



FooGayZee
New Paintings by John Avelluto
ESSAY BY JEANNINE BARDO

Note: An essay on the work of John Avelluto will be rife with new language, hyphens and quotation marks with a few expletives thrown in. The real and the unreal may seem to overlap and the reader may become confused. Read carefully, but do not be afraid to let things take on new meaning.

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John Avelluto is playful and John Avelluto is serious. It is sometimes difficult to discern what role he is playing or if he is even playing a role. At first glance, his work comes through as playful. He commonly works in series that defy reality, subjects painted in trompe l'oeil such as loose-leaf paper with pencil markings of text that declare an emotion or an expletive, pop-culture figures painted on "paper" (Avelluto makes his parchment out of paint) and for his latest series, Avelluto sculpts Italian pastries out of paint on "marble" slabs and real candy death masks for consumption. There is humor, a nod to formalist abstraction and a raised middle finger to anyone who chooses to take his seriousness AND/OR his playfulness into the literal.

The title of his solo show "FooGayZee" is also teeming with hidden meanings and unknown origins. It stems from the slang word fugazi or fugazy, a word that possibly came from an Italian bank founder, an Italian-American limousine business man, the Hollywood movie Donnie Brasco or the mixed use of the word during the Vietnam War credited by no one in particular, as a bastardized version of the French fougasse (type of land mine) or acronym for "fucked up, got ambushed, zipped in [a body bag]".⁽¹⁾

As a first-generation, Brooklyn born, Italian-American, Avelluto grew up surrounded by tropes and the shaping of language that culture clashes form. He appreciates the tension that hybridization sparks and is acutely aware of the visceral changes that form when "American" culture subsumes the art and identity of its newer Americans. For this series, Avelluto as a contemporary painter, uses color symbolically and focuses on the formal aspects of the work, but then flips it on end by representing a humble cookie that was originally created to honor the homeland of the Italian immigrants who settled in Brooklyn. The three-color or seven-layer cookie, with a street name of "rainbow" cookie was designed to

symbolize the Italian flag with its red white and green stripes and Avelluto uses this subject as an homage to Italian culture.

The three “paintings” *Untitled I-III* are a series of life-size three-color cookies on marble slabs. Avelluto makes the “cookies” out of acrylic paint by building layers with pigment and acrylic medium to give it different textures. They are then strewn on a painted, faux marble slab to look like the real thing, akin to a food model that a restaurant or food distributor displays to represent the food that is sold at their establishment.

The four-painting series, *To The People of Bensonhurst (after FooGayZee Blinky Palermo)* not only questions the loaded symbolism of the flag and the kind of nationalism it can elicit, it is also a direct nod to modern abstraction and artist Blinky Palermo’s series, *To the People of New York City*, 1976 in which Palermo used the colors of the German flag and/or the Native American visual culture of New York to paint a series of three-striped paintings. Palermo’s group of paintings was meant to be read as a whole with the striped colors changing to become one movement inspired by the jazz music he encountered living in New York City.⁽²⁾ Avelluto’s installation is similar, but he takes it to another level by giving the paint the lusciousness of painter Wayne Theibald’s Americana confections of pies and pastries and the impasto and sculptural quality of the flags of Jasper Johns. Blinky Palermo’s biography is another aspect that wraps Avelluto’s work up into tighter and tighter riddles. Avelluto seemingly plays the jokester and the critic and the art historian by choosing to reference an artist who takes the name of another person, albeit a Philadelphia mobster, as a device to bring attention to his work as an abstract painter. SO, the **real** Blinky Palermo was a mobster from Philadelphia and the painter who took his name was the German artist, Peter Heisterkamp, fugazy embodied.

The painting *FooGayZee* is in-your-face Avelluto. Its large, clownish scale built as a relief and masterfully painted with the phonetic text of the word fugazy sculpted out of the surface is full of his wry wit and elevates the three-color cookie once again into the realm of contemporary art not unlike the over-scale sculptures of Claes Oldenburg’s everyday objects. It screams to be taken seriously with its size and formal qualities while at the same time it simply makes one smile.

ManZoeNee (Artists Gotta Eat To Make Work) is another of Avelluto's work that might make you smile or laugh but of course there is more, so much more. Avelluto once again plays with language and sculpts his phonetic spelling of Manzoni (ManZoeNee) into the surface. The first thing that is different from Avelluto's "norm" is that this work is not made out of paint. Avelluto leaves the material he loves best and creates the three-color cookie out of edible marzipan. Even more to smile about, but the meanings still twist and turn when you are made aware of the fact that the Italian avant-garde artist he references in this work, Piero Manzoni was best known for his work titled, *Artist's Shit*, a series of ninety cans of shit that may or may not be feces from the artist himself, canned for consumption.⁽³⁾ You may find your initial naïve thoughts now engender disgust or more laughter or both? Manzoni critiqued the commodification and consumption of the artist's body and Avelluto does the same by making this "painting" out of marzipan as well as the death masks that are in this exhibition.

And now...about the death masks...There are two iterations of the death mask in this exhibition. Avelluto goes deep into two Italian cultural institutions that still thrive in the everchanging city of New York, the Garibaldi Meucci Museum in Staten Island and Villabate Alba Bakery in Brooklyn for inspiration for this unusual series.

Villabate Alba bakery in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn is where the *real* three-color cookies are made and is the inspiration for making the marzipan traditionally called *frutta martorana*.⁽⁴⁾ Avelluto learned about the trade and made his own marzipan for *ManZoeNee* and his small, ready for immediate consumption, palm-sized marzipan death mask candies, titled *Meucci Martorana*.

Avelluto came across the original death mask of Antonio Meucci after he was invited to visit the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum by a fellow artist. A death mask is a likeness of a person's face after their death, usually made by taking a cast or impression from the corpse, traditionally made with plaster or wax.⁽⁵⁾ The 160-year-old house that is now the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum in Staten Island, was once the residence of Antonio Meucci, a prolific Italian inventor, engineer and chemist who developed a voice communication apparatus called the teletrofoni in 1857. Many people argue that he should be credited with the invention of the telephone. Meucci opened his home to the Italian general, revolutionary

and major figure in the unification of Italy, Guiseppe Garibaldi while he was exiled for a short time.⁽⁶⁾ It is now a museum that protects the history of Garibaldi and Meucci and preserves and promotes an understanding of Italian-American culture. The museum generously granted access to the original death mask of Meucci to Avelluto when he returned to take an image of the mask with a digital scanner. The scan was then used to create 3D prints made of acrylic resin that Avelluto used as a mold to make his marzipan *Meucci Martorona and Eco, Ecco, Ecko*. a life-size Meucci death mask painted with acrylic.

Avelluto uses the technology of today, 3D printing, to make a portrait of a portrait of a technological genius of yesterday, Meucci. A death mask, to some, exists in the realm of the macabre, but Avelluto once again twists the meaning of the work by asking us to consider a literal taste of Italy by making a piece that can be consumed, or saved as a treasure in *Meucci Martorona*. Wry and humorous it is also poignant and fitting since the wicked machinations of capitalism took possession of Meucci's patent, twisted it through the U.S. legal system and planted it in the lap of Alexander Graham Bell, leaving Meucci penniless and a minor player in the annals of American history. A familiar and tragic story retold again and again by the powerless and marginalized. Now we are left with the opportunity to consume the genius once again, but in a more reverent and enlightened way.

Avelluto's decision to title the larger death mask, *Eco, Ecco, Ecko* is a clever play on words that is here and there and full of different meanings that span the Italian language, street fashion, systems, an on-line simulation game, and maybe even the reverberation of sound waves made into electric energy that is the science behind the telephone. Avelluto loves to play with paint and loves to play with language and the fluidity of both add to the complexity of his work.

Writing about Avelluto is confounding. At first you are hit with a sweet, funny image that is nostalgic, especially for Brooklynites, and when you go deeper, you find yourself emerged in Avelluto's mind and heart that lovingly, mockingly, critically, intellectually and humorously take on a myriad of cultural, political and personal subjects. Included in the mix is a critique of the capitalist system that consumes us all. The irony continues with the fact that this beloved cookie, now more commonly called a

“rainbow cookie” that was originally meant to honor a homeland can now be found on the shelves of super markets and big box stores.

Avelluto is versed in both art-speak and street slang, art history and pop-culture, high culture and low culture, food and wine and candy and cookies, otherness and belonging, the joker and the fool, the formal and the kitsch, the real and the fugazy. He is all of this and in all of his serious playfulness, he shows us that WE are all of this. “*Capisci?*”

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