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ARTIST

Comfort Food

Food Representation in Literature, Film, and the Arts

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I met my wife Sarah just before Christmas when we were juniors in college. For Valentines Day she baked chocolate chip cookies for me.

With a simple gesture she leaned quietly forward unfurling the tablecloth, beginning to set our table for a romance with food. I folded napkins and brought a pot of red tulips—a meal for the eye, hope for spring.

Later that year I met her family and I found my place in New York in the kitchen by her mother's side, intrigued by her passion for all things food. Edie—quick to remind you she is a Wellesley woman; firm in her kitchen; creating meals with lavish and foreign flavors, meals requiring complex and obscure processes, meals of deliciously surprising simplicity.

As she directs it to its place confidently, intently, the fork's ring resonates through the table.

Edie and Sarah talked of family traditions, of dinner disasters, of celebratory evenings out at glamorous restaurants, mysterious dishes from world travels, of comfort food. Comfort food. What was comfort food? Buttered toast and rice Mom had served when our tummies ached? Popsicles when our throats were sore? I knew nothing of this idea of comfort food.

I knew that growing up Thursday nights were baked chicken nights. Salads were iceberg lettuce with Italian dressing made from an envelope. Casseroles were vegetables because hidden somewhere in those dishes of cream of celery and mushroom soup mixed with mayonnaise were mushy things that had once been green. The only way to cook fresh vegetables was to lace them with bacon grease and boil them for hours. My mother raised my brother and I with a silver spoon of southern Virginia bacon grease in our mouths—bacon grease and mayonnaise. Mayonnaise on chicken salad sandwiches, pimento cheese and sweet pickle sandwiches, peanut butter and banana sandwiches with mayonnaise. Avocados and aspic always need mayonnaise. My mother loved mayonnaise. Please note the pronunciation, man-aze. Improper pronunciation of mayonnaise—may-o-naze, my-nez—aroused serious suspicion in my southern mother's mind; a clear sign of poor upbringing. My parents dated for two weeks before they were engaged. Three months later they were married. I think my father rushed the wedding hoping that my mother wouldn't realize that he liked Miracle Whip. My mother was a wonderful cook. Her repertoire was not expansive, but all of her meals were good. Everything was made with great care. Ingredients were selected with precision. We ate vegetables she had picked from our garden in her nightgown in the morning and canned sweating in the tidewater heat in the afternoon. If there is food that was made with love, it was hers. If your belly swelled full of this love, you had a problem and she let you know—by pointing out signs of extra weight in pictures, with motherly questions like "getting a little thick in the middle aren't you?" My poor father paid penance for the love of her double-edged sword at the sink doing dishes for so many years that he even convinced himself that he enjoyed this charge.

Knowing that she was right, knowing that we knew she was right, my mother placed the knife next to the spoon with precision, gently straightening them to make sure their position was perfect, proper.

Before dinner, Dow, my father-in-law, mixes syrupy cold, dry martinis on the rocks with no garnishes in pressed glass tumblers. He always makes sure, with great fanfare, that Edie gets hers first, chiding that he has given her the smallest. For special dinners he brings out wines from the 60's that he bought on futures in his bachelor days. The everyday glass is filled with good, inexpensive wine picked to precisely match Edie's efforts in the kitchen. If it is a birthday or anniversary or holiday, bottles of old port, sauterne, or toque fill the most delicate stemware to accompany dessert. After dinner Dow searches through dozens of bottles under his bar for Chartreuse or Poiré William or Midori that should be green, but now has a mysterious brownish ton. Or perhaps someone would like a beer from the Pioneer where they have the best prices. At 82 Dow has never been drunk. I have lost track of the number of times I have been drunk since I met him. Dow raised my wife with an appreciation and affection for spirits. Her first sentence was "want more beer now please."

Dow steps back from the cabinets in the butler's pantry and surveys the glasses before picking the perfect ones and casually placing them above the knife in anticipation of the evenings

doubtless pleasures.

As Sarah works away glancing at cookbooks and pulling ideas from all of the meals she has cooked before, I assist, destroying the kitchen with dirty pots and pans. She remembers them all. How we cooked the turkey three Thanksgivings ago, where did that recipe for shrimp bisque come from, how we tried to recreate that Quiona salad we had in D.C.

Leaving her to her masterpiece, I embellish the table with candles—light—and with objects—a still life to be pondered and played with as the evening unfolds. I pick the plates to match the meal, the occasion. I decorate the dining room. I adjust the lighting. With Sarah's help I pick music before returning to her side in the kitchen to help with the last minute preparations. Everything is ready for the meal. Everything is perfect in the world.

My artwork is based on stories like these. It is based on the continuous process of consumption that is fundamental to my existence. Three times a day I feed my body. My entire life is spent feeding my consciousness. With consumption and digestion of food as metaphor for the ingestion and rumination of sensory experiences, my images explore the fusion of diverse elements forming the meals that sustain my soul.

As individuals we are dependent upon food. As a culture we obsessed with it—eating, not eating, non-fat, low-cal, high protein, low-carb, organic, processed. Our language is peppered with allegories and clichés reflecting this preoccupation—we eat our own words, our hearts out, our humble pie; we want to have our cake and eat it too. I am what I eat. My work investigates the means by which our identities are constructed. On one level, my individuality is determined by my distinct genetic composition. I find, however, that who I am is in a continuous state of evolution that is impelled by everyday experience. I ceaselessly consume commonplace events upon which my mind feeds. Some of these happenings are expelled immediately, some linger, and others are hidden away and saved for later. Regardless, all of these mundane details are the extraordinary ingredients that flavor my identity.

In my images varying forms of representation speak of the different ways in which I experience the world and the incongruous effects these experiences have upon my personality. The process of developing my images is analogous to the way that new observations are assimilated with past experience and digested to determine who I am now. Diverse circumstances interact in an atmosphere that is at once subjectively romantic and objectively documentary. Through my layering of images and techniques, I create visual meals to serve my viewer.

As with many things in life, food and the meal were a part of my work for years before I realized it—spoons and plates, teacups and apples. They were objects to draw, not the content of my work. It was only when I began showing my work to others, speaking about my work, that I stepped back and realized what I was doing. I once observed a seasoned teacher who drove his students to madness asking them repeatedly “what do you know, what do you love?” trying to get them to find the meat, or maybe tofu, of their work. I love food. I love planning a meal. I love hunting and shopping for the ingredients. I love cooking. I love setting the table. I love entertaining. I love cocktails before dinner. I love eating. I hate dishes and I make a terrible mess, but I love stepping back and surveying the destruction, the shrapnel from some great explosion. Something wonderful has happened. My mind is at work sorting through the evening. What was good? What could have been better? What was the best? Did everyone enjoy everything? Who said what? What did we talk about—politics, books, music, art, jobs, love, gossip? What was the tone of the evening? This is the meat of my work.

I work in series of images that have a common form, format, use of materials, content. I approach each series with a different idea from a different point of view. I take a different set of experiences and try to communicate a new perspective on life. I always, however, return to telling stories—thinking about ideas I have, something I have experienced, the effect it has had upon me, how it has changed who I am, the memory of what happened, the truth of a situation, creating reality. Discussing the writing process in the author's note of his novel *The Life of Pi*, Yann Martel's narrator asks “That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality?”¹ That is what my work is about, the transformation of my reality into a visual form where my viewer and I can meet on a common ground bringing our own life experiences.

Consumed/Contained is a series of monoprints in which I tell stories from several different voices within the same image—woodcuts are matter of fact. Loose, watercolor drawings are more ethe-

real, abstract, and less tangible. Text is embellished, poetic, and romantic. All exist in a bilious environment speaking of the different emotions we often have about the same event.

In the series *Lemon* I juxtapose images of myself eating a lemon with different stories relating to the tastes and clichés associated with lemons. Life, like food, takes on many characteristics and is evocative of many emotions. It is not always sweet like dessert. It is at times bitter and sour like lemons.

Lifeblood is an installation whose elements include an eleven-foot by four-foot dinner table, fourteen photogravure/intaglio prints, and an audio heartbeat. Each framed print is the size of a dinner plate. There are no chairs. These were my meals. I invite the viewer to ponder my images, the leftovers of experiences I have consumed.

Playing Chicken started as a series of images to get me working in a new studio after a move. Chickens make me laugh. I needed to make myself laugh. The series, like *Lemon*, became about different clichés associated with chickens, but more so about the games we play with ourselves—should I, shouldn't I; the grass is always greener; wanting and needing.

In the Kitchen is about the different movements, made in the kitchen. There are broad ranges of effects that can be created by subtle differences in process. There is an abstract wordless quality things take on when you know them as if they are a part of you.

In *Comfort Food* I layered paper, pencil, acrylic, wax, a cut-up cookbook, oil, and oil pastels to create images that I paired with written or diagrammed memories. The works speak about movements from here to there, ingredients to dishes or meals, experiences to memories, food to memory.

Dinner is about the process of creating, consuming, and experiencing a meal. The images are the size of a tabletop and were created the way a meal would be served. I set the table, served the food, consumed it, and have left behind the memories of specific meals. *Dinner* is about the importance of food and memory as observed through four different dinners that marked significant moments in my life.

In his BBC series *Ways of Seeing* John Berger stated, "An image is a sight which has been recreated and reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing."² In my work I invite the viewer to consume images set at a table constructed with metaphors of food and the meal. I invite the viewer to consider our common experiences, and the invaluable moments in his or her life as related to food.

My mother died the day after Christmas this past year. Over the weekend before her funeral, in the moments between tears, laughter, visitations, chasing my children, consoling my father, I found myself drawn to my mother's recipe book, my grandmother's recipe file. I once read "a memory is what is left behind when something happens and does not completely unhappen."³ As I sorted through these pages and cards I found my hands full of things that had not unhappened. I found myself knowing comfort food. Comfort food is nothing complex. I had thought too hard about it. It takes no special effort. It is food laced with memory—sweet and bitter. It fuels the body and enlivens the soul. It is delicious, though it may be hard to swallow. I saw that I had eaten it every day of my life and my belly was proudly full.

But there is room for more. Sarah and I have our monthly date nights taking turns cooking special meals for each other. Or maybe the simplicity of canned soup and toasted buttered bagels in front of the television. Or dinners around the kitchen table with my children, Caleb, 7, and Grace, 4. In a perfect demonstration of the union of Sarah's and my families, the children each insist upon saying the blessing and immediately after amen raise their glasses bellowing "Cheers!" We settle in and they haggle over how many bites of chicken they must have. As we talk Caleb corrects us and tells us what is "actually" true. They gag on vegetables. Grace asks "Is today tomorrow?" They can't eat any more; they are full. But as soon as the table is cleared, they want to know what is for dessert. There is always room for dessert. There is always room for more. For me there is always room for comfort food.

Our table is set and I am ready to eat.

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¹ Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2002) p. VIII.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Group, 1972) p. 9-10.

³ John Jackle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) p. 17.