

# LUSCIOUS



paintings by emily eveleth

July 9–October 24, 2010 Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA

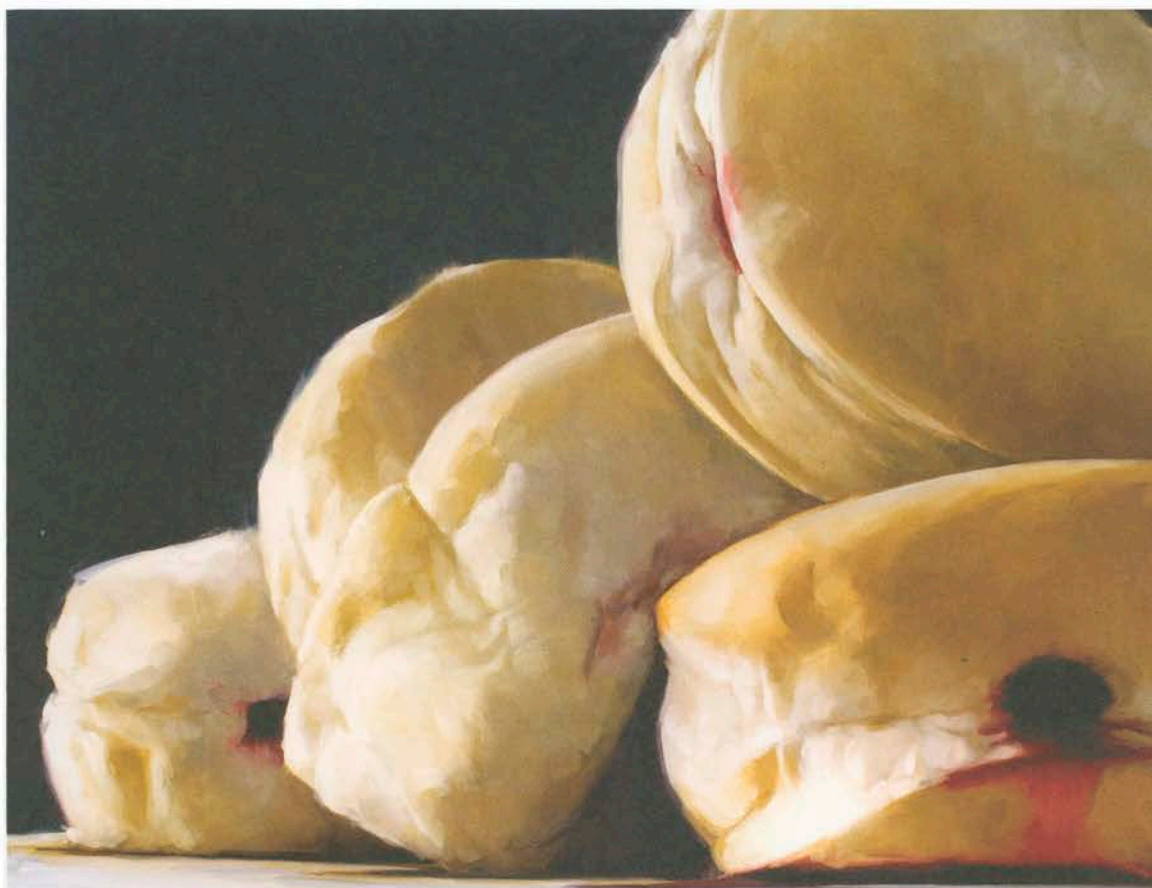
LUSCIOUS: paintings by emily eveleth

In the unabashed beauty of Emily Eveleth's paintings, the still life is revived and magnified in contemporary terms. The artist's monumental canvases of her signature motif—jam-filled doughnuts—are inevitably described by critics and writers with reference to the body and the landscape, and as portraits. At once corporeal and topographic, their forms suggest slumped, sensuous flesh, or, in a work such as *Pact* (fig. 2), resemble tumbled boulders rounded by erosion.

The artist acknowledges these associations but her purpose is less literal than many of the meanings that have been assigned to her work. Still life painters have always found inspiration in ordinary objects, from the bounty of 17th-century Dutch displays of fish and game to the serene simplicity of Jean-Baptiste Chardin's glass and clay vessels. In Eveleth's case, while she was working on an elaborate still life painting over a decade ago, she became fascinated

by the expressive potential of one of its most mundane elements—a jelly doughnut, a staple of the daily commute. She immediately recognized the irony of her new subject in the context of fine art and began to push the boundaries of its representation, enlarging the confection to Rubensian proportions and eliciting by the scale of the canvas an instinctive, bodily response from the viewer. The doughnut's identity as a familiar object is never concealed; however, the visual language of largeness imposes a claim for space, attention, and reconsideration.

Eveleth thinks of her paintings as moments in a narrative, implying a before and after. She compares the painting *Snake Eyes* (fig. 1), which arrests its subject in a flare of blanching light, to the tabloid photographs of Weegee, whose flashbulb photos captured high and low life on the streets of New York. Smaller works in the exhibition—a series of 26 x 18 inch paintings, which are complete in themselves



but also function as springboards for larger works—have been given the titles of actual pulp novels and crime stories. Eveleth, however, does not title her works until they are finished, and the titles should not be taken as definitive or limiting. *Questionable Ambition* (fig. 3), for example, is less about motive than about the implied movement of forms projecting past the picture plane.

For the artist, the ruptured forms of works like  *Holding* (fig. 5) connote aging and the passage of time. The viscous red jam oozing from their cavities and from virtually all of Eveleth's doughnuts will be seen by many viewers as blood. In *Snake Eyes* the vivid crimson spill suggests blood flowing from a bodily orifice or wound.

Eveleth's drawings are a corollary body of work and represent a different approach. They are not intended as studies (her working drawings for paintings measure mere inches) but instead are made after a painting as the distillation of an idea. The artist first mixes a "graphite slurry"—powdered graphite mixed with an alkyd painting medium—which she applies by brush to a mylar support. The velvet, painterly drawings she produces are

small in comparison to the canvases but more than hold their own, as a work such as *And So It Goes* attests (fig. 4).

Eveleth is concerned by the formal elements of composition and their ability to create a tenor of emotion. Paint is always richly handled, and its application varies from contained to more open brushstrokes that are adapted in service of the work at hand. Light is immaculately rendered: the corona surrounding the three forms of *Shelter* (cover) suggests both a sunrise cresting a hill and the radiance of a Spanish still life. The triptych *Circle* (fig. 6), the largest work in the exhibition, poses a single form on a long gray ledge against a vast, darkened background of layered color. It references tripartite Renaissance paintings by its physical division into three conjoined canvases, but the space and importance accorded its color fields also calls to mind Mark Rothko's elegiac late paintings.

Emily Eveleth's paintings speak about time and space, about the relationship of form and scale, and about the act of becoming. At this moment in the history of art, they also speak about the valor of extending the traditional act of painting and all its possibilities.