

What It's Like to Live With Art That Doesn't Love You Back

At a time when art is as commodified as oil, a few collectors have chosen to buy works that are messy, perishable and threaten to take over their lives.

By M.H. MILLER SEPT. 22, 2017

PAUL LEONG, A YOUNG banker who lives in downtown Manhattan, spends an unusual amount of time thinking about square watermelons. He wonders where to get them, how long they'll last, when they'll next be in season. This is because two years ago, Leong bought a work by the Los Angeles-based artist Max Hooper Schneider called "Genus Watermeloncholia": a bioengineered square watermelon in a glass case filled with water. The watermelon is connected to an LED sign that is positioned so that it appears to be transmitting the watermelon's depressive thoughts: "This is all a mistake," for instance. Leong doesn't quite know why he bought it, only that he was curious how the work might look in his apartment, with its sculpture of a miniature tank by Lutz Bacher mounted to seem as if it's driving up the wall over the entrance to his bedroom, or Stefan Tcherepnin's life-size Cookie Monster statue, which dominates the guest room.

Since buying the work, however, Leong has lived with the watermelon in his apartment for a total of only six weeks. The original melon degraded quickly, and another replacement, ordered from Pennsylvania, was damaged during shipping. It turns out square watermelons aren't easy to track down. He's looked into having one shipped from Japan, where they are cultivated as a kind of curiosity. The artist and his gallery have also talked to growers in California and Australia, among other places. Recently, Leong showed me where the work used to be installed, inspecting the spot forlornly, as if something essential had gone missing. At that point, he'd been waiting eight months for a new watermelon.

Not long after my visit, I got an excited email: The artist's gallery had confirmed that an Amish farmer named Ernest in Lancaster County, Pa., had some square watermelons on the vine. They'd be ripe in a couple of weeks. Leong planned to buy a few backups, hoping they might get him through next spring. He admitted to me that it's "comical" to be spending so much time thinking about a watermelon — but that was also why he was attracted to Schneider's work in the first place: "I was drawn to the humor of it," he says.

