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Artful

YOU WOULD not think cake decorating, confectionery and painting have much in common, although all American reality cooking shows charting five-hour-long marathon attempts to embellish tiers of sponge probably establish icing sugar as a rival to oil paint.

Georgina Gratrix's show at Smac Gallery Cape Town dubbed *Puppy Love*, forges a link between painting and cake decorating in ways unexpected but also making surprising sense.

Her most obvious link to baked goods is a table in the gallery presenting an array of cakes, puddings and other confectionery created or embellished with paint.

This allows her to avoid being a "serious" painter as cakes are seen as frivolous, although like art they are a luxury and associated with wealth and excess.

The infamous line supposedly coined by the French queen Marie Antoinette, "let them eat cake" has come to function as the catchphrase attributed to an individual's blinkered sense of privilege in the face of extreme poverty.

If there is self-reflective, socio-political commentary to do with whiteness and privilege in Gratrix's art, she buries it well beneath layers of paint that not only define her "cake" sculptures, but canvases figuring dogs, flower arrangements and portraits.

Her subject-matter brings to mind a life of leisure and pleasure, a utopian universe, best evoked through the delicious tropical motifs that pepper her work such as flamingos, parrots and palm trees.

By using layer upon layer of paint, as in the mode of decorating an ordinary sponge cake, she draws our attention to the level of sickly excess that underlies an advantaged existence.

The only cost of privilege here is the kind of grotesque level of excess it facilitates.

Using cake as a metaphor for an excess of privilege can be traced to Penny Siopis, who in her most famous painting *Melancholia* (1986) presents a banquet table with a spread of confections. Siopis used paint like icing – layering it thickly on the canvas with cake-decorating implements.

The relationship between cake decorating and painting was obvious for Siopis whose parents owned a bakery. Siopis's political subtext was clear; she used the unexpected link between confectionery and painting as a way of collapsing or challenging the boundaries between women's hobbies and painting, which like every other "serious" pursuit in the world had been male dominated.

She also used her cake painting art to highlight how women functioned as "decoration"



TOPICAL: Georgina Gratrix's *Puppy Love* exhibition presents an installation of her oil paint cakes.

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Let them eat canvas cakes

Georgina Gratrix's exhibition exposes excesses of frivolity

in art (and life). Gratrix does not deny admiration for Siopis's art – during a chat at the gallery she pointed out as there were so few acclaimed female painters Siopis was an obvious role model – yet she claims no feminist subtext to her art.

Gratrix doesn't want to talk about or make her political subtext obvious, as this would mean her art was "serious" after all – and not the fun, light, "puppy-loving, sickly-sweet extravaganza" she sets it up to be.

This puts her in a sticky spot. If her paintings should not be taken seriously and are no more than odes to dogs and pretty flower arrangements why should

we take notice of them?

Perhaps she understands as a beneficiary of privilege, she has no ground on which to moralise and can only reproduce the excesses of it. Or maybe, as with Siopis, the layers function as a metaphor for the weight of history that underpins leisurely pursuits, including painting.

Either way, her work is both easy and difficult to swallow, even washed down with a cup of tea.

● *Puppy Love* shows at Smac Gallery in Cape Town until April 2
See www.smacgallery.com/exhibition/georgina-gratrix-puppy-love-13-02-16-02-04-16/

