

Impasta Handbags: All Puns Intended

by Paul D'Agostino

Viewers familiar with John Avelluto's art will be pleased to see that the Brooklyn artist's newest bodies of work, showcased in several different manners of presentation in his solo show *Impasta Handbags*, evidence a broad expansion of his trademark *trompe-l'œil* objects informed by language, humor, art history, Italian American culture, and a bafflingly rigorous regard for materials, detail, and process.

Viewers unfamiliar with Avelluto's art will also be pleased with what they find, for the experience of encountering his work for the first time, and coming to an eventual understanding of it, is a consummate pleasure.

What seasoned and novice viewers will discover together, however, in *Impasta Handbags*, is Avelluto's thorough, vastly engaging upping of the ante in terms of material mastery, visual trickery, linguistic cleverness, cultural commentary, and layered, embedded punnery. Consequently, all visitors to Avelluto's exhibit, first-timers and long-timers alike, will be promptly excused – excused, that is, for being convinced that they know what they're looking at, even while not exactly knowing what they're looking at. They'll be excused because they'll also, in all likelihood, be partially right in their convictions, and not fully privy to precisely why, on the one hand, they are right – and why, on the other, they're not.

I already sense you furrowing your brows. Why all the contrivance? Why such convolution? Is it really possible for it to be all so paradoxical? If so, are all the paradoxes truly necessary?

The answers to those questions are, respectively:

1 – Because contrivance makes the heart grow fonder, or in this case, it makes the viewer look harder.

2 – Because even the simplest things, especially with regard to art, are often more involved than meets the eye, and thus more complicated or layered than they seem.

3 – Yes.

4 – Also, yes.

By now I'd guess your furrowed brow is further furrowed, and maybe complemented by a squint of quizzical impatience. So allow me to get down to brass tacks.

On that note, Avelluto has made brass tacks. He has also made paper, paper airplanes, burned paper, and parchment. He has made wooden panels, tabletops, linoleum blocks, and marble slabs. He has made scotch tape, painter's tape, duct tape, and bandages. He has made fried eggs, chocolate chip cookies, wedges of cheese, slices of pizza, whole pizzas, and checkered tablecloths. He has also made pasta, tomatoes, olives, peppers, herbs, oozy mozzarella, shaved and grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, and marinara and meat sauces. And he's made essentially every delectable sweet treat you might salivate over at an Italian *pasticceria*, and most all the sliced meats and sausages you might find at a *salumeria*. Other works of his recall items in the fridges or display cases of a *latteria*, *gelateria*, or *pescheria*, or on the racks and shelves of a *panetteria*.

Avelluto has also made gilded frames, gold chains, and crucifixes. And Mediterranean icons and talismans. And human skin, hair, and beads of sweat. And of course, pepperoni nipples. Crispy pepperoni nipples. The kind of crispy pepperoni slivers whose char-crunchy mouthfeel you can readily sense, and whose oily sizzle is virtually audible. To look upon the greasy centers and pucker-cup-crust-edged edges of these coin-shaped, ostensibly wood-fired slices is a direct act of seeing inflected by indirect, cognitively associative modes of smelling, touching, tasting, and maybe hearing. The act of looking at most all of Avelluto's multifarious artworks is a similarly multi-sensory experience, even if only a few feature mixed-use nipples.

Indeed, the very variety of objects Avelluto makes is an important concern in his practice. Over the years, he has consistently broadened their type and range in part due to the interdisciplinarity of his aesthetic, historical, cultural, and material interests. In part, he's done so because his enthusiasm for verisimilitude – its possibilities, its challenges, its realization, its meanings, its metaphors, and its ever-malleable parameters – is positively boundless. And in part, he's made such a vast array of objects thanks to his profound love for painting.

Painting? Yes, painting. Because when I say that Avelluto has made all of these things, what I mean is that he has painted them. And when I say that he has painted them, what I mean is that he has built them out of paint. This entails variable methodologies. At times, he builds objects out of paint, then paints them, and presents them as objects. At times, he builds them as objects, then presents them on surfaces as paintings. He even builds painting surfaces out of paint – panels, textiles, paper, marble – and arranges painted objects on them compositionally like so many formal matters to be mediated on a picture plane. Avelluto's tools are many and sundry, and his processes of pouring, layering, slicing, splicing, sculpting, and retouching are just as various. His compositional modes and manners of presentation also run an expansive gamut. Yet his medium is essentially just one: acrylic paint.

For this reason, no matter what viewers think they're looking at in *Impasta Handbags* – marble, paper, wood, or gold; skin, hair, sweat, or jewelry; cookies, cakes, fritters, cannoli, or sprinkles; ravioli, penne, ziti, parsley, pizza, pomodorini, mozzarella, mortadella, salsiccia, soppressata – what they're actually looking at is paint. In turn, since the objects at hand, however sculptural, are crafted from paint, then all these things viewers are looking at are, simply put, paintings.

Especially regarding the food items, Avelluto makes many of these pieces precisely to scale, and with a level of textural meticulousness that makes their simulacra-like ‘realness’ almost hyperreal. The slyly *trompe-l’œil* aspects of such verisimilitude make the works particularly captivating, in a visual and meta-sensorial sense, but also particularly questionable. ‘That’s not actually marble, is it?’ one might ask. ‘And those aren’t actually cannoli, are they?’ The answer to such questions is, of course, ‘No, but also, yes.’

Avelluto’s virtuosic handling of his beloved medium, acrylic paint, has served as an increasingly fitting conduit to bring his artistic and critical interests into confluence. In his most recent works, as evidenced by the series of paintings in *Impasta Handbags*, the artist’s virtuosic touch has also led him to delve ever more deeply into the types of puns, linguistic paradoxes, and layered humors that become uniquely possible and aesthetically cogent only once certain touchstones of verisimilitude are achieved. For instance, paintings that feature scrumptious foods on unlikely or precious surfaces – such as *Sant’Anonimo* and *A Tree Grows in Bensonhurst* – are at once an apotheosis of culinary brilliance and the nearly exaggerated importance of beauty in Italian cuisine, and a humored take on cross-cultural modes of veneration and the ubiquity of spirituality. *A Big Nothing*, featuring a colorfully sprinkled wreath of sticky-sweet struffoli fritters and pastel confetti almonds configured on a slab of marble, is especially exemplary of this. It’s a divinely presented dessert, festively festooned, sacred and profane, venerable and edible, comestible and plastic, iconic and iconoclastic – and ‘real’ and ‘not real’ – all at once. Also, it’s just a painting.

Several other works in *Impasta Handbags* feature layered sheets of skin, follicle-thin strands of hair, and extraordinarily convincing droplets of perspiration, all made of acrylic paint, that come together to make unmistakably manifest a suite of hairy, sweaty chests. In one of these works, *HowUdoin?*, a chunky gold Cuban chain is slung heftily around an implied neck, likely one with rather jacked trapezoids, just outside of the picture plane. Dangling from the chain’s clasp is a huge cross featuring a large, bloodied visage of Christ wearing the crown of thorns. Like a couple other ‘hairy chest’ pieces in the show – *Pimento Nips*, where the figure’s nipples are concealed or replaced by pimento-stuffed green olives, and *Pepperoni Cups*, where slivers of crispy pepperoni furnish the ersatz nips – this one both implies and literalizes the matter of paint becoming incarnate when deployed to figurative ends, namely in portraiture or related types of body depictions. This piece, a double portrayal at least – the headless ‘subject’ wearing the necklace, plus the ‘head of Christ’ as the pendant charm – carries the incarnation pun outwards into a third dimension, upwards into spiritual echelons of religiosity, and then away into some metaphysical beyond as a metaphor for material transubstantiation. Yet again – flesh, faith, jewelry, and bloody iconography aside – it’s all still ‘just paint’, and thus still ‘just a painting’, indeed an implicitly humorous one at that. Avelluto never tires of the now solemn, now comical suggestiveness of such paradoxical equivalences, making the work’s title, *HowUdoin?*, a kind of inversely rhetorical wisecrack on a rather different question, ‘What would Jesus do?’

From Avelluto’s faux surfaces and embellished accoutrements to his hyperreal foods and figurations, there are plenty of ‘impostor’ objects to speak of in *Impasta Handbags*. All the

artificial types of pasta, of course, are the true ‘impastas’. But what about the ‘handbags’? Well, on the one hand – pun intended – there are no handbags to be seen, if by handbags we’re talking about purses. On the other hand – again, pun intended – there are dozens upon dozens of handbags, or rather ‘handbags’, in Avelluto’s newest works. That’s because here, the word ‘handbag’ is a near-synonymous stand-in for the Italian expression ‘*mano a borsa*’, which basically translates to ‘hand in the form of a bag’, which is the way one can refer, in words, to a certain hand gesture often used by Italians and Italian Americans, a gesture that can mean so many different things depending on mood and context that even extensive entries on it in Italian gesture dictionaries – yes, these exist – tend to come up short. Nonetheless, despite the gesture’s many meanings and variable lexicality, it came to be much more widely known and used when it became, not too long ago, an emoji. It’s the one that turns up as you type in ‘hand gesture’ or ‘pinched fingers’, or in Italian, ‘*gesto*’. This was met with surprise and delight, and sometimes slightly forced chagrin, by many Italians and Italian Americans, and before long, brief tutorials began circulating online in which people try to teach others how and when to use the emoji. Needless to say – yet again, pun intended – most of those videos, albeit well-intentioned and humorous, are generally useless.

This peculiar phenomenon was almost too good to be true for Avelluto. He immediately tapped into the comical, meta-linguistic popularity of the ‘handbag’ emoji, and he began putting it to great use in his work. Since it can mean so many things, it’s something of a silent shout, as far as puns go. And as far as forms go, it has a certain elegance to its subtly arcing contours. Harnessing the emoji’s expressiveness and shapeliness at once, Avelluto recreates the emoji over and over at various scales by excising the instantly recognizable shape from thick acrylic films of various colors – often green, white, and red, of course, and sometimes gold – and he arranges these forms as subjects of focus, as repeating patterns, and as partially hidden types of alt-form, Rorschach-like configurations. The ‘handbags’ gesture to the viewer and to each other. They gesture to and about the surfaces they embellish. They point to or objectify the subjects they surround. They come to the fore and nestle into the background. They indicate and inflect. And they inquire, critique, bemoan, beseech, reflect, redirect, and deflect.

One of these ‘handbag’ works in particular, *Impasta Impasto*, brings all such formal uses, material puns, Italian American references, and variably titular relevances full circle. Here, Avelluto presents a dynamic, entrancingly radial composition featuring three tiers of ‘handbag’ emojis in bright red, deep crimson, and olive green. From bottom to top, the emojis gesture upwards until they turn to gesture inwards, all the while directing the viewer’s gaze to and around a dispersed trinity of plump ravioli affixed to a light green surface. At the circular juncture point of this swirl of hands, wrists, and forearms, then, is what appears to be a toothsome serving of *penne rigate alla marinara*, presented with rustic elegance with shavings of Parmigiano-Reggiano and parsley garnishes. This conflux of emojis, penne, and ravioli is a humorous reference to the aggrandized importance of presentational aesthetics in Italian cuisine, not to mention a witty nod to the omnipresence of pasta cooking tutorials online. At the same time, the painting also features various types of sculpted ‘drips’, ‘brushstrokes’, and ‘impasto’ textures on the surfaces of the emojis, as well as select gold accents creating occasionally

luminescent halo effects. Crafted entirely out of acrylic paint, this single work encompasses puns about and references to social media, cuisine, spirituality, and Italian American culture, while also making plastically blatant the fact that deep lineages of pictorial traditions and art historical antecedents are what allow for the artist's ranging commentaries to converge into critical, formal, and compositional coherence.

In *Impasta Handbags*, John Avelluto's visual tricks and embedded cultural puns are many and profound, but they're also profoundly fun. His paintings entail contrivance and convolution, material virtuosity and linguistic nuance, and they subtly obscure and disclose inherent paradoxes. Yet for Avelluto, of paramount importance is that his variably legible work carries its conceptual baggage – pun intended – very lightly, if not also deliciously, delectably, and delightfully. The artist is most satisfied when his paradoxical punnery communicates something funny, too, or even yummy. On that note, here's an apropos closing quip: *Leave the puns, take the cannoli.*

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