

The Hungry Eye: Is it Insatiable?

For better or worse, food is something we all need, crave, occasionally try to do without and fear, sometimes all at once. The fact that in a place such as the US, the consumption of an excessive amount of processed food has emerged as a health threat for millions of people (obesity and diabetes) is a cruel outcome of the power of advertising and ease of access. It has recently become an international problem. Artists are aware of these issues, and try to deal with the ambiguities and contradictions within the cultural mix of visual appeal and hidden peril of food with a multiplicity of approaches.

This exhibition focuses on a preoccupation with food as image and idea in contemporary culture. Going beyond the notion of the traditional still life, as redefined by Cézanne, after centuries of a rich history of imagery and iconography that goes back to cave painting, Egyptian and Roman art, contemporary artists have again taken on the complex relationship of human society with that which is ingested and imbibed.

Taking into account the complexity of the globalization of what constitutes a meal, through the continuing controversy about additives, processed food and hormone treated livestock and fertilizers in produce, artists have attempted to interpret and translate these often controversial and life altering events in the treatment and distribution of food in a world society. Dealing with these complex issues, often with humor and irony, as well as integrating the subject of food as commerce and pleasure into the themes of contemporary art and culture, these artists are commenting on how we view our lives as well as our diets.

Who or what are we to believe about food these days? Atkins proclaimed that fats (good ones anyway) don't make us fat; refined carbohydrates are to blame. French women never get fat (mini portions and fresh produce?), and recent research indicates that our genes may determine what is right and wrong for us to eat. Tainted spinach has sent a chill through the nation, much as mad cow disease did around the world some years ago, and canned tuna did back in Andy Warhol's disaster days. Is the salmon one gets at a restaurant or market wild, organic, or merely a farm-raised specimen, and how much does it matter? Did you have your flavonoids today? With all the information and unconfirmed scientific data available now, is it possible to just enjoy the food we eat, or are we destined to be always wondering about what it is doing to us once we have eaten it?

If we were visually what we eat, then we would all resemble a Giuseppe Archimboldo portrait, our features a composite of the food we consume. George Condo has updated this image in *Fruit Man*, and it seems just as potent and perspicacious today. Looking at and thinking about art that employs food as a means of exploration and examination of contemporary self-image and a reflection of global consciousness, one cannot help but wonder at the range of approaches in various media to such a controversial subject by artists working today.

Picasso was quoted as having quipped, "I eat the apple, and then I paint the apple." Is that appreciably different from Cézanne remarking that he married his

wife because she "could sit as still as an apple" for a portrait? Very likely, because Cézanne was absorbed in the thing (or person) in front of him, and Picasso was referring to another form of knowledge and experience. Picasso's process reflected a need to know his subject completely, intimately, consume its mystery, and then reinvent it. If Cézanne altered the rendering of the visual world by means of an acute perception, Picasso did it by ingesting and internalizing it.

In Western art, there is the "original" food image of Adam receiving the apple from Eve, in Durer's etching for example, and all that this image conveys about forbidden fruit and the irresistible hunger for knowledge, as dangerous as it may be to ones well-being, no less the future of humankind. The Last Supper, as painted by Leonardo, took four years to execute, a painstaking rendering of a fateful repast that turned, prophetically so to speak, on a confession. Dutch still life painting represented the emergence of the comforts of middle class life as a subject worthy of painting, a visual confirmation of having arrived. From Rembrandt to Soutine, the rendering of an animal carcass was an excellent excuse for pushing paint around and getting the viewer to acknowledge their complicity, conscious or otherwise. The Impressionists and Cézanne employed food as either a sumptuous indulgence (Renoir), or as a formal unit (Cézanne) to give solidity and structure to a composition.

20th Century art, might have followed the lead of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur L'herbe*; food as an opportunity to live without constraints, a vehicle for sensual pleasure. In the Americas, however, the upheavals of the early years of this century, in art as well, lead to an ambivalence that found expression in still life painting that, with landscape, aspired mostly to a pastoral quietude. Marsden Hartley works involving food was an exception, dark and full of foreboding, as were Frieda Kahlo's richly symbolic still lifes, and the proto-Pop imagery of Stuart Davis.

Pop Art changed all that, in dramatic and timely fashion. Abstract Expressionism had put American painting at the forefront of world art, and the fallout changed the seriousness of the way its art was perceived. In come the Pop artists, anticipated by the works of Johns and Rauschenberg, and the embrace of popular culture engendered a break with European precedent altogether. Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Oldenburg and Wesselmann among others, forged a direct connection with American identity through limning, with deadpanned acuity, the mechanism of advertising and commercial promotion.

Artists such as Wayne Thiebaud found in cakes and dessert displays a vehicle for formal construction, with a painter's mastery of seductive color and texture. The work of Sharon Core explores the iconography of Thiebaud, maintaining the illusion with a three dimensional rendering that blurs the line between painting, photography, nostalgia and reality. The influence of both Process and Minimalist art can be readily observed in the work of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vik Muniz and Mimi Oka with Doug Fitch, who each achieve in their use of food materials, mussels, chocolate and pasta, respectively, a wholly original vision. Pop Art's aura is evident in the work of Jonathan Seliger, Scott Teplin, Donald Baechler, and Renée Cox, though each takes it in their own particular, quirky direction. Packaging and presentation are the focus here, enlarging the image the product, for maximum effect and to the point of bombarding our senses, and simultaneously challenging our passivity about the iconography of food.

Variations on the concept of still life painting has re-emerged as a device for formal invention and/or brooding reflection, in the paintings of Janet Fish, Nancy Grimes, Peter Dayton, Julia Jacques and Donald Sultan. Each of these

painters has a distinct approach to the subject of food, influenced by photography and advertising, yet not confined by either. The works of Marcia Grostein, Mariana Lopez and Pierre Sernet are all immersed within the environment of food, be it restaurant, poultry market or a ritual (and virtual) tea setting, in order to call attention to what we take for granted but rarely observe with any attention beyond the casual.

The dinner table is a site for subtle or blatant subterfuge, as in Anthony Goicolea's wild boarding-school boys (all played by the artist) cavorting rather than eating. John Bowman's dinner table is deserted, but the mood is dreamlike, almost surreal. Julia Jacques setting exudes comfort, the moment of anticipation before indulgence. Robert Pettena's dinner party is a Victorian affair, humorously attired in animal plastic hoods, presumably to protect them from their own worst impulses; overeating. Ilona Granet's signage, *Safe to Settle In*, is an attempt to get cultures to sit down and forget, even temporarily, their differences. Priscilla Monge's photo captures the culmination of pleasure, a table full of coffee cups of consumed latte or cappuccino, portentous messages scratched into their residue.

Dessert (French, from Old French *desservir*, to clear the table) is easily the most appealing of subjects to the contemporary artist. It is likely the combined seduction of its sweetness, overtly rich color and texture, not to mention the many calories it usually contains, which adds to its ambiguous nature. Again, the work of Wayne Thiebaud represents the quintessential dessert image; arranged in geometric order, at once pristine and irresistible. A wide range of approaches to confections, from Jan Albers candy cover collage, Ed Lipski's rowdy toasted doughboy, Gary Komarin's Tower of Babel cake and Emily Eveleth's massive Goyaesque donuts, Will Cotton's painstakingly constructed confectionery landscapes or Betty Bee's multiple ice cream cones, are all meant to seduce as well as ask questions about their seemingly all but irresistible enticement.

Adam Stennett's video of a couple having dinner with white mice interlopers is a parable in the tradition of Lewis Carroll, though perhaps with more sinister implications, and Claire Lieberman's jell-o sculptures are rearranged by invading feet, a process work in progress. Ana Prvacki's installation, a documentation of her interactive papaya treatment at ARCO this year, is a paean to the healing powers of (certain) foods. The formal juxtaposition of a luscious dessert and a soldier firing his gun in Mike Solomon's monoprint illustrates two extremes locked in a visual harmony. Perhaps most apropos of all, Matthew Ronay's sculpture *Irreversible Algorithm* is a metaphor for the food cycle itself; the symbolic and fragmented animal, eating humankind's dubious invention, French (or the more absurdist, Freedom) fries.

Beyond the now overall innocence, in retrospect, of Pop Art lies the awareness of the responsibility involved in the embrace of consumer culture. Ultimately, however, the use of food imagery in art is a celebration of life. The question could be posed as to how artists can question and still indulge in the beauty that, before it is converted to something else all too often far more insidious, represents the pleasures of life on earth. This exhibition is an opportunity to experience the artist's response to this uniquely universal subject, where the visual allure, the facts and fictions collide within a still unsolved mystery; the food we consume.

Robert G. Edelman

Curators

Curated by Robert G Edelman and Gina Fiore

Artists

Jan Albers
Donald Baechler
Jay Battle
Betty Bee
John Bowman
George Condo
Sharon Core
Renée Cox
Will Cotton
Peter Dayton
Emily Eveleth
Janet Fish
GisMo
(Jessica Gispert and Crystal Molinary)
Anthony Goicolea
Ilona Granet
Nancy Grimes
Philip Guston
Julia Jacques
Nina Katchadourian
Gary Komarin
Roy Lichtenstein
Claire Lieberman
Ed Lipski

Mariana Lopez
Ted Mineo
Priscilla Monge
Vik Muniz
Mimi Oka and Doug Fitch
Nicholas Papadakis
Richard Pasquarelli
Robert Pettena
Ana Prvacki
Matthew Ronay
Jonathan Seliger
Pierre Sernet
Laurie Simmons
Sandy Skoglund
Mike Solomon
Adam Stennett
Billy Sullivan
Donald Sultan
Scott Teplin
Wayne Thiebaud
Rirkrit Tiravanija
Andre von Morisse
Andy Warhol
Tom Wesselmann
Franz West

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