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OLIVIA STERLING

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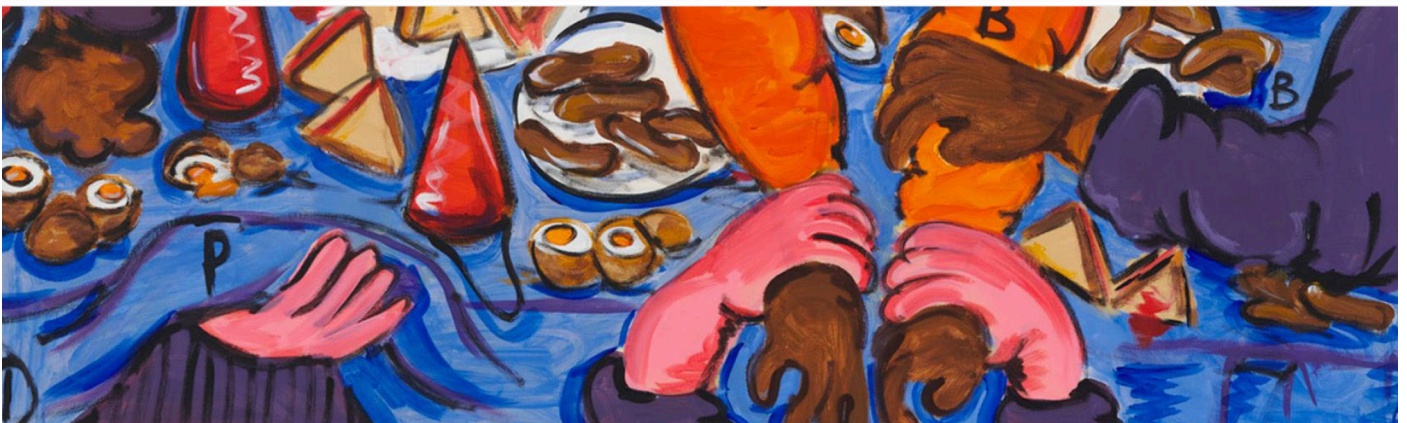
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Olivia Sterling Crashes a Birthday Party

At Cob Gallery, London, the artist takes the seemingly innocuous setting of a children's tea party to explore how white British culture perceives race

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BY LEANNE PETERSEN IN REVIEWS, UK REVIEWS | 20 APR 21



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For her latest exhibition, 'White Bread' – a series of 12 acrylic-on-canvas works (all 2020) – Olivia Sterling depicts quintessential scenes from the ostensibly innocuous setting of a children's birthday party. Animated hands wrestle with desserts and finger foods in close-up, inducing feelings of claustrophobia and infusing seemingly innocent interactions with discriminatory undertones.

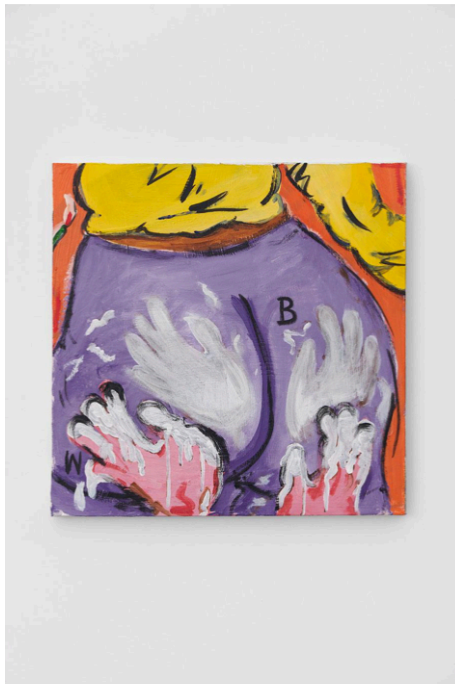


Olivia Sterling, *How to Ice a Cake*,
acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm,
Courtesy: the artist and Cob Gallery,
London

Since receiving her MFA from London's Royal College of Art last year, Sterling has drawn on the domestic environment to explore her experiences as a Black woman in Britain. Her slapstick style and lurid colours in this body of work make shrewd reference to George Cruikshank's *The New-Union Club* (1819), a hand-tinted etching that satirized the abolitionist cause 14 years before the British government passed the Slavery Abolition Act.

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Olivia Sterling, *The Other Cream Incident*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Cob Gallery, London

Sterling's paintings are about neither food nor parties; they serve as commentary on the dynamic of white privilege. Canvases filled with dynamic outlines and hyperbolic shades unveil narratives of othering and racist macro- and micro-aggressions. Colour tags – 'W' (white), 'B' (black), 'Br' (brown) 'P' (pink/peach) and 'Y' (yellow) – dryly comment on the incongruous semantics of race, with ('P') often placed next to white hands. In *The Other Cream Incident*, the act of grabbing someone's bum is played-off as a joke, as a white person's creamy handprints drip comically from the buttocks of a black figure. In *How to Ice a Cake*, white hands are shown covering chocolate cakes in white icing, as the word 'COVER' in the bottom corner – followed by a ticked box – renders these confections 'acceptable'.



Olivia Sterling, *Making It about What It Doesn't Need to Be*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Cob Gallery, London

In *Making It about What It Doesn't Need to Be*, two separate scenes are divided through a black swathe, as if viewed through the eyeholes of a party mask. On the left, a black figure presents a pink birthday cake to a child's outstretched hand; on the right, a white figure tugs at the same child's sleeve. Such racial fractionalization could be interpreted as Sterling's wry commentary on the social constructs of race in binary terms – a means of understanding the historical burdens of visible differences.

Olivia Sterling, **'White Bread'**, continues at Cob Gallery, London, until 24 April 2021.

Main image: Olivia Sterling, *Table Manners*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Cob Gallery, London