



ART REVIEW: Offbeat “Cheese Ball Challenge” in Southold Makes Art Lovers Smile, and Think

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by Charles A. Riley II

As a [museum director](#) and itinerant art critic, I hit openings all too often. The old joke about Andy Warhol being ready to go to any opening, any time, even the opening of a window, could be slapped on me as well. But I have never, in all my many years of occasionally feigning fascination in exchange for mooching a few glasses of wine, had more fun at an opening than on October 6, 2018 when the “Great Cheese Ball Challenge” pop-up show made its debut, complete with live music and its own theme song, at the Glen Hansen Studio in Southold, NY on the North Fork.

This utterly ridiculous group show of work by 17 East End artists, accompanied by a mini literary festival, was curated by Glen Hansen, a talented painter whose works are in [The Met’s collection](#) and had recently hung in the [Nassau County Museum](#) during a trompe l’oeil show. The “Great Cheese Ball Challenge” show was presented in his spiffy, well-lit studio and featured a few of his works, including a genuinely terrific abstract painting, *Chernobyl Cheese Ball*, made under a nomme de plume, which reminded me of the work of Nicolas de Stael.



“Chernobyl Cheese Ball” by Hans Gëlb, 2018. Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy of Glen Hansen Studio.

Hansen’s deftly executed impasto was not the reason I made my way to Southold though. I was there because of a plumber named Jack Grismondi, who happens to be my neighbor and is one of the writers featured in the show (a print of his cheese ball-themed short story was on the wall, and he read it at one of the events during the show’s brief run). Jack often drops by my front porch for a brew and literary conversation on his way home. He looks like Ernest Hemingway, whose work he admires, and has a passion for the fiction of John Steinbeck and Sinclair Lewis.

Months ago I had received a cryptic text message from him, sent from the Greenport Harbor Brewery, about a group art and writing project dedicated to a giant jar of Utz cheeseballs. Hansen had purchased the jar at BJ’s in Riverhead, NY and then photographed it on the hood of his Prius. John Keats had his Grecian urn as a premise for an ode; Hansen had a massive plastic container of

orange cheese balls.



“Eat Cheese Balls” by Lucy Dewitt, 2018. Acrylic on paper.
Courtesy of the artist.

He sent the photo to all the members of the Brewery Boys, who meet weekly at Greenport Harbor Brewery—what some North Fork cognoscenti call a “salon.” They took up the challenge of interpreting the photograph. I chalked it up to another victory for alcohol. Months later, the invitation to the show arrived. I had to go just to see if it was for real.



Perfect Strangers perform for the Opening Reception and debut of the creative challenge that formed the “Great Cheese Ball Challenge” exhibition, held October 8, 2018 at Glen Hansen’s studio in Southold, NY. From left are Claire Kolensky, Bob Blatchley and Guy Pezzulo. Photo by Glen Hansen.

Along with a good band (Perfect Strangers) playing in the parking lot, a keg of Greenport Harbor ale and a vast pile of garlic knots, I was in for some other nice surprises. The roster of artists included [Adam Straus](#), who lives in Riverhead and whose moody landscapes I knew from [Nohra Haime Gallery](#) in New York. His oddly absorbing effort, a delicate still life of a single cheeseball titled *Holy Cheese Ball!, Batman*, 2018, was a highlight of the show.



“Holy Cheese Ball!, Batman” by Adam Straus, 2018. Oil on brass leaf on plywood, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Another work on view was a rendition of the photo Hansen made of the cheese ball jar on his Prius that started the whole thing off, made by [Cindy Pease Roe](#), with some gorgeous greens in the background. As she explained in the artists’ statement accompanying the show, “I grew up in a large family with many older brothers. There was often a competition for snacks on TV night. One that I could never win. I now have the Last Puff.” That kind of wit informed the whole show.



“The Last Puff – Puff is marine debris” by Cindy Pease Roe, 2018.
Digital Print, 13 x 10 inches. Courtesy of Glen Hansen Studio.

Other works riffing on the theme were offered by Cliff Baldwin, Stephen Capozzoli, Lucy Dewitt, Kim Fulmer, David Geiser, Hans Gelb, GP Lane, Phil Marco, [Paton Miller](#), Holy Mott, Frankie Neptune (former cop, born raconteur who once collaborated with Kiki Smith on a video project), Judith Nilson, Lesley Obrock, JD Plummer (nom de plume of my friend Jack Grismondi) and Ann Vandenburg.

Halfway through the show a big cheese on the local art scene showed up, John McLane, chairman of the board of [East End Arts](#). He joined in the laughter and spent some time admiring Hansen’s terrific abstract painting.



“Clown After a Hard Day” by Paton Miller. Courtesy Glen Hansen Studio.



“Gautama Buddha Hop Frog Springing
from Many Tongued Cheese Ball
Lotus...All’s Good in Nirvana” by David
Geiser, 2018. Mixed Media, 50 x 21
inches. Courtesy of Glen Hansen Studio.

There is one serious thought that arises from all the irreverence: The unintended absurdity of many of today’s conceptual installations is overdue for a round of cheeseballs to be hurled at it, hard. For some reason, the New Museum seems to have inherited the mantle for pretentious and boring self-indulgence from the Whitney. I spun on my heels recently the minute I entered [Marianna Simnett’s “Blood in My Milk”](#) at the New Museum, which is being classified, as all these overweight shows claim to be in their press materials and catalogues, as a “tour de force” and an “epic.” Utter narcissism.

“A festival of whining” was the judgment passed on the 1993 Whitney Biennial by Robert Hughes, who had more guts than almost all of today’s critics. Hamptons Art Hub art critic and artist James Croak described the [2014 Whitney Biennial](#) as “mounting a cluttered art fair” and relegated them to

the “minor leagues” in comparison with major league art fair players.

The trouble with too many artists and curators, as the cheeseball romp so wonderfully makes clear, is that they take themselves so damn seriously. When the opposite approach arrives like a fresh breeze on a stuffy day, it blows the rhetoric away. I thought of Verdi, ending a career built on tragic operas with the comic masterpiece “Falstaff” and its all-too-true final chorus: “All the world’s a joke” (*“Tutto nel mondo è burla”*).

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“Smash” by Cliff Baldwin, 2018. Courtesy Glen Hansen Studio.

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BASIC FACTS: “The Great American Cheese Ball Challenge—A Pop-Up Exhibition of Painting, Photography, Sculpture, Video, and the Written Word, Curated by Glen Hansen” was exhibited October 6 to 28, 2018 at Glen Hansen Studio in Southold, NY.

Keep your eyes peeled: A new show may be on the way.

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