



Carmen Argote, *Digesting Scroll—Feb, March, April, 2020*, protein-bar oil, chocolate, and crayon on paper, 22' × 4' 2".

Carmen Argote

COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL

In Carmen Argote's twelve-minute film *Last Light* (all works 2020)—a montage of still and moving images documenting the artist's peregrinations throughout Los Angeles—she confides to us in a voice-over: "I feel like I'm not made to last. I'm not the one who's gonna make it. I'm very aware of this organic body, and the city. . . . it's like, touching. . . . I want to touch the city . . . want to touch the city." The desire to commune with one's environment is ever-present throughout this work. Of course, the feeling is at odds with all our current pandemic guidelines, which demand that we remain physically distant from one another and do everything in our power *not* to touch. And so pictures of the artist's latex-gloved hand are interspersed with footage of a neighborhood dog, a loud and playful pup confined behind a chain-link fence. Indeed, keep it all contained.

Last Light served as a kind of keystone to the three concurrent presentations of Argote's work installed around the city—"Glove Hand Dog" at Commonwealth and Council, "Hand Dog Glove" at Clockshop, and "Dog Glove Hand" at Stairwell LA. Appearing in all three shows were a series of contact prints the artist made by laying RXBAR protein bars and slices of pizza—or whole pies—on paper in order to let their oils seep into the pulpy substrate. Argote then traced around the outlines of the greasy, chocolaty residues after the foodstuffs were removed, even though the oleaginous forms eventually bloomed past the boundaries of the artist's delimitations. Argote's method for making these lubricious time charts was inspired by her walks around the city, where she would notice parking lots spattered with dribblings of oil, or the blackened "coins" of bubble gum that dot the sidewalks of virtually every metropolis—an atavistic-looking Morse code of dits without dahs. (Argote's prints overlap formally and conceptually with the work of her fellow Angeleno and comrade in arts Susan Sifton, whose ongoing series of crumpled photographs, "The stain of __. A stain on __.," 2018—, capture these gummy urban blemishes, which Sifton sees as metaphors for "stained" national histories.)

Argote's use of RXBARs and pizza to translate the *longue durée* process of accumulated, street-level filth is particularly inspired, considering the contrasting associations between these foods. There's a smiling, snarling, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps strain of neo-liberalist "disruption" embedded within RXBAR's repeated marketing promises of "no BS," which embodies the bougie health food, total living, blah blah blah *Gestamfoodswerk* that promises a form of spiritual affluence for its insufferable and oftentimes *socially* affluent customer base. Pizza, on the other hand, is oozing, messy, calorie-rich, and, in this critic's mind, far more delectable. This outstanding example of bread-with-stuff-on-it has regional specificity and hooks into narratives of immigration (at least in its American incarnation), proving its staying power within the pop-cultural psyche. RXBARs are unequivocally the polar opposite of all this. But pizza and protein bars do have one thing in common: Like you and I, both seep.

Layers of oil also soak *Digesting Scroll—Feb, March, April*, a twenty-two-foot-long drawing displayed on the floor of Commonwealth and Council's inner gallery. Helpfully, Argote has identified the foods she used to make all the works here via a color-coding system: red for pizza, brown and black for the bars. Taken as a whole, the exhibition felt like an act of love *and* futility: love, because Argote gave patient attention to the much-maligned fats that give us

pleasure and essential nutrients; and futility, because a nearly five-trillion-dollar “global wellness market” has been built on classism, preying on our insecurities and our weakness for celebrity-sponsored flimflammy. Argote’s codex of consumption was complemented by nearly a dozen other works: multicolor crayon tracings of the artist’s hand, frenetic graphite smearings (which recall Robert Morris’s series “Blind Time Drawings,” 1973–2009), and contact prints such as *Sugars*, in which spangly drips of brown chocolate were layered on top of an already densely packed field of RXBAR residue. In her expert handling of her humble yet fraught materials, Argote has modeled for us the difficult task of paying attention and the associated gifts that reward waiting.

— Andy Campbell