

*On the occasion of FIEND?, his new exhibition of oil-stick paintings at Guzzler, Alex Vivian discusses the weight of advertising, the leftovers of pop art and the politics of condiments. By David Homewood.*

D: When you were at art school you would often begin essays with a standard dictionary definition, so I thought I'd take your cue and start this interview the same way. Wikipedia defines condiment as 'a spice, sauce, or preparation that is added to food, typically after cooking, to impart a specific flavour, to enhance the flavour, or to complement the dish. A table condiment or table sauce is more specifically a condiment that is served separately from the food and is added to taste by the diner.'

A: Well, that is the right definition but it's quite a loose definition. I definitely see a condiment such as mayonnaise as a preparation, but not exclusively culinary. Consuming mayonnaise orally, for example, could be the ultimate preparation, an all-body lubrication. Class it under: body prep.

D: So there is a parallel between condiments and lubricants?

A: Mayonnaise is oil-based, and has that classic air of a non-safe lubrication. I'm not sure if you've seen old mayonnaise that separates? Part of it becomes a clear elixir (or goo) that resembles the most basic of helpers, a common hair aid (gel). I've encountered mayonnaise in that state when it's been left out with food scraps on plates or discarded fast food remnants. I've never left mayonnaise out, unhoused, in mass to experiment.

D: I suppose lubrication is also encompassed within the culinary definition of condiment, which is partly about giving moisture to food, ensuring food isn't dry.

A: It's an accent to the flavour. And helps something go down easier. Dry bread with no aid? Sounds difficult... Mayonnaise is helpful, but on the other hand it is disgusting because of its primary ingredient, egg, one of the crudest food forms around. And when I say that I mean when in its purest form—not mixed or diluted to create something else. Outright.

D: Are you talking about Thomy 'whole egg' mayonnaise?

A: No, I'm talking about egg as a form in itself.

D: Your new paintings feature commonly available condiments and/or lubricants. How would you characterise your relationship to these products?

A: Mayonnaise is similar to Vaseline, but it has different connotations. Although it is stained with a certain sexual brush, it seems out of place to tarnish everything with this carnal theme. That's how I came across mayonnaise: it had similar blue colour packaging and an oil base. I like the idea that it holds less of a strictly homosexual property because it contains egg, which aligns more with thoughts of reproduction, heterosexuality, etc.

D: Does heterosexuality align with raw egg or cooked egg?

A: Mayonnaise is all raw. Uncooked. All unactivated.

D: Is cooked egg a problem?

A: Yes it is. But not in theory or visually, as I am able to honour tradition.

D: These mayonnaise tubs look curiously brandless. An imaginary home-brand variety of mayonnaise. Have you consciously mimicked any existing mayonnaise packaging in these works?

A: I've definitely made a conscious decision for the mayonnaise to be brandless. The design blueprint is based on Best Foods which is the same company as Hellmann's, the mayonnaise depicted in a Tom Wesselmann work from the early '60s. Several other brands resemble the Hellmann's colour scheme: S&W, Praise, Kraft.

D: Is your choice of mayonnaise guided by your personal appetite? Or do you simply appreciate the Best Foods packaging?

A: It's mainly about the packaging. I can admire its sense of decadence though.

D: There's something quite old-fashioned about the jars.

A: Yeah, I mean, the jars are all plastic now. Glass would be incredible. But there's something kind of comical about the plastic tubs, which can be pressed, squeezed, or squished. The plastic tub kind of reiterates the substance inside.

D: Is there an ultimate ranking of condiments or sauces? Your last painting show, *Kitchen Setting*, presented a series of condiments in a hierarchy or scale, or as you put it—'a pecking order'. However, your present show seems to be less about ordering or ranking.

A: These new paintings are less about types of species overlapping. It keeps with one dominant gene which is Vaseline—oops, I mean Mayonnaise...

D: A slip of the tongue! Earlier, we were discussing the proximity between mayonnaise and Vaseline. A few years ago, you used Vaseline a lot in your work (for example, the 2013 exhibition *To propose a petroleum jelly advertisement or campaign*). Maybe mayonnaise is the new Vaseline?

A: Vaseline was proving more and more difficult to use because they changed their packaging. Updated to meet skin routine markets. I think it's similar to McDonald's trying to rid their tarnished atmosphere by adding cafes to all branches, and upgrading their notoriously unhealthy architecture. Or Kentucky Fried Chicken initialising themselves to become KFC in an attempt to rid themselves of an unsavoury past. Recently they have gone back to including a full name on all packaging though (KFC) which boasts a horrid retro styling. Would you call this a form of age regression?

D: Unsure. Immanuel Kant argued that 'hunger is the best sauce', by which he meant that a person's vested interest in an object affects how they relate to it. If I'm hungry and say 'this food tastes good', it's likely that my judgement is skewed: the food could be terrible and I wouldn't notice. That is how Kant distinguished between things that are 'beautiful'—which implies detachment and universality—and things that are merely 'agreeable'—which expresses the preferences of an individual, or the circumstances under which a judgement is made. The agreeable is not aesthetic, but rather a sub-aesthetic mode of experience.

A: Unadorned is the best state to be. To be at ease, be fed, and/or relieved with self or surroundings can prove to be a tremendously unproductive state.

D: In your work it's as though the condiment has become the main course. Are there any examples of your work showing the object to which a condiment has been applied?

A: Condiments have a distinct noncommittal sense to them and require no preparation to use. There have been several shows where tomato sauce was squirted onto objects, floors, or walls. Unfortunately non-oil based condiments dry up over time, so these condiment acts have a short lifespan.

D: Condiments are usually understood as supplementary in nature, as extra. You don't have a meal purely of condiments...

A: This is true, you don't. However, I was quite fond of Gravox in my younger years. A cheap, easy meal that replicates the place of missing meat or potato. In general, condiments are free things. They're readily available, like salt. Tomato sauce, mayonnaise, BBQ sauce. They can be taken from most fast food restaurants or larger corporate places.

D: You didn't answer my question before. I was trying to think of examples of when you show a condiment *in use*, or *used*. Your Vaseline-coated mirror is one example. In the reflected image, the people, objects, and architecture are coated in the greasy substance.

A: Pipe down. When applied to the mirror, it's not obvious that it is Vaseline. At least, until you read the ingredients list. Mirror, Vaseline. In the past Vaseline was also slathered over various household objects and glass windows to create a re-viewing of an outside scene, or to create a sort of amyl-infused vision.

D: The same with your Calvin Klein advertisement, coated in Vaseline. Travis Fimmel is the object to which the condiment is applied.

A: That work was more a short-cut to painting. I used Vaseline to...

D: Make the magazine page seem painterly?

A: Yes, to represent some form of painting without necessarily even doing it. I suppose these new paintings are all embellishments or reworkings of stacked objects and quick sculptural whatnot—for example, stacks of mayonnaise tubs on stacks of pans held together with condoms and rubber bands stacked up on bricks of Fairy cooking margarine—made in a studio or bedroom. Usually, these works have no permanence and are difficult to keep together. I love that Fairy packaging.

D: One of your earliest works from high school is a photographic appropriation of a Lichtenstein meat painting. Underneath the meat it reads 'destroy' in the style of a ransom note. This is an example of an object awaiting a condiment. But then again, the meat is uncooked—

A: Unactivated?

D: Yes. So it's not food so much as the raw material that food comes from. Pre-food.

A: I always thought of that work as an announcement of availability.

D: Can you expand on that?

A: Self. Meat.

D: Self?

A: Self, meat, available.

D: So you're saying the Lichtenstein work is a self-portrait, a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man?

A: Yes.

D: Do condiments always enhance? Can they also hinder or delay?

A: All I know is that I'm not at that stage in my life where my body is ready to accept a non-condiment kind of interaction.

D: *Boom!* is a supermarket aisle scene. A man (or a man's legs), stands before an aisle stocked with tubs of mayonnaise, perusing the shelves, except the products are all the same. What does the text refer to?

A: The painting features a general text describing a scene of product excretion. The text has a militant vibe—telling the reader what is happening. It clearly states what is going on—you are told. It is direct, but it is also bland and lacking in specifics. The interpretation is at the viewer's discretion. If they read it sexually, it is their problem and not mine. The text clearly describes what is happening, 'Why would you think otherwise?' If you're reading it in another manner, well... What are you exactly? In the painting, it's not apparent who made the first move—whether it was the product or the person, because the person has their legs in a way that is somewhat squirmish. It's not entirely apparent whether the mayonnaise tubs have combusted in front of someone, or whether there's been a droppage. Or is it the 'BOOM!' that came first? The 'BOOM!' is dominant. Whatever is dominant must come forth.

D: It kind of looks as though the man standing before the mayonnaise is exploding.

A: That's the most obvious way to look at it, in the same manner as Vaseline has an obvious relation to sexual endeavours.

D: I was thinking more about the dismembering effects of a bomb, because the distance between the two limbs seems unnatural. Rather than parts of a real human body, what we see are anatomical fragments.

A: Blown into pieces? I can appreciate that. A man stands on the ends of his toes reaching for the top tier of mayonnaise. When reaching for produce, you always reach for the top or the back product, to ensure longevity if not an everyday item. Especially when buying in bulk.

D: It's funny that you describe the man as standing on his toes, because it looks to me as if his left foot is resting on its heel, with toes pointed upwards. This ambiguity, I think, arises from the heavy reliance in this work on pentimento—visible layers of underdrawing—which is not seen in your earlier paintings. It is partly the result of your use of oil sticks. There are many layers and corrections; these paintings look worked-over and worked-on. I know you don't like the word 'process', but these works record the process of their making.

A: I guess it's just like a snapshot of someone barefoot in a supermarket. It's almost the only place that really permits barefoot—the supermarket. It seems like a place that is rampant for barefooted-ness.

D: In its studied ineptitude as well as its subject matter, this painting has a neanderthalic aspect. It reminds me of *Encino Man*.

A: Well there is a Raymond Pettibon drawing I like of a neanderthal man, bearded, penis showing, with the caption: 'Will I turn you on or will I turn on you?' I think it's from 1982. But perhaps you're actually reading the product as Neanderthal. A wayward, out-of-date mayonnaise that is badly socially trained.

D: So far we have only discussed condiments as a savoury phenomenon. What about desserts? A few months ago, you, Luke, and I watched the movie *The Stuff*, which features an incredible scene of the titular dessert presented—and spilt—in supermarket aisles. Was this film an influence on your exhibition?

A: I'm not sure. I definitely admire the product worship. In relation to the supermarket aisles, it is the historical aesthetic that is gripping me. For example, I don't enjoy the new Vaseline logo. It doesn't suit my age group and I refuse to grow with the branding. I've seen Best Foods is starting to filter in new packaging. I don't approve of these steps either.

D: I don't know when *The Stuff* was made. Probably around 1987 or something. It's mid 80s, but then the supermarket is styled in a way that looks '50s.

A: Perhaps. I was thinking it has a strange '70s vibe, if I'm remembering correctly. It could've been just the colouring of the film. But uh, '50s?

D: I mean the supermarket aesthetic and the old-fashioned advertisements for the dessert.

A: Is it just Middle America?

D: Maybe. This film is partly a critique of commodity culture. Of mindless mandatory consumption. The consumer...

A: It's not Kruger. Get lost!

D: The consumer is framed—

A: No, it's not capitalism, it's not...

D: (laughs) The consumer is framed as an addict in *The Stuff*. I'm wondering: do your paintings engage in a similar kind of capitalist critique?

A: The theme of addiction invites further consideration. It seems like something to be called upon or worked upon—I'm not sure what else to say about this. But I am definitely not about anti-consumerism or... If that's what you're meaning?

D: What did you say before? You were saying glorification of... ?

A: Product worship.

D: Yeah—maybe that's more what's happening in your work. You seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of art as a vehicle of political critique, which you associate with Kruger.

A: I do love Kruger. I love her 'I shop, therefore I am.' My blog was once titled 'I BB therefore I am' in homage to this work/line/slogan. There is also the classic *Your body is a battleground*. I appreciate these works. Perhaps she doesn't necessarily seek to advance the same anti-capitalist critique anymore, who knows. But this is what is sprayed upon it with industrial hosing.

D: What is sprayed on her?

A: Not her... the work. The anti-capitalism, all that kind of stuff. Maybe those texts and ideas have merged into some other disposition that we're unaware of. Isn't capitalism, like, important for some people?

D: You tell me. Where does its importance lie?

A: Well some would say in promoting a certain idea of progress. Moving forward. The same way as mayonnaise, as was mentioned before, when it is left out becomes separated into two different parts (both desperate to go their own way). Now that's progress.

D: You have described *Fiend?*, another work presented in this exhibition, as a painting of a domestic scene. But I see it as borrowing the visual language of commodity display. It is reminiscent of the way that products are presented in advertising brochures or on TV. And I saw you copying down those vacuum cleaners from a Google image—

A: You didn't see!

D: I did.

A: You were watching me—what? Well let's just say they were definitely sourced. Of course, the mayonnaise tubs are all sourced as well.

D: Well, there's nothing wrong with that.

A: No, not at all, I mean everything is sourced. Wait, so you saw me hungrily copying down these mugshots of vacuums?!

D: You have previously presented a vacuum cleaner and two buckets of mayonnaise in front of a text painting at Neon Parc, *A morsel/snippet of information from the Cosmopolitan Lovers Guide, 1993, accompanied with objects (to be used)*, 2017. You have also shown a Koons-like cleaner in a sculptural work at Tarrawarra Museum of Art.

A: There is no way of totally escaping Kooniality because they are what they are: vacuum cleaners. But I usually see vacuum cleaners as lone objects in horrid houses that are to be used, but often aren't. They are there, often displayed without the intention of displaying, and most often without being used. In *Fiend?*, the vacuum cleaners resemble hanging meats, and also appear to have gills on the side.

D: Why show two vacuum cleaners rather than one?

A: In fact, it's a single vacuum cleaner shown from two angles, like a condition report documentation. If you are showing yourself, or an object, you reveal all factors. The side... the saddle... All parts workable or doable. Everything can look great front on—given chance—but not all can carry the side.

D: *Fiend?* keeps the reader slash viewer on the surface. The work has a shallow sense of space. Onto the image is text, pressed up against the picture plane. Behind that are the vacuum cleaners, and behind them are the stacks of mayonnaise. There is nothing really behind them. Apart from the picture support which is a bed sheet.

A: Which is riddled with copious amounts of gross history.

D: There is a more complex spatiality to *Treasury*. This painting has more of a sense of foreground, middle ground, and background. It's probably more indebted to the landscape tradition. The spectator looks through the trees, which are partially concealing columns of oil and mayonnaise. Things obfuscate texts.

A: The trees look like clipart, or like stock images (as the vacuum cleaners do). Actually, though, they were based on images of trees around Treasury Gardens. I think I got bored halfway through and made them into strange, grand objects—like a large maple tree in front of an old family residence, etc. Now that I think of it, that screams stock image as well.

D: I have a question for our readers who aren't familiar with the reference to Treasury Gardens. It's one of Melbourne's oldest parks, located on the eastern edge of the Melbourne CBD. Is this site personally significant to you?

A: It's a beat that is located in the toilet blocks during the day, and then in a shrubbery-filled area of the park at night across the road around 200ish metres away. Perhaps it is like the Hellman's/Best Foods relationship.

D: In what capacity do you frequent these gardens?

A: I've been going there since my early twenties. Twenty, Twenty-one. Treasury is located at the 'Paris end' of Collins street—it's on the outskirts of Parliament. There's the obvious menu of going to chase, spectate, be around sex in public. Even if there are no doings, there is always the promise of something.

D: In his George Miles cycle, Dennis Cooper describes the activity of exploring an anus as one that implies the possibility of faecal residue, or as he calls it 'hidden treasure', an elusive morsel in the depths of the cavity. Your *Treasury* painting, I think, evokes a related activity of exploration—of an outdoors locale, rather than a bodily orifice. The work literally shows a landscape, but it is a landscape that lures or beckons the spectator into a rich, mysterious interior. We pause at the 'WARNING?' sign, then pass beyond it. The beautifully drawn orange Mobil blocks lead us deeper into the scene. We conduct a thorough search of the wooded area.

A: (laughs) Beautifully drawn?

D: Unlike the shallow space of *Boom!* and *Fiend?*, *Treasury* conjures the thought or promise of entering a landscape. However, that same landscape also appears schematic, diagrammatic, miniaturised, distorted. I was going to say that the oil containers remind me of shipping containers, but they also look like roadside signs.

A: Yeah, I think it's related to the fact that Treasury Gardens is in the CBD. So, of course the CBD is littered with signage. But it is a reimagined slash embellished idea of Melbourne city. This is not a New York City-type square or Tokyo. If you look up, you only see advertising in those places. It's not like in Berlin either, with the massive Mercedes Benz sign. In the most pedestrian way, the painting shows some kind of other parties. The labelled signs are an imagined idea or representation of parties involved.

D: What do you mean by parties? Are you referring to the vibrant, iridescent colours of this work? Are you associating these with a party-like atmosphere?

A: Partying?

D: Because they're colourful and bright and festive.

A: What, like the Sydney Mardi Gras?! I was meaning parties involved, presence, etc.

D: So is this your coming out painting?

A: Ugh, no. Coming out is tarred with coming of age. All these paintings almost have an 'expiration date exceeded' sense to them. Exceeding to the point of combustion. The only thing I can see in relation to festivities is the 'CAUTION? SMEGMA' sign.

D: Which we haven't spoken about yet.

A: Whether you understand smegma as festivitous or a pest, waste or want, it's a form of the purest honesty. It's very much an accidentally farmed—often goofy—type of product. That's why the Caution comes equipped with a question mark.

D: What do you mean by farmed?

A: By farmed I reference a form of self-cultivation. This below-the-abdomen substance does not contain the pungent deception that bad breath does, for example. Sure, smegma can serve as a strong barrier between the carrier and others, but it generally has no malice behind it. Smegma comes from a very unaffected place. Perhaps similar to non-factory relish with handwritten labels.

D: You said before this is an imaginary scene but also it reminds me of what's—

A: Well it's not imaginary, I said reimagined.

D: Ok, reimagined.

A: Because imaginary is false and these are real.

D: Okay. But these three works, and *Treasury* in particular, have a fantastical aspect. Not like gritty British realist painting.

A: It does have a Secret Garden presentation to it. But, I mean, anything is beautiful before you arrive. Upon arriving and experiencing these places, people, environments, or products everything changes. I like Treasury Gardens for its private use of a public setting. Of course, there is no ultimate privacy—there is always the ravenous voyeur, but we are dealing with sexually charged people—not the everyday public. The logos behind trees draw so much attention. Hidden, but so obviously present. It's almost like a product morphing into a body or face. They act as a stand-in (Castrol, Wynns, Valvoline) for foreign personalities.

D: Foreign—you mean outside Australia?

A: By 'foreign' I am meaning other people, as opposed to *Fiend?* and *Boom!* which have more of a non-presence. The *Treasury* painting has and invites obvious company, shown through other companies and branding especially.

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