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Alfred Mac Adam

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ARTSEEN | DEC/JAN 2024-25

Yuli Yamagata: *Ghosts Don't Wear Watches*

By Alfred Mac Adam



Yuli Yamagata, *Self-Digestion Fountain*, 2024. Polyester resin, fiberglass, automotive paint, epoxy, acrylic paint, chrome pigment, aquarium pumps and tubes, 66 7/8 × 65 × 45 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery. Photo: Izzy Leung.

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Yuli Yamagata was born in São Paulo, where the Brazilian avant-garde was born in the 1922 Week of Modern Art. Self-conscious, cynical about its possibilities, *Modernismo* was charged with irony and dark humor; the poet Oswald de Andrade founded a magazine he called the *Anthropophagy Manifesto* to define the relationship between Brazilian and European culture. Brazilians, he asserted, would cannibalistically eat European culture. But it was a woman, Oswald's then-wife Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), who gave the movement its icon by painting *Abaporú* (1928), “man who eats people” in the language of the Tupi-Guarani people. The irreverence of that movement achieves a new life in Yuli Yamagata; if the *modernistas* appeared at Brazil's centenary in 1922, Yamagata comes along one century later to express the Brazil of her times: cosmopolitan, polyglot, and pluricultural.

*Ghosts Don't
Wear Watches*
Anton Kern
Gallery
October 30–
December 21,
2024
New York

This is Yamagata's third show with Anton Kern, and she has filled two floors of the gallery with floor sculptures, wall pieces, a mobile, and a video starring an outcast snail, *Frooty Looping Serial Death* (all works 2024). If the *modernistas* of the twenties defined themselves through an act—deglutition—Yamagata defines herself through interrelated processes: eating, sex, digestion, and death. Metamorphosis, usually at a dizzying speed, lies at the center of her esthetic.

Take her *Self-Digestion Fountain*, the first piece the visitor encounters. It is a fountain, obscenely peeing water downwards, curiously evoking Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*. But where his urinal stands in pristine glory, Yamagata's fountain is surrounded by bones, vaguely intestinal shapes, a fork—an astonishing image of artistic creation as self-consumption (it is, as well, reminiscent of the performance of Keith Boadwee's paint enemas; *Ghosts Don't Wear Watches* overlaps with a show of his new work also on display at Anton Kern). This is a meditation on the work of art as remnant, as the artifact that materializes after the creative process has spent its energy. The idea of the work of art as leftover reappears in another floor piece, *Microwave Motocross Horror Show*. Yamagata has constructed a motorcycle smash-up, the rear wheel of her fabric machine held aloft by a chain hanging from the ceiling, intestines pouring out. The action is over and only the wreck remains.

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Yuli Yamagata, *Ghosts Don't Wear Watches*, 2024. Elastane, chrome spray, silicone fiber, sewing thread, dyed cotton, glazed ceramic, anti-UV spray, 82 5/8 × 49 1/4 × 4 inches. Courtesy the artists and Anton Kern Gallery. Photo: Izzy Leung.

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The wall piece that gives the show its name, *Ghosts Don't Wear Watches*, is a soft sculpture made of elastane (spandex or Lycra), silicone fiber, and myriad other ingredients. Large in scale (83 by 49 inches), it reconfigures the idea of collage, incorporating intestines, overtly phallic elements, and—somewhere—a ghost. Spirits don't wear watches because, like the finished work of art, they are outside of time, dead. Creation took place elsewhere, and this is all that we have—art for us, but detritus for the artist. Yamagata confirms this in *Bullet in the Forehead*. The eyes of this elastane “victim” frame the composition, staring blankly upwards, while at the center a flash of blood red to mark where the bullet entered. The swirls of color vaguely recall Miró, but Yamagata remains faithful to her theme: all creation entails a death, all works of art are cadavers.



Yuli Yamagata, *Tomato Spaghetti Puddle*, 2024. Dyed epoxy resin, bone, dried flowers, bamboo, cold porcelain, papier-mâché, glazed ceramic, 54 3/8 × 31 1/2 × 1 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery. Photo: Izzy Leung.

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Even the overtly funny pieces here have their dark sides. *Tomato Spaghetti Puddle*, made of dyed epoxy resin, looks like a domestic accident until we see that sauce as spilled blood drying on the floor after some atrocity. *Crazy Tomato*, a digital print, takes photorealism up a notch: as we look at a photograph of a tomato slice closely, we realize just how horrifying it really is, how it suddenly possesses teeth that might bite us. Below the tomato, an insane face grimaces at us, reminding us that with each bite we move closer to the last bite, that what keeps us alive also kills us.

The seven-minute video on the gallery's second floor, *Frooty Looping Serial Death*, summarizes Yamagata's intentions. First, a play on Froot Loops, a children's cereal punned into an old-fashioned homophobic insult, "fruity," mixed in with the idea of periodic death—that is, the death embodied in the finished work of art, no longer creatively alive. The action entails a consideration of Betto the snail, an outcast because the spirals on his shell invert the direction found on "normal" snail shells. Not to worry, Betto achieves a kind of fruition in parenthood even if his story is mixed in with digressions on consumption, sex, and—of course—death. Yamagata has successfully invoked the tradition of Grand-Guignol, the horror show charged with Kafkaesque black humor.

Alfred Mac Adam is Professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He is a translator, most recently of Juan Villoro's *Horizontal Vertigo* (2021), about Mexico City.
