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Artist Derek Buckner on Painting
Marshmallows

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Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Figurative painter Derek Buckner spends his time shuttling between Brooklyn and Mexico with his new novelist wife and twin infant sons, crafting works that have already gotten him no small amount of critical buzz. His latest batch — on view at George Billis Gallery through October 4 — are a fun departure from his earlier paintings of foreboding urban landscapes and beastly trucks and buildings. The subject matter? Marshmallows. Buckner spoke to Vulture about his inspiration for the project, the “hivelike” quality of his materials, and why he’s relieved his inspiration didn’t come in the form of other, more pungent materials (Andres Serrano, we’re talking to you).

So you went from trucks to marshmallows. What was the thought process there?

It sort of happened by accident. At the time I was painting these large cityscapes, and I was actually traveling in Mexico where we have a property. I was working on this series of UFO sightings over buildings, and I decided I was going to build a small, little city to actually work from. So I went to one of those little bodegas and they had marshmallows, and I said, “Oh, I could try and use the marshmallows as a sculptural element.” I brought them back and opened them up, put them on the table, and it struck me immediately — forget about the buildings, this is what I want to paint.

And you must have gone through tons of them. Did you eat them as you went along?

In the beginning I was actually eating quite a few, and after a few days, I couldn’t stand another marshmallow. It went from the novelty of the marshmallows being something fun to eat to just totally gross me out. So now I can’t eat another marshmallow. I have them all over the house, but I can’t eat them.

You have children, right?

Yes, I have twin boys who are going to be 3 years old in a couple weeks. One of the paintings in the show we had in our house for about a month or two, and my son Noah would come downstairs every day, and say “That’s a painting of marshmallows, you painted that,” and then he’d stop and think for a second and he’d say, “That’s silly.” That was every day. I felt like it was nice to see that the kids recognized it immediately.

Yeah, that must be incredibly hard and take a lot of obsessive work to actually have them look like marshmallows.

Yeah, I am generally obsessive. Painting is a positive way for channeling my obsessive tendencies. I’ve spent every single moment thinking about these paintings for five months. At some point, I realized I had to get away. The marshmallows have a sort of hivelike quality to me. They’re claustrophobic the way they fill a space.

Did they ever go moldy?

They didn’t get moldy. No bugs, no mice, which was surprising. Mostly they turned into dried-up sponges. They didn’t get sticky, they just got dry. They didn’t seem to be changing a whole lot. I don’t know if it’s the preservative or what. Maybe they have no nutritional value.

I’m trying to think of a clever comparison between your study of marshmallows and Andre Serrano’s study of shit, currently up at Lehmann Maupin. Any thoughts?

I haven’t seen Serrano’s studies of shit yet, but one thing I can say is that I’m really glad that I didn’t have piles and piles of shit in my studio for the past eight months! I think it’s an interesting idea, though, and in some ways the marshmallows teeter on the edge of grotesque as well. However, for me, it is far more subtle.