

COB GALLERY

OLIVIA STERLING: WHITE BREAD

Cob Gallery is proud to present 'White Bread', the debut gallery exhibition of work by Olivia Sterling, and the inaugural exhibition in Cob's tenth-anniversary programme focusing on artists whose work reflects the gallery's core values, combining traditional media with distinctive and original new voices.

Born in Peterborough in 1996 and graduating from the RCA in 2020, Sterling has carved out a distinctive niche in using paint to address questions of blackness and whiteness in twenty-first century Britain. Her work in 'White Bread' presents scenes of colourful mayhem with a nostalgic twist and signature 'slapstick' style, combining joyous celebration with a subtle critique of racialised ways of seeing.

Using old photographs of parties and family cookbooks as starting points, the Day-Glo immediacy of Sterling's zoomed-in canvases is full of human touch. Her paintings, at first glance, are as sinful a treat for the eyes as the cream-cakes and party snacks they depict. Daubs of bright colour and swooping, comic-book outlines create a sense of bigness and chaos extending beyond the frame.

This is true in both formal and thematic terms, since pigmentation in Sterling's work is both hedonism and neurosis. In 'White Bread', her compositions allude subtly to the tradition of nineteenth-century political caricature, and in particular an 1819 example by George Cruikshank, 'The New-Union Club' – a toxic satire on the abolitionist movement in Britain, painted 14 years before the Emancipation Act was passed. This was a time when racist theories attempted to define and categorise gradations of skin colour into bizarre and obsessive hierarchies of identity and power. Sterling's work sends up the absurdities of this obsessive compulsion to label and tag: letters marked onto her paintings point to the nearest block of colour, schematising pigmentation to the point of farce.

Blending pointed references like this into her depiction of ordinary scenes and subjects, Sterling's work in 'White Bread' reflects on how we are confronted by racialised discourse everywhere in the everyday. Even happy or anodyne spaces are encoded with structures of othering and difference; every object, every skin tone, is assigned its place in a drama that continues beyond the edges of the canvas.

For full details and larger images, please see the end of this document.



Olivia Sterling
Titivate #1, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
1500mm x 1000mm
(OS-001)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Titivate #2, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1500mm x 1000mm
 (OS-002)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
How to Ice a Cake, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1500mm x 1000mm
 (OS-004)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
The Squirty Cream Incident, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1500mm x 1000mm
 (OS-003)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Table Manners, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1000mm x 1500mm
 (OS-006)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
The Cake Incident, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1200mm x 1000mm
 (OS-013)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
The Custard Incident, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 592mm x 420 mm
 (OS-016)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
The Other Cream Incident, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 610mm x 610mm
 (OS-012)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Making it About What it Doesn't Need to be, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1000mm x 1500mm
 (OS-017)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Wake to Another Day of Terror, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 1000mm x 1500mm
 (OS-018)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Spread Evenly, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 592mm x 420mm
 (OS-014)

[View detail](#)



Olivia Sterling
Whiteheads, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 592mm x 420 mm
 (OS-015)

[View detail](#)

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The Squirty Cream Incident , 2020



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OLIVIA STERLING
Whiteheads, 2020



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(OS-015)

Olivia White Bread – Exhibition Text

It is your 7th birthday party. Everyone is here. Your mother and aunties have been making the food all day. You look down and the sandwiches are divided into white bread and brown bread – W is written on a cocktail stick. The W is for white. Your party dress is tight, you've already spilt food down it – it was white.

'White Bread', the latest series of works by Olivia Sterling, draws on myriad nostalgic references to open a discussion about how it feels to be a black person wrapped up in White Britain.

Using old photographs of parties and family cookbooks as starting points, Sterling has created multiple scenes of colourful mayhem with a nostalgic twist and signature slapstick style. With the world currently lacking social interaction, mass gatherings and human touch, her paintings, at first glance, are a sinful treat for the eyes.

Typically British party snacks cover the dining table; cakes are being smothered in white icing, and a mixture of hands – seasoned with Sterling's signature lettering to denote the literal colour of each figures' skin – are picking and grabbing at whatever is in their reach.

Each painting reflects how we are confronted by racial discourse everywhere in the everyday, even in happy places such as parties with family and friends. The viewer can position themselves within the different characters in the party scenes: as the masked birthday child; the mother icing the cake; the family members at the table and even as the figures inside the cookbooks themselves.

The brown (chocolate) cake being smothered in white icing [Titivate], the segregation of the white and brown bread sandwiches [Table Manners], the white gooey liquid being squirted onto the brown figure's arm [The Squirty Cream Incident], all contrast with the bold colours used elsewhere in the paintings. This allows the direction of the viewer's attention to look at the figures' skin tones, and how they are placed and used in each scene to depict issues around the normalcy of race-based discrimination in modern-day Britain.

Throughout the 'White Bread' series, Sterling's choice of bright colours points to the subtleties of racism, deep-rooted in British culture, like a colour-coded game that needs to be unpicked.

Text by Natalie Blain

Olivia Sterling (b.1996) graduated with an MA in painting from the Royal College of Art, London, 2020. Forthcoming exhibitions include *White Bread* (Solo), Cob Gallery, London, UK (2021); *Episodes*, (Solo) CCA Goldsmiths, London, UK (2021). Selected solo exhibitions include, *It Clings like a Leech*, Guts Gallery, London, UK (2020); *A Cure for Nose Bleeds*, Marriots Way, Reepham, Norfolk, UK (2020). Selected Group exhibitions include *A Rudimentary Education*, Art Lacuna, London, UK (2020); *Love your symptom, but not too much*, Blank Projects, Cape Town, South Africa, (2020); *Without a Painter*, Fitzrovia Gallery, London, UK (2020); *Snapshot*, RCA Hockney Gallery, London, UK (2020); *WIP*, Sackler, RCA (2018) and *Tomorrow: London*, White Cube, Online (2020). Residences include the HQI Summer residency, London, UK 2020 and *Extended Contexts*, National Trust Ilam, UK, 2016.

Sterling was awarded the Pro Vice-Chancellor / Dean's Award for her Degree Show Exhibition, BA of Fine Art, University of Derby, 2018.