

Whitaker, Iona. *Larry Bamburg at Simone Subal*, Art In America. May 2016. Print

LARRY BAMBURG

Simone Subal

A saccharine, minty scent greeted visitors to Larry Bamburg's solo exhibition. It emanated from three large, weighty, pastel-colored forms standing on the floor, two centrally placed so that viewers could walk around them, and one positioned to the left against the wall. These sculptures, from Bamburg's "TalctoTile" series (all works 2016), were composed by stacking four-inch-thick layers of bathroom tiles (some oriented frontally, as on a wall, and some side-on) and handmade soap. Each work is topped with a piece of raw talc, the shape of which dictated the contours of the layers beneath it.

TalctoTile PL'd to MDO, shown in Pink might remind one of topographic models of hills, while *TalctoTile Tower, from a unstable foundation* has the look of a strange, leaning, six-foot-tall pink cake. The colors of the tiles and the soap mimic the tones of the talc, so that the works are solid masses of pale pink, yellow, or green. Each of the sculptures bears a range of textures, from the smooth, clean surfaces of the tiles at the base to the central portion of soft, greasy soap to the dry craggy formation of talc at the top. Bamburg made the soap with tallow, lard, and different animal fats. I was told by gallery staff that *TalctoTile Tower, from a unstable foundation* is "three cows' worth." A framed sketch for that work highlights those slaughterhouse origins in a scrawled inscription: "MEAT GLUE."

According to the press release, these works began with Bamburg's interest in the unresolved relationship between an original and its copy. The show included a series of color studies of a cross-section of a mulberry tree. A piece of bark was encased

in a wall-hung vitrine. Framed photographs of the same bark appeared alongside it, and color charts were hung beneath them. Analogously, the "TalctoTile" sculptures echo the outline of a piece of mineral without copying it precisely. Yet it's hard to see the soap works merely as formal experiments in copying, given the sensory associations with domestic and private experiences and Bamburg's playful twists on form and meaning. The sculptures' minty smell conjures memories of bathing, cosmetics stores, and hotel bathrooms. *SeasShellSoap*, shown in Peppermint takes the shape of a giant clam shell, as if to parody conventional molded soaps. The fatty texture of soap dimples when coerced into a sculptural body, rather like human skin. Bamburg's use of FDA-approved dyes makes the works safe for domestic use, as if such a function were necessary now. While bathroom tiles usually line interiors, Bamburg places them on exteriors. The physical memory of such tiles as markers of a private enclosure is turned inside out in these public objects.

TalctoTire, shown in Black—a dirty pile of old tires, trash bags, acrylic sheeting, and other detritus—was positioned in a corner, and visitors would most likely have noticed it only on their way out of the gallery. It left a black smear on the wall behind it. An antithesis to the clean, benign forms that otherwise pervaded the exhibition, the work suggests that the mild horror attending them—and not just a play with concepts of original and copy—is indeed part of the artist's intention.

—Iona Whittaker

