

LUCY DODD

*Cake 4 Catfish*

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In his great essay “The Falling Trapeze,” Yve-Alain Bois confesses to his astonishment upon first hearing Jean Fautrier’s painting described as cake: “The lowbrow nickname startled me: as a Frenchman who spent his youth in the (then) rarified atmosphere of Parisian museums and galleries, I had been accustomed to hearing highfalutin and sanctimonious comments about Fautrier’s works—hardly ‘birthday cake.’”

Bois’s surprise, which he develops in the course of his thinking on Fautrier, is, however, part of a wider pattern; this pattern emerges as one begins to consider the word, the concept, the sign /cake/ within the marked (solar) discourse of painting. Wasn’t Barnett Newman, for example, publicly and vocally horrified by Thiebaud’s cakes? It is not merely that one particular intellectual was once surprised and affronted by /cake/, but, conversely, and more broadly, that /cake/ is, by definition, always a surprise, always what one finds smeared, excessively, and in the wrong way, on one’s face.

Why then has there not yet been a theory of /cake/?

Is it that /cake/ splits painting in half, on the one hand pushing it down, driving it back into its origins as colored earth (that is: /cake/ means: the destiny of painting is the body of painting, just as the destiny of earth is, literally, the earth), while on the other, and conversely, insisting on painting’s inescapable position as frothy, sugary excess, as permanent rococo, too eager to attract and be consumed?

If /cake/ is perhaps doubled—that is, wrong in two opposite ways—the exhibition, is, likewise, divided in two sections, in both space and time: /show/ and /beyond/ /show/. The relationship between the two sections is determined by a narrow crevice, the passageway between the *The Doors...* “One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small...” In both sections, though, the destiny of /cake/ is given by the figure of the catfish, or—allowing for a theoretical proposition to be expressed as a zoological allegory: /cat/ /fish/—as well as the remembrance, in story, of the cliffs at Varkala beach, called Papanasam (the sin-destroyer, the watery completion—this too is in the exhibition—of the cycle of birth and death). Painting becomes earth; earth (cake-cliffs; the cliffs of cake) crumbles, over eons, softly, swooningly, like cake, into the sea.

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Note that at least three of the paintings, like the artist’s namesake, are, literally, blind(s).

“There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.”

—Barnett Newman

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