individuals enact authentic self-expression, their queerness is resistant and performative. But what about objects? Can an object be queer? The answer to this question is a resounding yes, and it's apparent in Anthony Sonnenberg's exhibition *Cannons Buried in Flowers* at GAVLAK Los Angeles from May 20 - July 1, 2023.

Sonnenberg's newest body of sculptures follow the development unique processes, passions, and investigations undertaken over the past decade. He often begins by building clay understructures and covering them with silk flowers, porcelain tchotchkes, and yards of textile trimmings. When he's satisfied with volumes and compositions, they're coated in liquid ceramic slip. Sprayed on repeatedly, accumulating layers obscure finer details of the items encased in the clay. As the same time, the surface sedimentation consolidates the sculptures both structurally and formally, binding and unifying their composite parts. During firing in kilns, the objects encased in the clay burn away, and a fine shell remains. Through glazing and subsequent re-firings Sonnenberg offers a variety of matte, glassy, and lustrous finishes. For this presentation, the palette of Sonnenberg's glaze colors here ranges from mauve and chartreuse to frosty blues, lavender, rust, and buttery yellow. The creeping and crazing of Sonnenberg's proprietary glazes creates small fissures, inviting darkness and depth into colored surfaces that are filled with texture and event.

Sonnenberg's title for this exhibit—*Cannons Buried in Flowers*—points to the Romantic era composer Fryderyk Chopin. In the late 1700s, as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was embattled during annexation attempts by Prussian, Russian and Hapsburg occupying forces, Chopin escaped to Vienna. There, a mixture national pride and melancholy over his lost homeland suffused his music. As Karol Szymanowski notes, Chopin "understood that he could invest his music with the most enduring Polish qualities only by liberating art from the confines of dramatic historical contexts." The composer sought resolution by celebrating that which was lost. Recognizing this sense of pride, fellow composer Robert Schumann referred to Chopin's compositions as "cannons buried in flowers." His reimagined musical refrains would have had an added layer of affective significance for listeners able to identify their folk music sources. Such complex status negotiations will be familiar for many marginalized folks: Personal safety in a prejudicial society often hinges on couching coded information in plain sight. These messages can be object-oriented or ephemeral, as befits those

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circulating them and their intended audiences. Sonnenberg offers these signals as “safe harbors, opportunities to build community, and a refuge.”

With *Personal Monument With Pipe* (2023), Sonnenberg unites simultaneously melancholy and celebratory sensations. Standing three feet tall, the sculpture’s rounded top references the iconic shape of gravestones. On closer inspection, the sculpture’s white glaze reveals shell pink and icy blue drips. Sonnenberg has adorned the structure with flowers, frills, and figurines of angels and teddy bears, though they’re cast in a game of hide-and-seek. Most apparently, Sonnenberg keeps questions about camp, taste, and irony in a productively tense orchestration. Those who continue exploring may discover something unexpected: a pipe piercing this memorial effectively renders it a bong. With its multiple functionalities, this bong/tombstone serves up mourning and memory, impermanence, vessel and monument to perception.

Sonnenberg’s artworks mark a personal journey. While coming to terms with his homosexuality in small-town Texas, “one thing that gave me solace was my early sense that creatives, and especially men involved in creating beauty, like hairstylists, florists, fashion designers, and interior decorators, seemed to be gay. This was a good thing, since I loved art and appreciated all of these fields. I knew I could find my place.” More recently, Sonnenberg has spoken about his experiences as a fat-bodied man. He’s reckoning the pleasures of standing out against those of fitting in, along with the constrictions of normative standards of desirability. This potential for emotive content and discovery is surfaced in his ceramics. Though his sculptures are unabashedly *extra*, he’s not serving drama for drama’s sake. He’s exploring what he’s referring to as “soft power.” Challenging the status quo, his sculptures circulate in art worlds where Minimalism is positioned as a lingua franca, utilitarianism is a dirty word, and withholding gets perceived as a form of power. Within entrenched hierarchies, designations like art, craft, and design offer contexts through which artworks may be approached and appreciated, but they can also be limiting. Why isn’t a candelabra a sculpture? Who feels the need to argue that a functioning bong isn’t a serious artwork? If the right to self-determination is a shining goal for queer folks, might we not equally cast generous eyes over the objects around us, relying on familiar perceptions when they’re useful and knocking them back when they feel restrictive?

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