

Arts & Entertainment

Instead of paint, L.I.C. artist uses chocolate



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Sid Chidiac eats his work.

For the past 10 years, the artist, born in Australia and raised in Lebanon, has painted with chocolate.

Now based in Long Island City, Chidiac has a distinct, creative routine unseen among those working with oils and acrylics. He cleans his brushes by licking them, and is forced to repeatedly remind people to not dig their nails into his paintings for a taste.

Regularly, countless boxes of chocolate, instead of pigments and lacquers, are shipped to his studio.



Chidiac started working with chocolate after moving back to Sydney, where he attended the Julian Ashton Art School. He worked in the kitchen at Sheraton on the Park. A chef in the hotel's restaurant was representing Australia in a pastry competition in France. Knowing that Chidiac was an artist, the chef taught him how to paint with chocolate, commissioning him to create a representation of sunflowers on a woodblock.

Chidiac was instantly drawn to the medium.

“It was that temptation, I’m not eating it, but I can taste the chocolate under my teeth,” he said. “My guts wanted to eat that painting.”

Years later, after an exhibition in Kuwait City, his paintings were shattered on the flight back to New York.

“I opened the bag and I was so upset,” said Chidiac. “[It] looked so beautiful. I started eating [it] right at JFK Airport.”

A major career breakthrough for Chidiac came when he was given the opportunity to paint in the Chashama Theatre near Bryant Park in Manhattan. For weeks he painted on display in the window of the theater, composing a humongous oil-paint interpretation of “The Last Supper.” About 4,000 people passed the window every hour. At the end of the display, Chidiac received 50,000 emails from newly earned fans.

Chidiac said his chocolate paintings frequently garner questions from curious and skeptical onlookers. None of his paintings have ever melted, spoiled or faded.

The chocolate painter does have one rule – the better the chocolate, the easier the painting. Chidiac, who is sponsored by Barry Callebaut, a Belgian chocolate company, believes that a higher

concentration of cocoa in the chocolate holds the “paint” tighter and prevents it from drying too quickly.

Occasionally people are doubtful that Chidiac’s paintings are actually chocolate, an accusation he takes quite seriously. Chidiac laughs it off, telling a story of a time he dug a spoon into his work and forced a skeptic to eat his art.

At many showings, people mistakenly think that because the works are done in chocolate, they are welcome to sample what Barack Obama’s face tastes like, or how sweet Nicole Kidman’s hair is. Chidiac must remain on constant patrol while exhibiting his work, prohibiting hungry viewers from taking a bite.

“I am constantly telling people, ‘please don’t touch my work!’” he said.

And who could blame them? The gallery smells like a confectionery paradise with fragrant chocolate wafting through the air. Viewers struggle with the temptation of his paintings – an artistic statement in itself. The relationship between the desire for

beauty and the consumption of chocolate provoke something deeply sensual.

“People would say, ‘why do you paint with chocolate?’” said Chidiac. “I would say, ‘why not?’ New York is the heartbeat of the world, you have to do something completely different to be recognized. It’s a tough city.”

Chidiac has been searching for ways to break from the mass anonymity of the city since first arriving. Even back in Sydney, he was warned of New York’s ability to sink an artist’s name.

“People said, ‘New York is big. Who’s going to listen to you?’” he recalled.

While painting with chocolate has gained Chidiac recognition, he realizes that the struggle of making it big in the art world is ongoing. The artist is currently looking for a space in Long Island City to build a Chocolate Museum where he can display sculptures, paintings and other works completely made of chocolate. He has also been doing body painting in chocolate, layering forms in dark chocolate and covering that with white chocolate Arabic script.

Chidiac, pushed by the fast pace of the city, constantly reinvents himself, repurposing his work in creative and brilliant ways. Luckily, he is aided by the distinctiveness of his edible medium.

“People can’t resist chocolate,” he said. “They love it.”