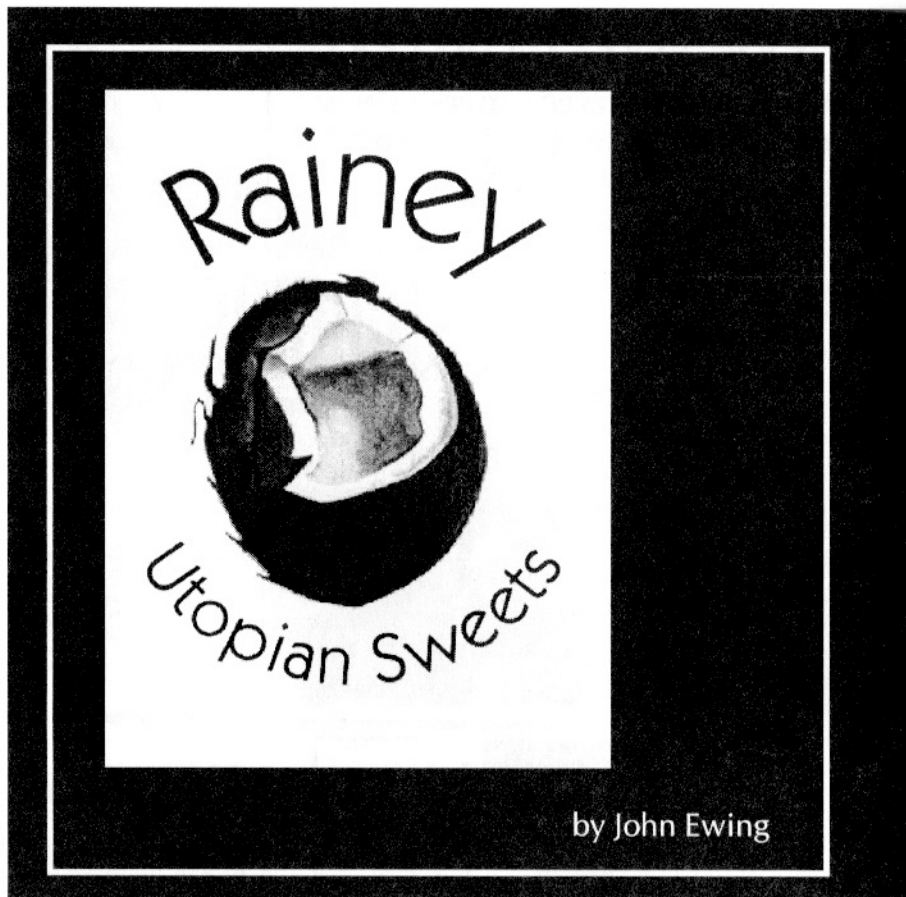


Since 1950, an American childhood anywhere near the mainstream has included the board game Candy Land. With its playing cards of perfect, individuated confections, the Milton Bradley classic has guided generations of children through a bright landscape of processed sugar. At the same time, American homemakers have been educated to realize those same, perfect fantasies for their families with the help of commercial products. In the post-war rise of the American consumer, the economic relationship of supply to desire has been

grounded in the marketplace's ability to multiply choices and insure quality.

This marriage of consumer fantasy and commercial product has also fueled a hefty portion of post-war art. Continuing the practice, San Antonio painter Rainey has chosen Adams brand extracts to organize a fine suite of pictures entitled *Vanilla Fluff*, shown in November at Joan Grona Gallery (formerly Primary Object Gallery).

In the first eleven canvases, a series of familiar images is lifted directly from the grocery store shelf. On identical rectangular fields of white, Rainey faithfully reproduces the package art identifying the Adams line of culinary extracts. Beginning with a bottle of "Adams Best" vanilla, the subsequent ten pictures are of a single pineapple, almond, orange, coconut, strawberry, etc., isolated in the center of the white field. As with the actual product packaging, there is a pleasing but misleading symmetry to the line of pictures. The almond is the same size as the pineapple, the strawberry as big as the coconut. And all of the canvases contain within the oils the same bright and even light found in grocery stores, "Dick and Jane" primers, and Candy Land playing cards. Like the marketing concept of a "product line", Rainey's series draws its strength and sensual appeal from the group. The concept of choice and controlled

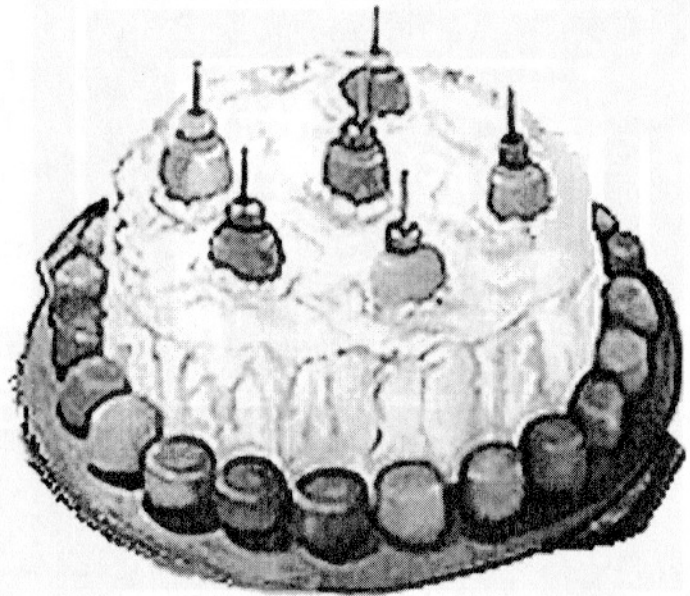


by John Ewing

quality is contained within the ensemble. Indeed, Adams relates the individual product back to the complete line with the package statement, "Don't say 'vanilla,' say 'Adams Best.'"

What is interesting about this first group is Rainey's painstaking effort to preserve the graphically simple yet manipulative strategies of the package art she references. With economical genius, Adams gets to the heart (or stomach) of our collective tastes. Therefore, Rainey's "Pure Peppermint Extract" is an image of a candy cane, not a sprig of peppermint. Similarly, "Imitation Maple Flavor" is represented by a restaurant syrup dispenser, not a maple leaf. The most strategic example is "Imitation Jamaican Rum Flavor", symbolized by a rum cake. It would appear that the words "Imitation" and "Jamaican" cancel each other, until one considers our culture's ambivalent, often hypocritical relationship to alcohol, ethnicity, and family. These images isolate social habits as well as flavors.

Neither art nor commerce operates in a cultural vacuum. Andy Warhol made sure of that. His Campbell's Soup cans and Brillo boxes rendered any special categories for art or commerce passe or simply impossible. But the intervening years have so thoroughly integrated Warhol's radical step that today a direct reference to a brand name in a work of art has the quality of nostalgia. In Rainey's work, the nostalgia offered is for a utopian mo-



"Marshmallow Birthday Cake" (from the Vanilla Fluff series) by Rainey

ment in post-war American life when modern appliances and manufacturing transformed the culture. Just as television sets and automobiles were becoming affordable to all classes, food was becoming fast, fake ("imitation") and democratizing the kitchen. General Mills invented the Betty Crocker test kitchen to that end, including photo-

flour sifters, Kalamazoo gas range, Adams food coloring, petits fours and Easter eggs). These pictures are loosely balanced in size and number, progressing inward toward the exhibition's centerpieces, "Yellow Daisy Chain Cake" and "Marshmallow Birthday Cake." Throughout the series, and especially here, Rainey's use of color and tone to sug-

gest flavors and textures is remarkable. The natural, buttery qualities of the first cake are accentuated by the white field. In contrast, the bluish tints and inorganic colors of the second cake give it an artificial, too-sweet unpalatability. As with the vanilla extract bottle, the appliances and the cake platters, this second cake glints like metal. Like Warhol above, Wayne Thiebaud's Pop irony lurks here and elsewhere in the exhibition. Rainey's attention to the sensual codes of surfaces and the tonalities of reflected light suggest Thiebaud's paintings of inedible pies and impassable streets, additional examples of artifice overwhelming or dismantling the natural.

Ultimately, Vanilla Fluff is nostalgic for a bygone America that innocently

linked product availability to a better quality of life. Post-war business harnessed science to insure product "strength" and "purity," from mouthwash to motor oil. But, we have come to recognize the consequences of "strength" and "purity", both social and environmental. Today we judge those virtues with wry detachment. We like that our vanilla extract "does not freeze or bake out" but now wonder, occasionally, if we should feel guilty about it.

graphs of gleaming chrome countertops and women in lab coats in its popular cookbooks. If we could build the Bomb and send a man to the moon, we could certainly guarantee every housewife a perfect cake.

The nine remaining canvases of Vanilla Fluff recreate that utopian convergence of fantasy and practicality. Resembling a family portrait wall, Rainey flanks a pair of large cake pictures with assorted smaller images (i.e. Sunbeam Mixmaster,

