



April Marten: Rites of Refusal

An enigmatic figure with sharply angled, bright silver hair and clad in an unassuming black dress, set off by hot pink vinyl household gloves, emerges from the darkened stairwell. Walking fastidiously and without appearing to notice the crowd that has gathered in the space, the ghostlike figure makes its way through the light-filled Tribeca gallery on an early September afternoon in 2019.

They approach an intentionally precious, dollhouse-like table, piled with swirling mountains of plain white table sugar and laden with ordinary household objects: a still-burning cigarette set into the lip of a stark white ashtray, a bright blue BIC lighter, a day-glow yellow pack of American Spirit cigarettes, a candy pink frosted cake with an interior of ripped book pages, and a small antique silver spoon resting beside an unadorned white coffee mug abundantly overflowing with sugar.

The *Frances Wasn't a Saint* performance that followed by New York City-based artist, April Marten, became a laborious study via the repetitive by-hand transference of this indulgently sweet material from the table to its rudimentary container of origin—a cheap paper bag—just a few feet away. The figure scoops the glistening crystals into their cupped palms—releasing accidental sprays of sugar onto the floor beneath their bare feet as they transport the sugar, returning it to its source. Perhaps it is an act of reclamation, or even refusal. Through the almost meditative trips back and forth in this action, the table is slowly cleared to reveal text painted below the whirling mounds of sugar: *Who can find a virtuous woman.*

The audience taking in this painstaking performance is in turn a bit nervous from the awkward silence allowing them to hear the individual sugar crystals bouncing off the floor, as well as profoundly touched by the mundane and rhythmic ritual as the artist's feet become literally

encrusted in the iridescent crystals. Marten, in this poignant performance becomes almost a modern-day martyr, tasked with building and dismantling a still life altar of sorts to the deeply correlated notions of decadence, restraint, and judgment. At the close of the performance, the artist picks up a nearby broom (also part of her installation) and gently sweeps away the mess that has been made, seemingly deconstructing the entire socialized ritual before our very eyes.

Performances rooted in isolation and ritual are at the core of Marten's multimedia art practice. When the public is allowed behind the curtain, as they say, to witness the performance itself—it is a magical experience. When, as a creator, she taps into the nature of objects themselves, producing still images of her performances captured in time as vividly hued prints on thick metal plates, or meticulously crafted ceramic vessels that quietly evoke the ancestral spirits they hold, Marten reveals the generational inheritance through which we attempt to understand and create a fabricated hierarchy around the objects, and people, in our lives.

Perhaps the most beguiling examples of Marten's object play lie in her repurposing or mirroring of cheap, mass-produced items: neon advertising lettering, LED Lightbox Marquee signs, prepackaged baked goods, children's Easy-Bake ovens, trash bags, old silverware, discarded televisions, vintage wigs (such as the silvery one worn in her NYC performance), fortune cookies, palm trees, and beyond. Each reincarnation of these items calls very direct attention to the throwaway nature of most goods, while imbuing them with a grandiose and often highly sacred place within the artist's cabinet of rituals. An encyclopedic journey through this artist's object history can in fact read as a comprehensive treatise on the materialistic folly that Marten refers to as our society's "manufactured desires". The artist reminds us that it is through these misplaced material desires that we try to locate and regulate acceptance, immortality, and, ultimately, power.

The artist is preparing a new exhibition *The Function of [an] Imaginary* in the Rowe Gallery at UNC Charlotte in 2023. The installation is a designed environment, years in the making (begun as part of her MFA thesis at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville). This highly layered environment will continue the artist's fascination with object culture and its vital role as a conduit to both human desire and transactional power structures. Those who experience this installation will be able to explore and question their own inherited social constructs, as well as the innate and fully exploited human desire to live forever.

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