

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Oct. 31, 2018

One Blue Eye, Two Servings

Through Nov. 10. Crush Curatorial, 526 West 26th Street, #709, Manhattan; 917-881-5631, crush-curatorial.com.



Tammy Nguyen's "Kiss of the Blossom" (2018), mixed media on panel. Tammy Nguyen and Crush Curatorial

Cheap and commonplace, bananas don't seem to inspire profound thought. But in an exhilarating exhibition at Crush Curatorial, the artists Nicole Won Hee Maloof and Tammy Nguyen examine the roles that the seemingly innocuous fruit can play in systems of political and social control.

Ms. Maloof's video "What Color Is a Banana?" is a layered inquiry into perception and meaning making. The artist jams a wealth of information into 13 minutes, touching on color constancy (the ability to perceive an object as having the same color even when it's lit differently), the use of "banana" as an ethnic slur, and a sterilizing pesticide that was sprayed on the fruit. The video plays out in pop-up windows and animations on a computer screen and is narrated by a robotic voice. The result is a digital collage that, like the internet itself, simultaneously expands the viewer's comprehension and destabilizes it.

Ms. Nguyen casts the banana as a character in a mythical world with a legacy of colonialism. In a series of mixed-media paintings, the artist reimagines Book 9 of "The Odyssey," specifically the Cyclops, here portrayed as women from the global South. They appear intimately connected to the banana plant, bathing with it and eating its fruit in dreamlike, almost hallucinatory scenes that often contain the word "Nobody" — a reference to Odysseus's trick of telling the Cyclops Polyphemus that his name is Nobody. In Ms. Nguyen's paintings, red and pink backgrounds suggest the blazes of historical wars, and the word floats across the sky to become a taunting echo: a colonizing voice telling these women that they don't matter. JILLIAN STEINHAUER