

When Marshmallows Are the Muse

By LIZZIE SIMON

For painter Derek Buckner, inspiration came in a pile of sugary, mushy cubes, the squeezable kind most often seen impaled by a long stick while facing a friendly inferno. His muse is the marshmallow.

On a vacation with his family along the Baja Peninsula in Mexico, Mr. Buckner was having a difficult time looking for plasticine clay to build models for a new series of paintings, but he found something far more intriguing instead. "All of a sudden, I came across a big bag of marshmallows at a bodega and figured I could try using those," he said. "And of course the minute I set them up, I said, 'I want to paint marshmallows.'"

Now, eight months later, his meditation on the campfire favorites has yielded 14 oil paintings to be shown at the George Billis Gallery in Chelsea, ranging in price between \$2,000 and \$18,000. In a palate that evokes the colors of the ocean at the end of a spectacular sunset, the paintings possess a surprising allure. Some feature hundreds of marshmallows, both up close and at a distance. They are whimsical and voluptuous, funny and also kind of overwhelming. Some of the paintings resemble mountains, or rubble. Each required a patient and obsessive attitude.

As it turns out, marshmallows are trickier than they appear to be. "Seeing it come to fruition was a lot harder than I thought," the artist said. "First of all, there's all of the white, and then there's so many of them, and they all have to feel like they are sitting on top of each other."

Mr. Buckner was inspired by Giorgio Morandi's still lifes of bottles, and by the fleshy bodies in Jenny Saville's work. He assumes that viewers will compare the color and confection of his marshmallows with the cakes of Wayne Thiebaud, but he says this association didn't occur to him until he had nearly finished the paintings.

The subject matter is a stark departure from his previous work, which depicted trucks, highways, and the occasional alien ship. With these earlier paintings, he employed many of the same techniques concerning light and composition as he did with the marshmallow series. Yet only with marshmallows did he arrive at this level of assured commitment. This, he says, inspired a new depth



SUBJECT AS SNACK Derek Buckner in his studio with marshmallows.

BARBARA TALLER



DEREK BUCKNER

Derek Buckner, "Collapse" (2008).

of focus. He had found his subject. "They just looked like they should be painted. Something about it seemed clear and uncomplicated," he said.

The 38-year-old artist is a Brooklyn native, who was raised by artist parents in the Cobble Hill neighborhood where he now resides with his wife, the novelist Joanna Hershon, and their 3-year-old twin sons, Wyatt and Noah. After attending LaGuardia High School, and graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago, he moved to Mexico for two years to practice landscape painting before returning to New York in 1996. He

has been represented by the George Billis Gallery since 2004, and was chosen for the online Saatchi booth at the 2008 Pulse Art Fair. He will have his work exhibited at Gallery Ho in Seoul, Korea, next month.

Mr. Buckner's studio is in a large industrial building in Red Hook, accessed through a series of musty and crowded hallways narrowed by stacks of artwork from other artists in the building. The walls in his space reflect that he is also a musician: A guitar hangs on one wall, and an electric piano is buried beneath piles of papers and eclectic oddities. Though his show

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opens on September 2, he was recently still at work on a large painting for the series — and the marshmallows don't quite glow yet as their finished counterparts do. Then there are real marshmallows, several substantial piles of them, in corners, atop file cases, under clamp lights, and resting in the afternoon sun. Over the past eight months, Mr. Buckner has invested in dozens and dozens of bags of marshmallows, replacing them when they melt or get dirty.

At least he knows he's working with a product that is easy to find. The only trick is that he has spread out his sources. "I went into one place and asked for marshmallows, and the lady said, 'They're in back.' But when I went to find them, they were gone. 'Oh,' she said, 'Someone must have bought them all.' And I knew it was me."

Tuesday through October 4 (511 W. 25th St. at Tenth Avenue, 212-645-2621).