

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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## **Christopher Chiappa: 7,000 fried eggs, or a way of working through**

By Jody Graf

Over the past five years, Christopher Chiappa's studio has been filling up with fried eggs. They surfaced initially in drawings and then as actual fried eggs, draped casually on studio surfaces, candid photos snapped. The eggs multiplied and mutated as Chiappa eventually adopted their form for hyper-realistic sculptures constructed through a carefully calibrated process of casting, pouring, sanding and painting plaster. As he refined his method, they became increasingly simulacral – uncannily illusionistic “sunny side up” versions of their former selves. They aggregate in his studio in various stages of completion along a series of folding tables, their plaster bases gaining yolks, contours, lightly toasted edges, and a glossy sheen as they graduate from one station to the next. Finished eggs rest – yolks shining expectantly, like so many eyes – on racks stretching from floor to ceiling, bakery-style, as their ranks methodically approach the decided goal of seven thousand.

Mirroring the conditions in which they are constructed, the eggs are exhibited creeping along the walls and spreading across the floors. This demands an immediate confrontation between individual viewer and anthropomorphized swarm. The humble contours of each egg are enveloped by the cumulative and unnerving energy of the group. The group mentality here is, as in many large gatherings, difficult to define. Is it a friendly crowd, a humorous displacement of the everyday? Or, is it an infestation – an angry mob, mold, or cancer, metastasizing? The robust symbolic function of the egg adds further complication. Eggs are traditionally coded positively, embodying perfection, purity, resurrection, and unbounded potential. In Piero della Francesca's *Madonna and Child with Saints* (c.1450), for example, a single egg floats above Christ as a persistent reminder of the tidy nature of his conception. The *fried* egg, on the other hand, occupies a more dubious position. The fried egg is far from immaculate: it is broken, defunct, dead, more suburban than divine, and suggestive of the materiality of sex rather than the purity of rebirth. It is, as the notorious PSA announcement tells us, “your brain on drugs” – the domain of the slacker and a symbolic *loss* of potential, but also the pleasure that might be found therein.

Chiappa's fried eggs operate squarely within the uncomfortable intersection of these two symbolic legacies, mining the darkly humorous vein where perfection and failure meet. This is familiar territory for the artist, whose visual lexicon frequently revisits figures from his suburban childhood – such as Weber grills, basketballs, and Volvos – to plumb the psychological depths of these gestalt images of mundane but wholesome American exceptionalism. For example, a 2012 photograph depicts an ear of corn whose kernels he has discolored to subtly read “gott ist tot” (god is dead), inscribing Nietzschean nihilism into the heart of American optimism. In the case of the eggs, these tensions arise not only symbolically but also within Chiappa's material process itself. Each egg displays an unbroken, precisely cast yellow yolk. This perfect yolk is suspended within a miasma of white plaster whose contours are defined by a process of pouring and subsequent chipping, left to the vicissitudes of chance and the molecular affinities of the material itself. In this sense, Chiappa builds a level of error into an otherwise highly regimented process, handicapping his own agency. If you make 7,000 imperfect attempts at creating an already symbolically imperfect version of perfection, is this total mental chaos, or the result of precise systemic control? The rhetorical gymnastics of this question alone suggest the ambiguity of its answer, located somewhere between absolute anarchy and obsessive regulation.

The self-imposed performance of repetitive tasks whose difficulty or futility places the artist's agency under constraints of his own devising has long been a central tactic of Chiappa's practice. In some instances, the durational event itself comprises the piece. For example, he has worn the same black pants, white t-shirt, and Nikes (an artist's uniform of sorts) every day for the past twenty years. Other works exist as prolonged feats of masochistic endurance: gnawing through a tree trunk (*Eat Tree*, 1999); being pulled behind by a Volvo, connected by his mouth to the exhaust pipe (*Volvo Exhaust*, 2006); or burying himself neck-deep in the ground for 24 hours (*Buried for 24-hours*, 1999). With these works, he self-consciously harkens back to the strategies of conceptual performance artists of the 1960's and 70's, while upping the level of self-deprecating humor.

Other projects result in decidedly material and properly “object-like” works: a series of 99 painted stools, based on the shape of the classic Weber grill; dozens of handmade kitchen knives ranging from minute to absurdly large; and, of course, the thousands of fried eggs. Yet, a performative core lurks beneath even these carefully crafted objects; it has simply become slightly harder to locate due to its elision with the event of production itself. Thinking Chiappa's labor as performance dissipates the aura of each individual object and reveals his practice, as evidenced in the fried eggs, as part of an extended Oedipal assault on the discreet minimalist object and the artist position it implies: omniscient, stable, and rational. Tactics of seriality and factory-like fabrication are rendered strange and personal when filtered through the excess, humor, and self-imposed difficulty of his production, which in turn becomes a protracted analytics of the self more than any means to an end. Seen from this perspective, Chiappa's studio emerges, both literally and metaphorically, as a site of “working through” and the eggs the material and residue of this psychological process.