

Michelle Bui, Spilled Plenitude, Franz Kaka, Toronto

Anaïs Castro

Number 99, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/93202ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les éditions Esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

1929-3577 (digital)

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Cite this review

Castro, A. (2020). Review of [Michelle Bui, Spilled Plenitude, Franz Kaka, Toronto]. *esse arts + opinions*, (99), 106–107.



Michelle Bui

← Installation view, *Spilled Plenitude*, Franz Kaka, Toronto, 2020.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Franz Kaka, Toronto

→ *Still Life Under Rolling Pin*, 2019.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Franz Kaka, Toronto

Michelle Bui

Spilled Plenitude

A garland of lilies suspended upside down near the entrance of the gallery offers to the viewer a decreasingly sweet and increasingly sour welcome as the weeks go by. This opportune introduction sets the tone of Michelle Bui's latest exhibition at Franz Kaka titled *Spilled Plenitude*. Comprised of large photographs in matte grey frames, the exhibition deals with putrefaction. Through this new photographic series, Bui captures the vivid colours of rotting matter, mixed with the elegant glaze of plastic foil and the finesse of manufactured objects. The entanglement of living and inert, of organic and synthetic becomes a game of perception in which individual elements get lost in a scramble. Ultimately, this work contextualizes the natural world as twofold by alluding to an ecological environment regulated by cycles of decay and rebirth, while pointing to its contamination and pollution.

The series emphasizes the fermentation, condensation, corrosion, and ebullition of organic matter via images that are arrestingly beautiful. The surface of the image is carefully composed of surprising forms and infused with an array of dazzling colours: deep turquoises, rich purples, vibrant pinks, burning oranges, radiant yellows, and pure whites. The formidable arrangement of these colours creates a generous compositional whole that is strangely alluring while retaining the power of affect of decomposition as a subject matter.

They are still lifes, granted. And there is something painterly—sculptural, at times—in these photographs. This is not solely due to their scale, but more so their composition: the attention to textures, colours, and the peculiar sense of tridimensionality created by the compositional elements. Yet, this is an exhibition firmly grounded in the practice of photography, first and foremost. *Spilled Plenitude* is about alchemy: the effect of light, time, temperature, and humidity on living organic matter. As pointed out in the exhibition

statement, “Bui’s ‘wet-cooking’ belongs as much to the chemical traditions of the photo lab as to those of the kitchen.” But photography’s historical heritage is also associated with a desire to dissect movement and to record time. Often this has been associated with a fragmentation of speed, but of course here the artist is paying attention to the more quiet motion of putrefaction—proving that there is delight in decay.

In the middle of the gallery’s industrial space, Bui installed a stainless steel pole that she covered in plastic transparent beads, plastic fruits and flowers. The work is playful: it is reminiscent of a kid’s jewellery—a necklace perhaps. The conscious artificiality of this piece highlights the photographs as manufactured objects, pulling us away from their representative plane to bring us back to their fabricated materiality. In her tackling of the subject, Bui is embracing the contingent nature of matter to reveal its inherent truth: living things are beautiful because they decay. Plastic, in turn, statically remains. This is where the exhibition’s sensual aesthetic is resolved to reveal itself as subtly subversive. As the dangling lilies continue to wither, the images on the walls remain unapologetically delightful.

Anaïs Castro

Franz Kaka, Toronto

January 9–February 1, 2020

