



ATELIER

Cake: Fiona Kinsella

AGH

Art Gallery of Hamilton

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Melissa Bennett
Curator of Contemporary Art



The familiar is made strange in this exhibition of ornately decorated cakes and thick abstract oil paintings. Fiona Kinsella's delicate cakes are iced with baker's fondant, and draw the viewer in for dark and peculiar encounters. Her paintings attract with their surprising sculptural character. When shown together, the cakes and paintings contextualize beauty in diverse ways, and can be appreciated both as objects and for their spiritual, visceral qualities.

Physically speaking, the cakes are at once both beautiful and grotesque. Lured by expectations of their sweetness, we at first want to indulge and consume them. These cakes, however, are more like reliquaries, and provoke disturbed reactions. The viewer is confronted with the mystery of their ornamentation — a blending of incongruous objects that may repulse. Here, cakes are adorned with human teeth and skin, tarnished forks and spoons, bones, porcupine quills, insects, and human hair. The titles describe the macabre or even melancholy contents: "*royal icing, rib cage, hair of a boy, flowers, tendons, claws, glass eye...*"

The artist's intentions are not to disgust her viewers. Rather, Kinsella negotiates the phenomena

of beauty and the grotesque. Her interests lie in the human response to visual encounters, and the viewer in a sense becomes a part of her case study. Although beauty is a quality recognizable in the physical world, the effect of beauty is ethereal. Kinsella proposes that the viewer's response to the works is instinctual, and thus she positions the art object as an agent with the marked capability of rousing innate reactions. While reactions to the works are not measured (as in a science experiment), responses play an important role in charging the atmosphere in which these works are experienced.

The *chapel (rose)*, and *(cake)* paintings also rely on instincts. On an immediate level, the paintings are a wonderfully indulgent exploration of the medium of painting. The oil paint is thickly layered, with dark reds and blues at the deepest level, and white layers on the surface. Kinsella digs deep to pull some of the darker areas forward, creating a mottled and extremely tactile surface. Like the cakes, the paintings attract, sparking an automatic reaction. The thick layers appear like creamy icing up to five inches thick, and we could almost want to eat these too.



Like the cakes, the paintings depend on the potential of the visual to convey the ethereal. With these works, the artist communicates a contemplative or spiritual environment. Her departure point for these abstractions is an object normally associated with beauty: a rose. This series was directly inspired by the artist's visit to a church in Scotland, in which a rose shape is the key architectural element. Kinsella considers that people often voyage to sacred places, longing for something intangible, yet the physical space of the church can provide catharsis.

Presented as mysteries to ponder, Kinsella's works provoke quiet shock and awe, and hint at a pilgrimage one might take towards spiritual understanding. Decadent and lush, the cakes and paintings invite us into a provocative realm. ■

Fiona Kinsella is a mixed media artist and painter. Her work has been exhibited across Canada, in the United States and Europe and is represented by transit gallery in Hamilton.



1
(12 lbs 5 ounces) cake (land/torso)
oil on canvas 2010

2
(cake) sleep (metamorphosis)
Royal icing, knife and fork, seeds, teeth, buttons, hair of a man and a woman, wood, glass, fondant icing.
Hamilton, Burlington, Nevada, England, ?, ?, ?
mixed media 2007
photo: Priti Kohli

3
(cake) Wound I (st. sebastian)
Royal icing, callus, scab, hat pins, handmade star doily, lamb's wool, hair of a man and a woman, glass, wood, fondant icing.
London, Hamilton, Burlington, ?
mixed media 2005

4

(cake) porcelain

Royal icing, silver fork, teeth, hair of a stranger, glass, wood, fondant icing.

London, Hamilton, Burlington, ?

mixed media 2007



5

(cake) twins (cosmas and damian)

Royal icing, ash, thread, flowers, vanilla, chocolate, sweets, guitar string, hair of

a stranger, skin, wood, glass, redpath, fondant icing.

Hamilton, Burlington, England, Constantinople, ?, ?, ?, ?

mixed media 2007



6

(cake) breath

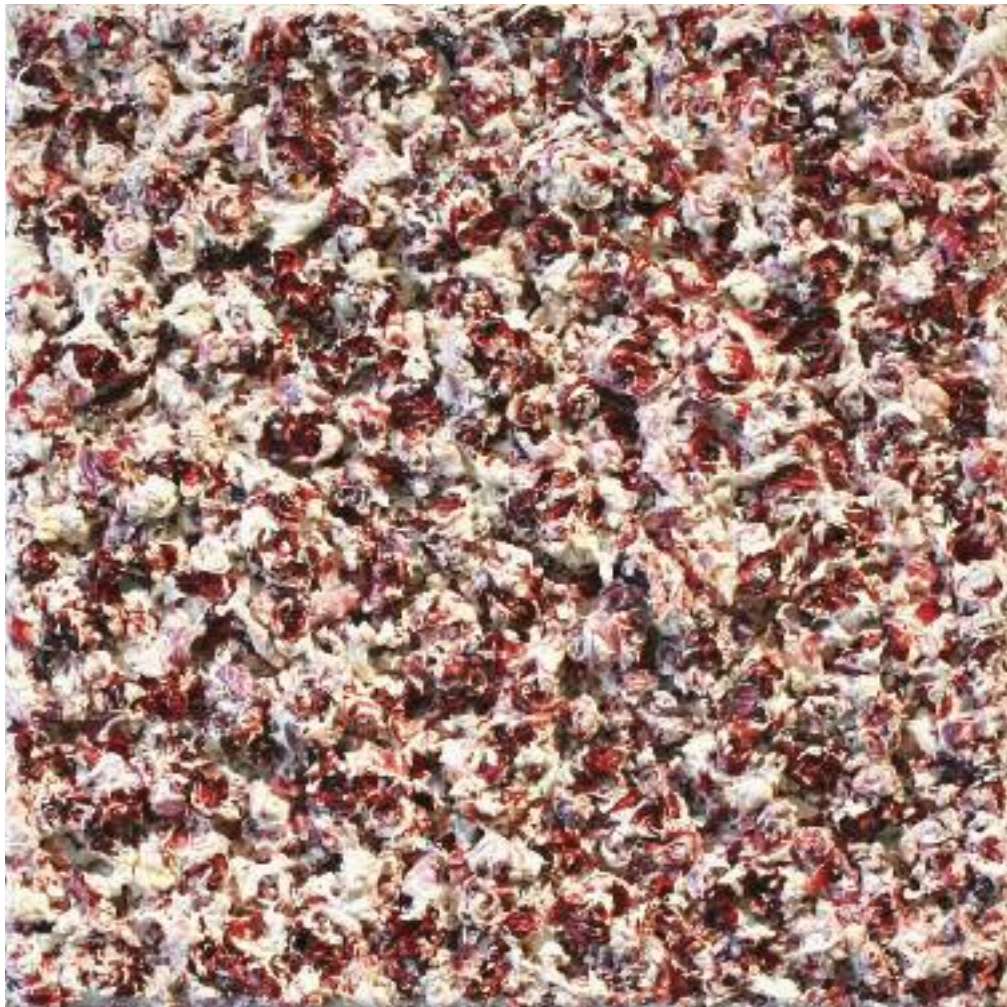
Royal icing, rib cage, hair of a boy, flowers, tendons, claws, glass eye,

wisdom, bleach, water, lamb, skin, pearls, meadow, redpath, fondant icing.

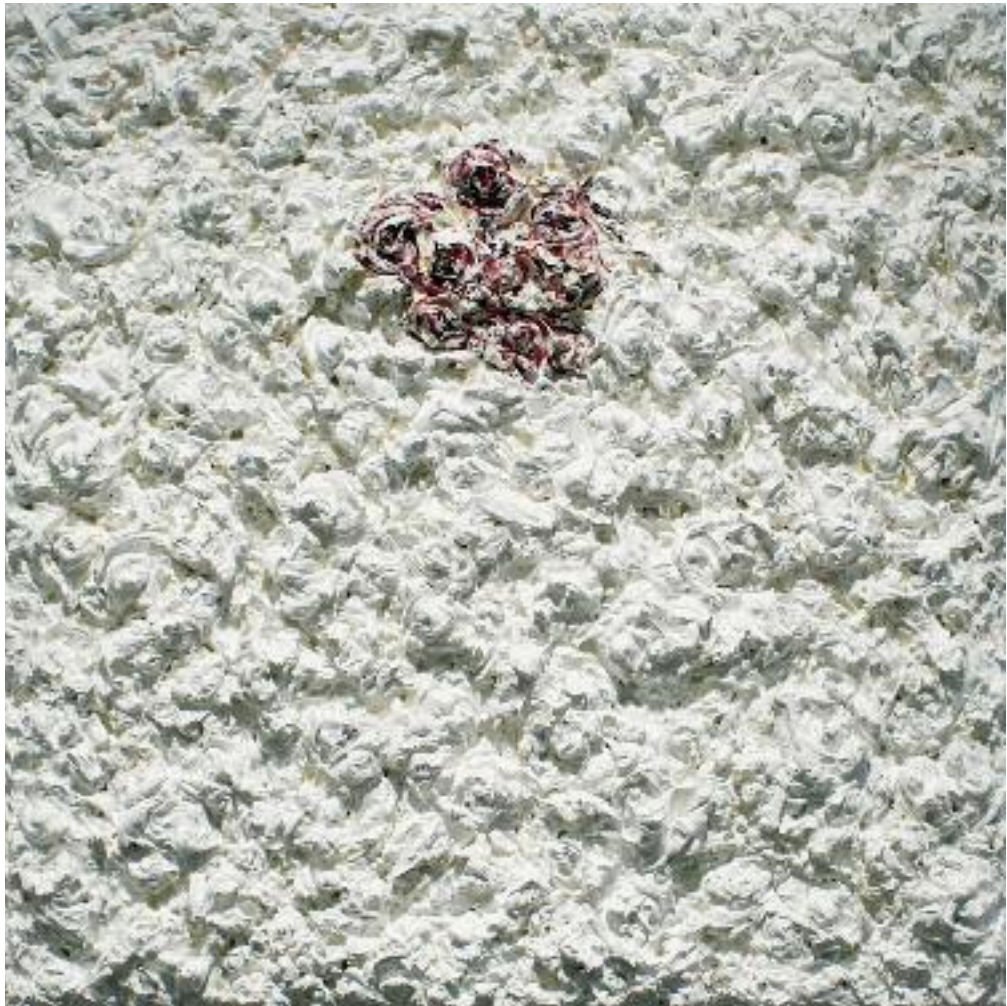
Wales, Hamilton, Burlington, ?, ?, ?, ?, ?

mixed media 2007





(90 lbs) chapel (rose) (of light, or girl II)
oil on canvas 2008–09
photo: Jason Avery



(50 lbs) chapel (rose) (white & red) (of sweet sleep)
oil on canvas 2008



(detail above)
(100 lbs) chapel (rose) (of deep sleep, or wind)
oil on canvas 2008

(cover image)
*(29 lbs) chapel (rose) (of a river) (or stars
standing across the sky without falling)*
oil on canvas 2007–08

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