

April Marten: *The Function of [an] Imaginary*

University of North Carolina Charlotte, August 28 - September 29, 2023

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The spiritual journey of experiencing April Marten's solo multimedia presentation, *The Function of [an] Imaginary*, begins before even entering the gallery.

Through the glass doors to the exhibition space, you can see an installation of a free-standing wall with a pointed arch; its reminiscence of gothic architecture is belied with modernity by Marten painting the entire structure bright white. The installation features a white chair set next to the wall's screen window, evoking the Christian act of confession. However, once one looks through the screen, one sees a black chair suspended upside-down. Plastic flowers are placed on a small burial mound, on what would be the underbelly of the chair if it were right side up.

The fuschia light emanating from the left beckons you to enter a chapel with a neon sign stating "Love You" hanging at the furthest corner. Below the text is a shelf, an altar upon which Marten places various symbolically charged objects, such as vials containing liquid that perhaps is holy water, gilded chicken feet, and a palm leaf. The ritualistic objects of the neon altar set against the confessional-like installation evoke the synchronicity of Catholicism and Latin and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices the artist witnessed growing up in Miami.

The spiritual connotations of the installations in the next room are not as evident but undoubtedly potent. Here, an ornate light pink table serves as an altar and is covered in fine glass shards, sprinkles, cake mix, and sugar. In her practice, Marten frequently employs candy and baking ingredients to comment upon the ways in which mass consumption can be seen as the new opium for the masses.

Above the altar is a floating white window frame flanked by turquoise curtains, behind which there is a projection of a video of cumulus clouds moving against a bright blue sky. The glass shards on the altar below reflect the light gleaming from the projected sky.

Flanking the video and saccharine altar are two cream-colored painted rounded arches with four shelves lined with preserved moss where Marten's ceramic objects titled *Soul Houses* rest. Marten describes this area of her exhibition as "columbarium niches," which are structures meant to hold funerary urns. The notion of cremains is echoed in the dust covering the room's altar. The video of the sky paired with objects associated with the remains of the dead alludes to the promise of heavenly realms.

The last room in the exhibition features a wall of Easy-Bake ovens, a functional toy for children to make baked goods. Here, Marten employs the appliances to make eucharistic bread, imbuing the commercial toy with religious significance and commenting upon the artificiality within manufactured religious systems. The ovens' functioning mechanism is hidden, much like the operations of human-made systems that are understood and controlled by the ruling few but opaque to those being oppressed by said systems.

The last stop Marten brings us to is her Botanica shop, containing items like communion cookies and saint cards associated with bringing the faithful divine protection and guiding them toward salvation. Here, Marten subverts the objects' traditional religiosity by adding absurd and humorous qualities, seen with her inclusion of packets of "Unicorn Cocaine" and with the saint cards depicting Marten as her artistic persona, Frances. These prayer cards are an extension of the artist's series *Frances Wasn't A Saint*, in which Marten embodies what she describes as "an ambitious, ancestral female figure who once lived and is talking to me and through me now." Marten's iconic imagery of the saint-like figure provides an antithesis of imposed traditional notions of what constitutes a "good" wife and mother, evoking the presence of Frances, a strong, androgynous, and independent woman. Frances' image on the prayer cards is small-scale but potent. The objects in Marten's Botanica shop provide the viewer with empowering talismans they can take with them. Marten's subversion of religious tokens for sale is a critique of the commodification of religion while also providing objects that offer the possibility of alternate modes of spirituality.

Moving through Marten's multimedia installations is always an instantly satisfying sensorial experience. From pastel hues to intoxicating sugary scents, Marten utilizes what is inherently alluring to seduce the viewer to confront difficult subject matter subtly. In Marten's installation *Breathing Room* for SPRING/BREAK Art Fair 2020, for example, the artist created a magnificent yet toxic paradise with a sugar island with pink palm trees surrounded by clouds of half-inflated "lungs," which conveyed viscerally the urgency of climate change through the overwhelming aroma of sugar and sense of suffocation amidst beautiful objects indicative of mass-consumption. Likewise, with *The Function of [an] Imaginary*, Marten creates a universe through which the audience can examine the oppressive systems of organized religions while providing the platform for the reclamation of individual spirituality.