

Art in America

Tony Tasset
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A mound of bean dip. A puddle of multipurpose cleaner. A glob of blackberry yogurt. Three-dimensional re-creations in colored resin and other mediums of a few dozen food and consumer products, along with the actual bottles and containers associated with the original goods, cover a 72-by-54-inch wood panel, making up a composition titled *Baby Muscle*. It is a typical work in Tony Tasset's series of "Spill Paintings," which could also be called "Goo Fests" or "Kitchen Nightmares." Whatever they're called, these works are gross and good fun all at the same time.

Although some of the pieces have been included in group shows, this exhibition of 11 new examples (all 2014) was the first devoted to the series, which Tasset began in 2012. The origins of the "Spill Paintings" can be traced to several different strands of the Chicago artist's earlier work. He previously depicted food items in pieces such as *Pumpkin Sculpture* (1998) and the large-scale, cartoonish sculpture *Hot Dog Man* (2011), and his use of found objects (like the jars and bottles in the "Spill Paintings") started with *My Empire* (2011), a 6-foot-tall assemblage of detritus that came from cleaning out his office.

The connection between these paintings and 1960s Pop art and its commentary on mass marketing, mass consumption and mass production is obvious. Loose precedents include works ranging from Tom Wesselmann's mixed-medium still lifes featuring objects like whiskey bottles and sliced bread to Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and soup cans to Claes Oldenburg's oversize soft sculptures of food. Tasset builds on and updates such work, as he suggests by describing this series as "pop conceptualism."

Like much of Tasset's earlier work, including his painted aluminum I-Beam (1996) or his spooky series of "Snowman" sculptures (2003-), the "Spill Paintings" explore the uneasy intersection of reality and illusion. His obsessively perfectionist synthetic evocations of spinach dip, horseradish and thousand-island dressing look uncannily authentic right down to their color and consistency. The artist goes so far as to clean out the original containers and refill them with his look-alike concoctions, which he then spills or splashes onto the panel surface for maximum realistic effect.

At the same time, take away the attached packages and references to consumer products, and what is left are compelling Abstract Expressionist-style paintings with thick, creamy textures and bold colors. Indeed, is it just a coincidence that the craggy vertical cascades of resin and the brown and red colors in *Genuine Ah!* echo Clyfford Still? Or that the gestural, interlocking sections of color in *Night and Day* conjure Willem de Kooning? Hardly. Tasset wants savvy viewers to make these connections. But by tying these swishes, daubs and splotches to spilled juice and wasabi sauce, what would otherwise be abstract compositions are suddenly snatched away from the world of formalism and the unconscious and given direct, overt meanings. The interplay between these two worlds gives these works much of their power. Call it making a mess with a purpose.