

## Only in Paris

LILIANNE MILGROM

What three-letter word do naked women, chocolate, cheese and bread have in common?

Answer: ART!

Specifically, the French masterpiece painted by Gustave Courbet in 1866 entitled *l'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*). To this day it is considered the artistic gold standard of female genital portraiture. When I initially applied for permission to copy this notorious painting at the Musée d'Orsay, I had no idea that my stint as an official *copiste* would conclude with a gastronomic twist. But then again, we *are* talking about France...!

Let me start at the beginning. Or more precisely, the *end*. Earlier this year, I spent six weeks painting a copy of Courbet's *L'origine du monde* as part of my ongoing work on female sexuality. On my very last day I was racing against the clock to put the finishing touches on my canvas before having to present it to the director of the *bureau des copistes*. My brush was flying over the canvas tweaking contours, adding a rosier tone to the nipple, enhancing a shadow here and a highlight there. By now a sizeable crowd had gathered. My heart was pounding as I saw the results of the past six weeks come together. The last frenzied moments spent applying the final glaze required my full concentration.



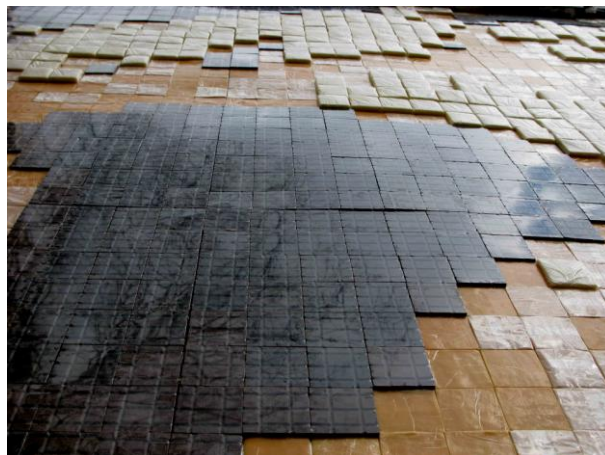
That's when I heard a male voice with a Long Island accent inquiring if I wouldn't mind keeping still so that the gentleman in question could take a good photograph. *Comment?* Couldn't he see that I was in a mad dash to the finishing line? Without taking my eyes off the canvas I curtly replied that *non*, I absolutely could **not** stop what I was doing; my time had literally run out. Well, *monsieur* turned out to be a photographer with a CNN badge hanging around his neck. Hmm...maybe I could spare a few precious moments after all!

What followed next was a rapid-fire exchange in which Paris-based photojournalist Larry Langner recounted a wild tale about a dog named Yoyo, cheese falling from the sky and an unexpected encounter with a gigantic, edible version of none other than *L'origine du monde!* My understandable skepticism was met with an invitation to *rendez-vous* on *rue Oberkampf* to see this sight with my very own eyes. What's a girl to do? A story this bizarre just had to be true. Despite the fact that I had a plane to catch the next morning, I headed off that evening to the 11<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* all the while wondering what on earth I had gotten myself into. When I exited the *métro* Larry was waiting for me as promised with his little dog Yoyo. As I followed him to our destination he filled me in on the uncanny details which led up to our chance encounter at the d'Orsay museum that afternoon.

On one of his daily walks through his République neighborhood earlier in the week, Larry noticed little Yoyo eating a perfect square of cheese lying at the base of the community wall designated by the local municipality for use by local artists. Looking up to find the source of the fallen cheese he literally came face-to-face with a pixilated, billboard-sized image of a woman's exposed genitalia rendered in squares of chocolate, cheese and bread! No, he wasn't dreaming. The accompanying wall text written by the artistic duo Zoom, credited Gustave Courbet's ***Origin of the World*** as the inspiration for their edible display, an attempt to titillate ALL the senses while experiencing art. Only in Paris.

Initially unfamiliar with Courbet and his infamous painting, Larry's research revealed the fact that after having been hidden from the public eye for almost 140 years, the original *L'origine du monde* now resided in the musée d'Orsay. He headed off to the museum to take a first-hand look at the inspiration for the street art that was slowly but surely being devoured by passers-by. At the museum he was met with a very disconcerting sight - not one, but TWO very realistically painted images of a woman's exposed sex, one of which was the copy I had been in the processing of completing!

As we approached the artist's wall I was instructed to close my eyes till we arrived to get the full benefit of the impact. And what a surprise it was. I was rendered speechless. If I hadn't seen it for myself, I probably would not have believed it. This is the sight that greeted me when I opened my eyes. (Photographs by Larry Langner)



Close up of chocolate, cheese and bread squares

As I watched strolling pedestrians nonchalantly picking off and nibbling on squares of chocolate pubic hair, I realized that my experience with Courbet's iconic masterpiece was now truly complete. The remarkable series of coincidences which brought me to this very spot proved yet again that life really is stranger than fiction. For those adventurous souls with an inclination to see *avant-garde* public art off the beaten track, head off to rue Oberkampf and Saint Maur next to Cafe Charbon. You never know what you'll run into.



A little chocolate with my coffee before I took off for the airport the next morning...

**For Larry Langner's CNN ireport on this remarkable story click on:**

<http://www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-427376>