

Exhibition Review

Impasta Handbags: New Paintings by John Avelluto.

Curated by Paul D'Agostino.

Stand4 Gallery, Brooklyn, New York.

October 14–November 25, 2023.

This exhibition of twenty-four trompe-l'œil works by the contemporary artist John Avelluto reflects the Brooklyn-born artist's interest in the way in which consumption informs the production of what he calls "selective national heritage."¹

Food is, unsurprisingly, at the center of this artistic negotiation of Italian American culture taking on the role as a representation of identity, consumption, amusement, and even as a symbol of the rituals of Catholicism. Avelluto entertains and provokes the viewer, and the title of the show itself is a double entendre. It is a reference not only to pasta but to the concept of the imposter, the interloper, and the trickster, a recurring theme in these collages of wordplay, texture, and images. The viewer can also infer a third meaning, one that references the impasto painting technique that layers paint to create a dimensional surface. As well, the word *handbag* recalls the Italian phrase *mano a borsa* ("hand in the form of a bag" or "purse hand"), the gesture of a thumb and fingers pinched together. At the heart of this show is the idea of a sort of *jouer le jeu*, and we are to infer that this is a place of witty nonsensical ambiguity. Identity and meaning in the realm of the visual and material place of diasporic Italian American culture is forever changing. Cast aside your reverence for the greats of Italian fine art, symbols of piety, and culinary achievement, and revel in Avelluto's boldly amusing artistic impudence.

Avelluto's first language was Italian, and his work reflects the way in which the mosaic of language and diasporic culture forms a sense of self, filtered through artistic experimentation that pushes against conservative aspects while also engaging in the lexicon of Italian domestic life. In these entertaining works he seeks to balance stereotypes with the gravitas of the monolith of Italian artistic, culinary, cultural traditions, history, and a sense of levity. Avelluto achieves this through wordplay, plastic illusionism, and the marriage of sacred imagery and metaphor inflected with motifs of stereotypes, reliquaries of food, and Italianate emblems. Works such as *Cannoli Ultrasound* feature hyper-realistic depictions of what appear to be collaged sculptures of popular Italian American dessert foods (actually formed from paint) and function as commentary on the artistic importance of presentation in Italian American food production and display.

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The ordinary is at the core of the artist's objects and images; he uses household and studio materials as "unwilling sculptural material, allowing paint to represent an object in its actual three-dimensional form." Avelluto applies acrylic paint, manipulating the surface through a process of cutting, texturizing, and, according to the artist, "sanding with kitchen tools" and finishing with paint brushes. Collage elements are attached with the paint itself. In viewing the objects, one can see the hand of the artist, pulled into the wordplay of each image, there is an enduring irreverence and affection for vernacular language of diasporic Italian culture and an examination of the consumption of material objects as cultural production and identity.

In a conversation, the artist shared that as a child he always made things, continually experimenting with objects and materials found in the house, later illustrating rave flyers and skateboard decks. He studied English at university and earned an MFA from CUNY. Of his relationship to the meaning of being Italian American, Avelluto said:

I feel as though I have a unique relationship with Italian and Italian American culture. I grew up a first-generation IA in a time when most of the people in my community were second, third, and fourth gen[eration]. Many of the cultural practices that my parents kept had already been filtered out of the consciousness of popular IA culture. I felt a bit too Italian for the IAs, but not Italian enough for the Italians. After developing relationships with many people outside my background in NYC, I was able to observe my identity coolly and at a distance. While I am still very interested in the lexicon of objects, practices, and rituals associated with the culture, I allow myself to take liberties with them as an artist.

Indeed, the pieces are often jarringly irreverent, and the illusionistic artifice of the paintings forces the viewer to look closely. In this, one finds a moment of both humor and awe at the cleverness and inventiveness of the artist, such as we see in the trompe-l'œil picture *A Big Nothing*, an acrylic painting of a wreath-like formation of desserts including Jordan almonds and *struffoli* set against a white marble tabletop. This neo-surrealist sense of freedom and willingness to experiment is clear in the other works: *Eye-Italians* combines the gestural and graphic imagery of twentieth-century Pop Art with the image of the evil eye and gold of Catholic altarpieces in the colors of the Italian flag. *Maloik* and *Cornoot II* continue to explore these signs of superstition and the interest in Italian culture as food and the material traditions' association with this form of cultural consumption and pride.

Of particular interest is the way in which the artist uses Italian words, evoking what Avelluto calls a "plasticity," namely the shifting spelling, pronunciation, and meaning (reflecting a living and ever-changing spoken language in

Italian American culture). Much of the work is also rooted in the art and symbolism Avelluto was exposed to in the Catholic Church and his interest in the religious art of the Renaissance masters. In particular, he notes that the mystical and deeply abstract concept of transubstantiation informed his practice, facilitating a willingness to transform materials to create imagery of double meaning. Indeed, *Sanfilippo Fountain* seems an irreverent nod to the wound in the side of Christ. Within the sliced canvas one sees a feast of culinary delights, the body of Christ, the partaking of the Eucharist now a metaphor for the almost sacred acts of cooking, eating, and preparing food as a way to perform and preserve the culture of Italian America. It is, of course, reductionist to imagine that anything representational has a simple meaning; in this show, we are brought to a place of playfulness of language and symbolism and confronted with the idea that the representational can be multivalent, coded, and continually in flux. Here is art that humorously engages us with contemporary imagery, pop culture, and Italian American identity and resides in the mysticism of Catholicism and the tradition of surrealist trompe-l'œil.

The show is accompanied by curator Dr. Paul D'Agostino's catalog essay "Impasta Handbags: All Puns Intended."

—ROSA JH BERLAND

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Notes

1. All quotes are from my interview with the artist, November 2023.