

**The Language of Food and Eating Within
a Context of Three Dimensional Still Life**

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Submitted in the fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

Signed statement of originality

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ABSTRACT

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The Language of Food and Eating Within a Context of Three Dimensional Still Life

Master of Fine Art

My research project sets out to investigate the assumption that eating is the most fundamental of acts, and that food is our most basic requirement. That the simple truth of these two facts suggests the connection of every living thing on the planet, each to the other; and through this network my connection to every other person in the world.

The place of food at the centre of life explains why it conveys a host of meanings. Messages are implied in the presentation of food be it a single slice of carrot or a partially devoured meal, meaning is layered upon meaning. The use of food to make art has by association this same potential.

While our consciousness separates us from the physical world, every day of our lives food connects us to the cycles of life and matter and is an ever present reminder of our utter dependence on all else. Working from the premise that the biological experience of food consumption is universal, this research project became an exploration of the language of food, at least in some of its many dialects. This project is an exploration of form and meaning when using food as a primary medium and as a subject of an art practice.

This body of work engages a medium-specific discourse. It investigates the nature of my relationship to the material 'food'. For the purposes of this project food plays a dual role. Normally we get physical sustenance from food, while art materials feed our need to express ourselves. My utilisation covers both contexts, with both being easily interchangeable.

The specific areas covered are:

- cultural meanings of a meal
- the processes of growth and decay
- bodily knowledge
- staining
- chewing
- metaphor, the use of food to speak of other things
- still life and the representation of food
- a visual language of objects as emblems, that stand in for the human condition.

Initially the project was an investigation of the stuff of food, with my own cultural experience of it as the subject matter. As I worked with food as a medium for making art, its wider possibilities both materially and conceptually slowly became more evident. As the project matured the work developed into a closer look at the connection of food and the body. I started to produce works that imitated the functions of bodies. Finally the project attempted using food and eating to identify some of the knowledge of life we have gained through our bodies. These outcomes of the research project are demonstrated in the art works.

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CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Everything that lives eats and is eaten.

Eating, a most fundamental act, *food*, one of our most basic requirements.

The simple truth of these two facts suggests the connection of every living thing on the planet, each to the other; and through this network my connection to every other person in the world. With total certainty I know that the action of eating and the stuff of food holds within it part of each individual's life story.

The place of food at the centre of life explains why it conveys a host of meanings. Messages are implied in the presentation of food. Be it a single slice of carrot or a partially devoured meal, meaning is layered upon meaning. The use of food to make art has, by association, this same potential.

My research project set out to test these assumptions and to explore form and meaning when using food as a primary medium and as a subject of an art practice.

Working from the premise that the biological experience of food consumption is universal, this research project became an exploration of the language of food, at least in some of its many dialects. It resulted in an exhibition of artworks and the documentation of the investigation provided in the exegesis.

NATURE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I came to Hobart in 1997 to complete my Honours year. This was an exciting, productive time when my interest in the domestic object and still life developed in the direction of food, eating and still life. Constructing miniature houses and blocks of flats out of white sliced bread, I was introduced to the idea of using the medium as the subject matter.



Fig.1 Barbie Greenshields *Homebrand*, 1997.

Consequently this was the one thing I was certain that I wished to pursue. I would make art *about* food *with* food. From this point of departure I chose what interested me most, whether by medium, technique or meaning and discovered that the topic *food and eating* is immense and complicated and needs to be divided up in order to be better understood. As the research progressed I realised that certain thoughts, objects and approaches had similarities that could be grouped together. I used four general headings; sociological, biological, artistic and philosophical.

This system of segregation served as a useful tool in the first part of the research when I was acquiring so much new information. By placing the material under these broad headings I was able to gain a clearer understanding of what it was I was actually dealing with. Once I had intellectually absorbed the concept of food viewed in these four different ways, I was able to place this device aside, freeing myself from the encumbrance of such wide-ranging generalisations. But for the purposes of establishing a foundation for this exegesis I return to this same system.

The type of food one eats, the method of preparation, the place, the time of day, year or lifetime at which it is consumed, and how these factors are regarded by the individual, are all indicators of one's position in a society. This research project assumes that food is a key signifier of ethnic identity. The project takes its lead from the texts of sociologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. It assumes that the history of the production and consumption of food has helped develop contemporary culture. Through the rules and rituals concerning food,

social control is enforced; and guidelines to social belonging are given.

The food we eat is the product of the combination of the four elements; earth, air, fire and water. Nature comes into the house, into our lives and directly into our bodies in the form of food. This stuff that we assimilate into our bodies, transforming it into us, this exchange of molecules, the shuffling around of matter, is a profound happening. While our consciousness determines to separate us from the physical world, every day of our lives food connects us to the cycles of life and matter and is an ever present reminder of our utter dependence on all else. The act of eating enables us to come close to the world, to seize its energy for our own, to become the world.

Mikhail Bakhtin has argued in *Rabelais and His World* that

The body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world¹

Nothing can escape eating and nothing can escape being eaten, there is a perpetual cycle of the world eating itself; plants eat the light, the air, the soil. Animals eat the plants; humans and animals eat the plants and animals. Finally the earth *eats* the remains of all; plants, animals and humans and so the cycle is sustained.

Our culture attempts to cover and tidy up the confronting reality intrinsic to our obtaining sustenance. The biological aspect of my research deals with our relationship with food before culture intervenes; within the biological flake

¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail *Rabelais and His World* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984 p 317.

reverts to shark, pork pig, beef cattle, and lamb sheep. Food and eating connect us to every living thing and to the *death* of living things. Animals are farmed, transported and killed en masse so that we can eat them. Our experience of meat is in the calm after the event; the violence that produced it is over, the stench is gone. Unencumbered, the moist red succulent meal is ours to savour, to chew, to swallow, and to digest, to assimilate and defecate.

This body of work engages a medium-specific discourse. It investigates the nature of my relationship to the material 'food'. For the purposes of this project food plays a dual role. Normally we get physical sustenance from food, while art materials feed our need to express ourselves. My utilisation covers both contexts, with both being easily interchangeable. The subject of food is so loaded with associations that to use it in an art context brings up a multitude of issues that go beyond appearances.

THE PARAMETERS OF THE INVESTIGATION

In investigating a vast topic such as this it is essential that parameters are set. I recognise that I am taking a relatively selective approach in this project and that some very significant issues are touched upon yet not developed. Listed below is the main set of issues I have *excluded* from my research. Relevant in the wider context and extremely interesting, these sub-topics may be investigated at a later date. At the same time however I recognise that all these things listed may, for example, have sociological implications and some have been mentioned in passing.

Some issues excluded from this research are:

- genetic engineering
- cannibalism
- sex
- obesity
- starvation
- diet books
- vegetarianism
- packaging and distribution
- economics
- synthetic foods
- mass production
- eating disorders
- drink

Through the process of choosing parameters, I have come across many points of intersection. The different aspects; the sociological, the biological, the artistic and the philosophical actually intertwine, overlap and at times run parallel, one aspect informing the other. Their cumbersome, convoluted nature has proven difficult to manage at times and to keep separate. But it is necessary to keep in mind that the different aspects I have named cover specific areas that do distinguish themselves each from the other. It is also necessary to acknowledge that there are different ways of seeing the same thing - often influenced by the way it is viewed.

Through the process of elimination (which occurred throughout the project by trial and error) the key concerns of this research project are as follows:

- cultural meanings of a meal
- the processes of growth and decay
- bodily knowledge
- staining
- chewing
- metaphor - the use of food to speak of other things
- still life and the representation of food
- a visual language of objects as emblems that stand in for the human condition.

RELATED ART PRACTICES

After reviewing a range of artists working in the same general field, I have chosen examples that typify the differing approaches. This brief survey locates my project in the context of the work of other artists with similar concerns.

The Ephemeral and Photography

One of the concerns that I have found to be most prominent in my research practice is that of the ephemeral and the preservation of the ephemeral. The media, *food* dictates overwhelmingly that this element is acknowledged and dealt with. There are artists and specific works that incorporate the element of decomposition and eventually dissipation. And there are those artists whose works employ devices to slow down or still this process.

The tofu face casts of David Shapiro; *Tofu Heads in Glass Merchandiser* (1998) are an example of the incorporation of decay. The short life of such a medium as tofu makes it well suited to the incorporation of decomposition into an artwork. These castings are ephemeral works lasting about two weeks. The artist's objective has been to make a portrait in a material that will slowly disappear. They were shown in the gallery in glass 'deli' cases, and after a while pieces spontaneously detach themselves from the main body and through this process the portraits slowly disappear.²

² Pirez, Ingrid "For Thought" in *World Art* issue 20, 1999 P.8-10.

Lynn Aldrich also addresses the mortality of all types of matter, food and the bodies into which it is ingested. The artist contemplates the possibility, both literally and spiritually, of running out of nourishment and hence life. To comment on this ironic condition of constantly pursuing something necessary for life, but which is ultimately transient, Aldrich created *Bread Line* (1991) a site-specific installation in an abandoned bakery. This was a work that was explicitly short-lived.³

The most permanent and long-lasting technique used to arrest this wasting away and eventual disappearance of art works is photographic documentation. The photographs of garden produce by Charles Jones,⁴ a gardener on private estates in the countryside of Victorian England, made a strong impact on me when I saw them.

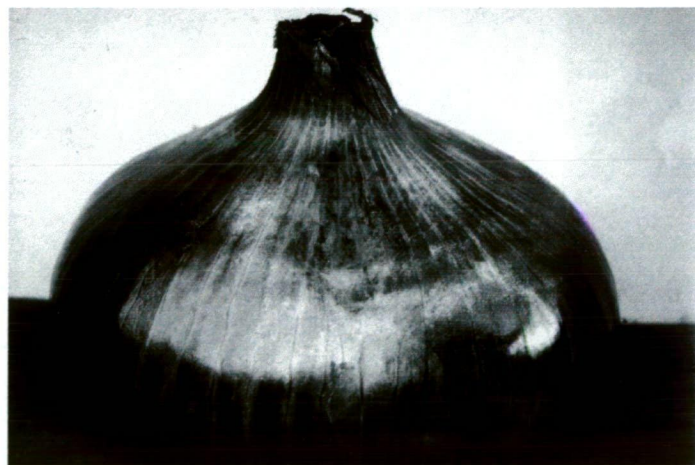


Fig.2 Charles Jones *Onion Rousham Park Hero*, (vintage print) c 1895-1910.

³ Schwendenwein, Jude "Cravings: Food into Sculpture" in *Sculpture* November-December 1992 Volume 11 Number 6. P.44-49.

⁴ Sexton, Sean and Robert Flynn Johnson *The Plant Kingdoms of Charles Jones* Preface by Alice Waters Thames and Hudson. London, 1998.

They are compelling, inspirational images that convey a feeling of celebration for a world that Jones must have known intimately; vegetables looking as though they were harvested only moments prior to being immortalised on film. Intensified by sharp focus, tight close-up and simple composition, the subject of a single specimen becomes a striking photographic still life. The vegetables are not photographed in nature, but are removed then isolated against black, white or neutral backgrounds. So in a way they are formal portraits. They are carefully lit and posed to create a very particular viewpoint. These works are unpretentious images of simple aesthetic contemplation. Jones has been positioned in the category of 'outsider' artist, implying his still lives were a visual record of private investigation and reflection, not still life as public object of display or commerce.

In comparison to these images by Charles Jones two artists whose work uses photography as an intrinsic medium in the production of their art are Michiko Kon and Sandy Skoglund. Both set up three-dimensional installations, made of decomposable matter, specifically for the camera.

Michiko Kon⁵ is a Japanese artist whose studio is located in close proximity to Tokyo's meat, fish and vegetable market. She visits the market regularly to acquire photographic subjects. Kon's *Cabbages and Bed #3*, (1997) is a black and white photograph of cabbage leaves that totally cover, below the pillow line, a white sheeted, single bed.

⁵ Kon, Michiko, *Still Lives* Narrative by Ryu Murakami Essay by Toshiro Ito Aperture New York, 1997.



Fig.3 Michiko Kon *Cabbages and Bed #3*, 1992.

There is a pillow placed at its head. It has been indented with what I imagine was the whole cabbage before it was deconstructed. The shot is taken from above, at the base of the bed. The lighting allows a wide spectrum of tones and shades. Set against a black background, this object has a powerful presence. There is a Surrealist sensibility to the work, the unusual combination of elements encourages thoughts that lead off somewhere into the subconscious, inducing feelings of awe that are not easy to logically explain. The power of these images lies within this ambiguity. This difficulty of comprehension produces in the viewer a desire to wonder about differing possibilities. It is this wonderment which is my main interest in the work.

My interest in the specific photographic work by Sandy Skoglund⁶ titled *Spirituality in the Flesh* (1992) is with her use of her chosen medium, 80 pounds of raw minced beef.

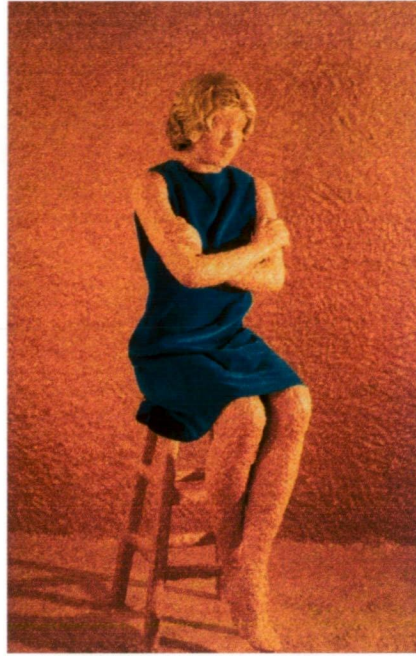


Fig.3 Sandy Skoglund *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 1992.

It is reminiscent of Jana Sterback's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1991). Once the viewer is aware of the material this intensely coloured image is quite shocking. Fresh minced beef has been smeared over the walls and floor of the space. A minced beef covered stool is placed in the middle. Upon the stool is seated a mannequin who is wearing a bright blue, soft velvet shift and a shorthaired wig. Its arms, legs and face have been covered in the meat. In this combination - the wet, blood red meat and the bright blue, soft fabric - there seems to be uncanny similarities between the elements, their soft-looking texture and their similar tones of colour. But the thought of the experience if they were physically mixed together is messy and unpalatable. I am reminded of Meret

⁶ Squires, Carol *Reality Under Siege. A Retrospective* Smith College Museum of Art, in association with Harry W Abrams Inc. Publishers, New York, 1998.

Oppenheim's *Le Dejeuner en Fourrure* (1936).⁷ This fur covered cup, saucer and spoon is similar in that, on viewing the work, sensation takes over from intellect. The fur covering revolts oral intimacy: fur in one's mouth. Both Skoglund's image and Oppenheim's object arouse other senses; taste, touch and smell. The major differing element of course is that of object and photograph, a viewer has a bodily relation to the object whereas the viewer's experience of an image in a photograph is one of intellectual recognition. Both these experiences of relating can be meaningful and memorable.

The unrelenting intensity of *Spirituality in the Flesh* suggests also the unrelenting intensity of the consequence of eating meat: death. The severity of the production of minced beef has been illustrated in this work and Skoglund is quoted as stating: "Every aspect of this involved extreme alienation from what's considered normal behaviour in society." This divergence from normal behaviour ranged from doing colour tests on the meat, to lying to the butcher as to why she was purchasing 80 pounds of mince - "It was an experiment in horror," she says, "It's the only piece I've done where I've really physically touched death. I felt I was digging around in my mother's grave. This is the ultimate reduction - what you are going to become - the ultimate reality."⁸

I have chosen these two works: Kon's *Cabbage and Bed #3* and Skoglund's *Spirituality in the Flesh*, as examples of the transfixion of a biological imperative. These are images of recently expired life, before the time of wilting or discolouration,

⁷ Naylor, Colin (ed) *Contemporary Masterworks* St. James Press Chicago and London, 1991.

⁸ Squires [1998] p.45.

and they impart a sense of before, now and after in the works. These pieces existed only to be photographed.

Although there is equal emphasis on two media - sculpture (the object) and photography (representation), the photographs are intended to be the art works. Jones, Kon and Skoglund, use photographs to portray ephemeral objects before they decompose. In my case the intention is that the *object* is the artwork, the photographs are documentation.

My work incorporates both the elements of decomposition and eventual dissipation, and devices to still these processes. Both of these approaches are described in detail throughout the paper.

Food as Medium

Food as *cultural experience* was a starting point for many of my investigations. Although I have focused my work on the family unit, I was also intrigued by the views of the 1930's Futurist Filippo Marinetti, who proposed a revolution in food for an entire culture. *The Futurist Cookbook*⁹ contained a manifesto to revitalise Italian culture by changing the way Italians eat. This book was not about cooking but actually it was about food as raw material for art which I will elaborate on at a later stage in the paper.

The Fluxus group of the 1960's and 70's also experimented with this idea of food as a medium for art making. Fluxus artists produced *anti art*, with an emphasis on the paradoxical, humorous

⁹ Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso *The Futurist Cookbook* Translated by Suzanne Brill. Edited with an introduction by Lesley Chamberlain Trefoil Publications, London, Bedford Arts, Publishers, San Francisco, 1989.

and ephemeral. This radical movement was a critique of established attitudes and *givens* in art and in life.

Some examples of Flux – Foods (sic) are: *Mono Meals* – a fish meal of fish soup, vinaigrette, pate', pancakes, cutlets, dumplings, bread (from fish bone flour), clear fish carbonated drink, fish jello, pudding, ice cream, pastry, candy, tea and transparent meals of clear gelatine flavoured shapes. George Maciunas who was the founder and resident genius of the Fluxus group, produced these works.

There were also *Food Events* performed by the Fluxus artists. These events were described in detail in manifestos and could be used by all on the condition that the Fluxus group was named as the source of the work. A time event was proposed to mark the passing of the year, 1975. For this New Years Eve event all participant artists were to submit timepieces that could be either, time or clock objects, or time events or time foods. Some of the *time foods* proposed were a 1 minute egg, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 min. eggs; or potatoes: food that continuously expands, or changes colour, or shrinks or melts: food or drink that is dispensed very slowly or very fast and food that takes a very long time to chew.

Another Fluxus New Year Eve event held in 1974-75 was a coloured meal. Each artist was to produce a dish of a certain colour to be shared at a meal on New Years Eve as a Flux (sic) event.¹⁰ There were

¹⁰ The participating artists were – Charteuse(sic), by Vytas Bakatis. Yellow, by Yasunao Tone, Peter Van Ripper, Simone Forti. Orange, by Amy Taubin. Red, by Ayo, Francene Keery. Violet, by Barbara Moore, Larry Miller, Sarah Seagull. Blue, by Geoff Hendricks. Turquoise(sic), by Callie Angell, Mike Cooper, Jonas Mekas, Hollis Melton. Green, by Jean Brown, Shirley Smith. White, by Alison Knowles. Grey, by Almus and Nijole Salcius. Charcoal, by Shigeo Kubota and Nam June Paik. Black, by Barbara Stewart and Yoshimas Wada. Transparent, by George Maciunas.

also *Mono Colour Meals*, the work of Bici Hendricks, described as a white meal, white drink (milk), white potatoes, rice, white cheese, spaghetti, white creamed salad, white jello, white cake, white ice cream. A black meal, black drink (coffee), black beans, black meat and sauce, black bread, black chocolate.¹¹ These meals were comprised of untampered appropriately coloured food.

An artist who does tamper with his medium is the Californian, Peter Kutter, and an artist who in the 70's staged events presenting brightly dyed food to the public for consumption. In explanation of his work he is quoted as saying:

The significance of the idea is several fold.
Transmuting an everyday experience into a completely new experience refers to our conditioning, to the kind of assumptions we make about what we experience. It will be impossible for people, once they have seen blue bread, ever to consider bread again as exclusively white or brown just because of what they are used to.... Not only do I question particular assumptions in a given event, my whole work results from asking radical questions about the context in which an artist in western society functions nowadays.... Object making does not allow me adequate response...with certain exceptions, if one makes an object one perpetuates a concept of activity which is to do with monuments, with market investment for an elite, with a small scale of communication.... I feel strongly that the food should be considered valid as an experience in itself.¹²

¹¹ Hendricks, Jon *Fluxus Codex* Introduced by Robert Witten. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection; Detroit: Michigan, in association with Harry N Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York, 1998 p.69.

¹² Kutter, Peter "Coloured Food" from *Studio International* No. 932 Vol. 181 April, 1971 p.49.

The dyeing of foodstuff is not of particular interest to me. My main interest lies with the general use of food as an art medium. The fact that when using the common every day to make an art work it is necessary for the viewer to re-evaluate assumptions about the material in order to enter into the artwork. Once this re-evaluation is established and the medium is validated, this enables an opening up of one's view of the world to new ideas.

Artists Who Cook

The concept of an artist who cooks is personified in Rirkrit Tiravanija. He has a Thai cultural background and lives in New York. His first one-man show, *Pad Thai* (1990) exhibited the decomposing leftovers of the Thai meal that he had cooked for the opening night. Later, rather than concentrating on the leftovers, it was the *idea* of cooking that the artist would develop in further works. He prepares the food and serves it to his audience, sharing with them the time and the circumstances of the meals. The beholder of Tiravanija works, from the offering of a meal, receives *a gift*. In the process all the culinary paraphernalia creates its own particular visual aesthetic.

This is a collective activity, and Tiravanija relies on lots of people to animate his work, allowing for interruption. The chance that something could go wrong - an allergic reaction - or food poisoning is taken into account.¹³

¹³ This element of risk is the same consideration I encountered when my intention was to serve one of my art works for consumption to my examiners. I came to realise that with a single person as the sole participant in an event, the risk of something going wrong in relation to the successful outcome of the work was far too high. My solution to this problem I discuss in detail at a later stage in the paper.

In 1992, at the 303 Gallery in New York, Tiravanija turned the gallery inside out and back to front, emptying the contents of the offices and storage areas onto the floor of the main gallery, and transforming the rear office into a canteen where he prepared and served food to visitors. In 1993, in the Aperto section of the *Venice Biennale*, he installed a canoe in which noodles were cooked and offered to visitors. At the end of 1994, at "Cocido y Crudo" at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, his installation included a small camp stove and mini video with a catalogue of the meals and meetings that took place during his bicycle trip from the airport to the exhibition site. With the cooking, offering and consumption of these art works the social bond was asserted.¹⁴

Thirty years prior to the radical works of Tiravanija, Daniel Spoerri, a member of the Fluxus group, produced an on-going series called Trap Pictures, in the 1970's. These pieces represented the aftermath of the western ritual of food consumption. Entire tables, some with their chairs still attached, some with the table removed and the tablecloth remaining were hung on the wall. Fixed firmly to these supports were settings of meals that had been eaten. These assemblages suggest similar concerns to those of Tiravanija, in that they reflect common social interactive experiences.

Cooking is a near perfect metaphor for Tiravanija's philosophy. It acts as a mechanism for communal behaviour - sharing a meal as an analogy for sharing an idea. The food performances are about conviviality and socialising on a large scale. On the other hand my work, reflects a more intimate approach and utilises the meaning of food and

¹⁴ Melo, Alexandre "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" in *Parkett* Number 44 1995.

culture as it is confined to a smaller unit of human interaction; namely that of my experience within my family.

Feeding and Being Fed

I find the narratives of feeding and being fed, which are used by the English performance artist Bobby Baker very interesting in the context of my own project. Her performance/installation piece *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976), from the *Kitchen* show which was first performed in London in 1991 and then again at the Adelaide Festival of Arts 1992, is the work I have chosen to review.

This piece has deep undertones to it, to which I can relate through my own experiences of working with a material and content that has such a fundamental basis. Marina Warner in her article "Bobby Baker. The Rebel at the Heart of the Joker"¹⁵ describes this particular piece as a family that has been manufactured out of food. When I first read this description, *The Edible Woman* (1982) - a novel about symbolic cannibalism by Margaret Atwood - came to mind.

In Bobby Baker's *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* Father is made of fruitcake; he is placed in an armchair watching TV. Daughter is made of cream puffs and floats around the parents' bed. Son is made of Garibaldi biscuits and lies in the bath. The baby is meringues and lies in a cot. The artist, hosting the event and making cups of tea portrays mother. Each room is lined with appropriate pages from magazines, which suit the character of each family member and each room is decorated with

¹⁵ Warner, Marina "Bobby Baker: The Rebel at the Heart of the Joker" in *Art and Design* V10 Sept/Oct.1995 p. ii-xiii Feature Article.

icing sugar. The audience is invited to eat the family.

At the end of this installation when all that was left of the figures was a stain on the floor and the armature of the figures, Bobby Baker realised how fundamentally transgressive she had been, how she had in effect made a model of her own brother and sister, mother and father, and herself. This family tea party in which the family was eaten, could be seen to reflect the structure of a ritual such as the Eucharist - representing the eating of the body and the blood of Christ by the congregation. (I elaborate at a later stage on this subject)

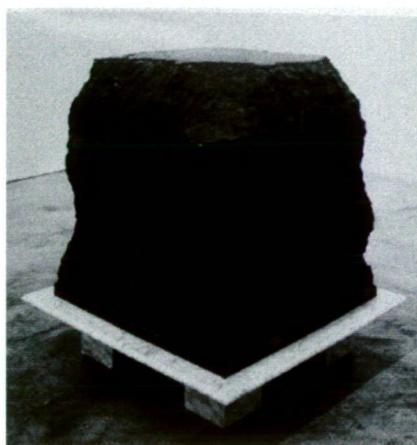
This specific piece of Bobby Baker's amuses and inspires me. The simple idea of portraying a family through the use of foodstuffs that can represent varying characteristics of each family member is quirky and amusing. When these family members are offered to the public to eat a whole new set of concerns comes into play. It is the combination of a seemingly lighthearted exposé into human character. In addition it refers to our basic biological need to feed and to the meanings of the source of that sustenance.

Chef Gay Bilson also made an exploration of the body but in her case it was an exploration of the body as meat. This banquet was presented for the *Seventh Symposium of Australian Gastronomy* in March 1993, at the Australian National Gallery, Canberra and by coincidence, in the same week as the opening of the Surrealist Exhibition at the National Gallery. This meal is described at length later in this paper.¹⁶

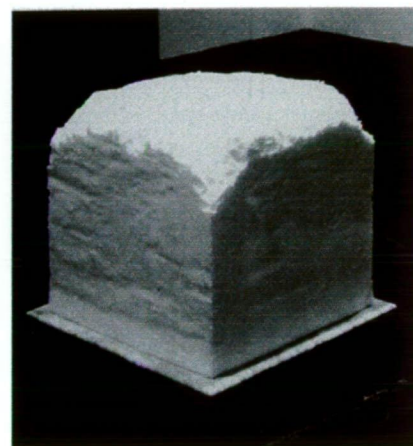
¹⁶ Bilson, Gay "The Art of Eating" *Australian Magazine* July 4-5 1998 p.16-20.

Obsession

The final aspects I will discuss in relation to other artists and my research project are body experience, obsession and compulsion. The artist I would like to introduce at this point is Janine Antoni. Antoni actually enacts obsessive and self-punishing aspects of eating disorders. In the work titled *Gnaw* (1992) food is Antoni's sculptural medium.



600 lbs of chocolate that I chewed on



600 lbs of lard that I chewed on

Fig.5 Janine Antoni *Gnaw*, 1992.

This is a work in which a pair of 600-pound cubes, one of chocolate and one of lard, are tediously manufactured layer upon layer. Because compulsive activity is the content of the work Antoni rarely employs assistants.

The artist bites into these two blocks over a period of a month and a half, removing bite-sized pieces

and spitting them out. She is quoted as saying "I am interested in the bite because it is both intimate and destructive."¹⁷

As the lard and the chocolate were bitten off in chunks, so the original cubes became the raw material for the next stage of the installation. Antoni then melted and remoulded both substances, the chocolate into heart shaped chocolate box inner linings and the lard, which was coloured red, into lipsticks which were placed into ready made lipstick cases. These items were then elaborately displayed in a glittering boutique cabinet that she constructed for this purpose, along with the ravished blocks.

This art originates with obsessive/ compulsive behaviour; and the process of enacting such behaviour determines the form of the work.

The obsessive aspect of my project reveals itself most plainly in the form of repetition; placing one unit after another many times over, or layering one layer after another daily over monthly periods. My own works refer to socially prescribed and repetitious daily activities that are integral to life. The obsessiveness becomes apparent because it has been distilled via art. Focusing on and isolating a single activity can be used in works to comment on the fact that so much of what one does in life becomes lost in the blur of repetition.

¹⁷ Weintraub, Linda *Art on the Edge and Over* Art Insights Inc.C.T. 1996 p.126.

HOW THE PROJECT WAS PURSUED

In the beginning this research project was pursued by 'feel'. That is, with a very scant idea of an outcome. Exploration was carried out through studio practice - involving physically manipulating material, mentally considering ideas and many hours of reading and contemplation.

At times the works were a progression; each piece would fuel the next. But not always. There were times when I would work on several pieces simultaneously, with thoughts and ideas brewing unbeknownst to me, for works in the future.

Experimentation and failure have been integral parts of this research project. Because of the nature of the medium, material evidence of such happenings is scarce. In the early days this was quite a scary position to come to terms with, this physical lack of production. When asked "where's the work?" sometimes I had to say "It rotted and stunk so much that I threw it out," or "It decomposed and fell apart so you can't recognise it as art any more", or "The production of mould and the smell was so offensive to my colleagues that out of concern for their health I disposed of it". Through these experiences I soon realised that photographing even the experiments would be necessary, but there were some which I deemed so inconsequential as to not even warrant a photograph. In retrospect I realise my mistake.

During many hours of contemplation I have pondered what in my personal history may be the driving force behind this compulsion I have for using food to make art? Among the many possibilities (the major two being, my Mum, and

being born in her gender) another that I feel to be important was the discovery of the Hare Krishna cookbook about twenty years ago. Their basic philosophy that the ingredient of *love* truly affects the taste and the nutritional value of the food¹⁸ appealed to my idea of what would make a perfect world, as it still does today.

I live in hope.

This philosophy had a profound effect on me. It has stayed with me all these years. I realise that the influence it has had on my ideas about food has been subtle and persistent and has only recently re-emerged because of this project.

The use of an unusual medium occasionally produced some confusion. There is a certain amount of money available from the university for reimbursement of monies spent on materials. The Arts Faculty Committee, which looked at research support grants initially rejected some of my applications. They could not quite fathom the presentation of supermarket dockets - listing fish stock, castor sugar and agar agar. I had to clarify my position as an artist using food, as the chosen medium of her art practice before the payment would be made.

The use of an unusual medium also allows the unexpected to occur. It was because I was using food that ants invaded my studio. The *Seduction* video was instigated by the ants.

¹⁸ Which I will elaborate on later in the paper.

I was working on an idea incorporating an image of a single food element with a single word.

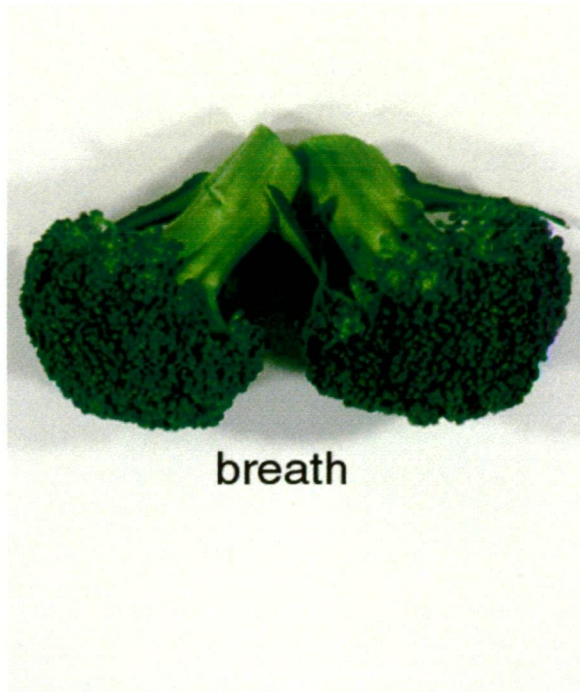


Fig.6 Barbie Greenshields *Breath*, 1998.

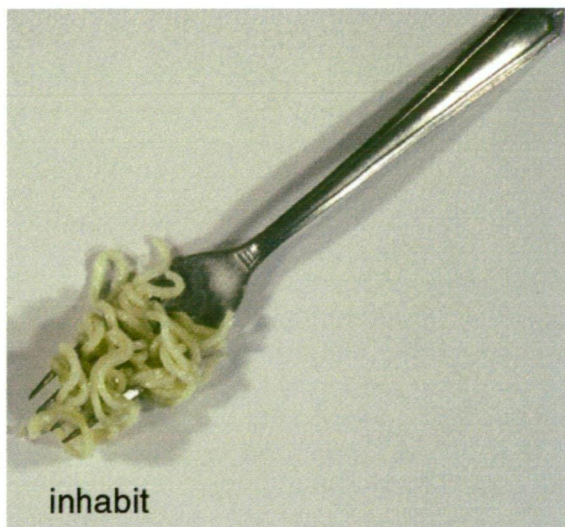


Fig.7 Barbie Greenshields *Inhabit*, 1998.



Fig.8 Barbie Greenshields *Jeer*, 1998.

The picture and motto were required to compliment each other so that neither alone would convey the full meaning. Different systems for deciphering the text/images were employed, so that just when you think you've got it figured out you find that a new approach is needed to make the connection. For the particular word *seduction* I placed a small pool of honey above the word. This was late one afternoon just before I left the studio so it was left to its own devices over night. The next morning to my great delight the ants had entirely encircled the honey, describing a solid black line around it.



Fig.9 Barbie Greenshields *Seduction with Ants*, 1998.

As I watched in awe I knew that the most appropriate method to capture the full magic of this work of art was to make a video, so I created my first work utilising this medium. When working with food, the medium's nature dictates the speed at which the works are produced, depending on the relevance of freshness or decay at that particular point in the work. In the case of the ants I had plenty of time, since it took the whole extended family about seven days to consume one tablespoonful of honey.

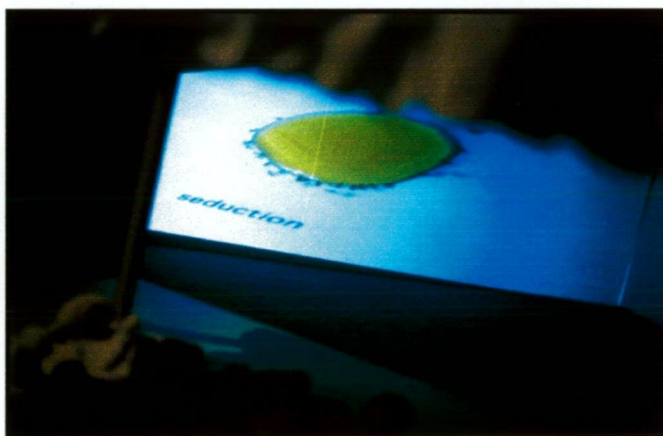


Fig10 Barbie Greenshields *Seduction with Ants Video*, 1999.

A work by Japanese artist Yukinori Yanagi that utilises ants was shown at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 1996. The installation piece *Ant farm* (1996) first shown in Japan in 1990 is comprised of ants and coloured sand placed within plastic boxes in the form of national flags of various countries. Plastic tubes connect these boxes and ants are released into them. As the ants make their tunnels through the flags, they move sand from one box to another eventually breaking down the flag designs by mixing up the sand. The ants symbolise the many people who have lost their social and cultural roots. The disintegrated flags refer to the gradual loss of national identity

and cultural autonomy that is occurring under post-modern conditions.¹⁹

I consciously approach my studio practice with flexibility; this allows me to take up unexpected opportunities such as that described above.

The ritual of *enrobing*²⁰ was part of my daily routine in the beginning of the program. At this time I was covering a 1950's style dining suite in commercially produced breadcrumbs. This is a six-seater laminex and chrome table and three vinyl and chrome kitchen chairs.



Fig.11 Barbie Greenshields *Crumbed Dining Suite and Suitcase*, 1999.

¹⁹ *The Second Asia-Pacific of Contemporary Art Triennial* Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland Cultural Centre, South Brisbane, 1996 p.76

²⁰ Enrobing is the poetic term used in the food manufacturing business to describe crumbing.

I carried out this activity over a period of approximately six weeks, laying a coating on each morning on my arrival and allowing the glue moistened crumbs to dry throughout the day and overnight. Brushing off the excess the next morning I repeated this ritual daily. The dining suite has forty coats on it. I see these objects as an allegory for a 70's suburban family. More specifically the crumbed table and chairs represent my parents and me as crumbed meat. The crumbed suitcase, which is placed on the tabletop, was manufactured in the same manner. It is a later addition to the piece. It signifies my leaving home. The case contains dry crispbreads as travelling food; like ships' biscuits of much earlier days.

On a basic physical level, I attempted over the entire project, to isolate an intrinsic attribute of a specific 'foodstuff' so as to expose, develop and consequently exploit the medium, then let it speak for itself. My part is simply the combining of elements and the placing of these elements in a particular context.

Intellectually, the approach was more complicated, or maybe convoluted is a better word. I found myself turned inside out at times. I was no longer able to relate to all my comfortable preconceptions because my viewpoint was changing so radically. The preconceptions I speak of are: product is paramount; be in control at all times; originality is desirable and achievable; and documentation is only necessary for completed works.

Cultural Meanings of a Meal

When I embarked on this project I put into practice the good advice of, "Start with what you know". My first major work included within this project is titled *Meat and Three Veg*. This work was installed in 'Foyer' a small installation space at Salamanca, Hobart in August 1998 and was up for three weeks. A second variation was installed in September 1998 in 'Gallery 101' Collins Street, Melbourne, a third is currently installed in the Plimsoll Gallery. This installation consists of 180 kilograms of vegetables; carrots, potatoes and brussel sprouts, which are pinned directly to the gallery wall. The installation required the use of 3 kilograms of steel pins. The amount of 60 kilograms of each vegetable was determined by the weight of my body. In the initial installation each vegetable group had its own wall which was covered completely with slices that butted up against each other. In the case of the carrots and brussel sprouts, the segments ran in horizontal lines across the wall. The sliced potatoes swirled in a spiral, with its central starting point offset so that as the spiral grew too large for its own wall it took in the corner and some of the space of the adjacent wall.

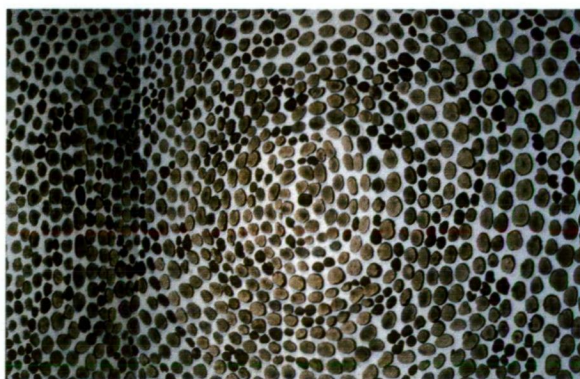


Fig.12 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Meat and Three Veg. #1 Potatoes*, 1998.



Fig.13 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Meat and Three Veg. #1 Carrots*, 1998.



Fig.14 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Meat and Three Veg. #1 Brussel Sprouts*, 1998.

Installation art by its very nature has to be *installed* to function as art; it doesn't exist if it's not in a place. There is an interaction between materials and their contexts.

The notion of actual space and time is critical to the reading of such works as *Meat and Three Veg*. This notion constitutes material for the work, it counter-balances the notion of abstract space and time (that is the preparation of meat and three veg for an evening family meal in 1968) constituting the concept.

The dish of meat and three vegetables is not just food for the body but food that defines a time, a place, and a culture. The work *Meat and Three Veg.* takes its cue from the meals of my childhood; its content concerns the small domestic happenings that have epic overtones. The element of repetition is an important factor in the work. The slicing of vegetables and the pinning in place is very time consuming and repetitive. My Mother served meat and three vegetables to the family over the thirty five years of her children's dependent lifetime (8 kids). Each slice of vegetable could represent a meal.

The piece has the cadence of contemplation, quietly shrinking away, decomposing. The change is slow, unencumbered, self-contained. Generally, when you do repetitive work, the more times you do it the more mundane and less engaging the action becomes. While your body is occupied by the repetitive work your mind is free to wander. Thus someone who appears to be stuck in a monotonous, repetitive task might actually be daydreaming, emotionally far removed from his or her physical limitations.

This description could possibly hint at a speculation I have about my Mother's other life, implying that the repetition of her daily work allowed her to be elsewhere. It is not an attempt at creating a metaphor of my Mother's dreams, but, in its way a simple homage.

HOMAGE TO FREDA

My Mother cooked a meal every night. My Father expected her to. I was taught to expect it of her. I have memories of stew, stew and more stew. Very often when I arrived home from school and walked through the back door into the kitchen I would go straight to the stove and lift the lid of the pot bubbling away and on recognition of the contents I would exclaim "oh no! Not stew again". I recoil at the memory of this, my poor Mum; I was so horrible, so unappreciative.

Birthdays were special in the 'tea' department - Mum always made us a birthday cake, and usually chocolate which was everyone's favourite. She'd also make the dish you liked the best. I remember for a time, Tuna Mornay was 'it' for me. I had very humble taste, I knew no other.

Sunday 'dinner' was roast mutton, (accompanied by the sound of blowflies) cooked in the wood stove. Mum had an electric stove but she always used the wood stove throughout the winter and for most of the time in summer. She would set it every night before she went to bed.

You just can't beat cold roast mutton sandwiches with home made tomato sauce for Monday school lunch. No, it wasn't Monday because there was no fresh bread on Monday; the baker wouldn't deliver until later that morning. We bought our lunch on Mondays. It was Tuesday.

A favourite was boiled cold sliced beetroot in a diluted vinegar dressing with salt and sugar added, plain boiled potatoes cut in halves long ways and my Mum's pressed lambs tongues with home made tomato sauce, I can taste it now; these are fond memories.

HOMAGE TO DOUG

A can of sardines, pierced with two holes, placed on top of the wood stove to heat up while the bread toasted. Frantic fumbblings and mumblings with a tea towel and the can opener while clumsily opening the hot tin, spilling smelly fish oil, poured out onto the toast then splashes of Worcestershire sauce added on top. This was my Dad's Sunday morning breakfast ritual, the only morning of the week he had free.

When my Dad died I was living interstate. I'd moved away from home many years earlier. I went back to Adelaide for the funeral and stayed with my Mum in the government - owned home unit she had shared with my Father for the last ten years.

I slept in his tiny room, in his bed. Next to the bed was a cupboard with a drawer in the top. The temptation was too great I had to see what was in it. There was no reason now not to, this was probably the most intimate moment I ever had with my father.

The drawer contained trivial bits and pieces but also two items that revealed much to me. Sanitary napkins, to catch the leakage from an old man's bladder, and about six loose ginger nut biscuits. To one without knowledge of my Dad these may not seem such significant items, to me they were revelatory.

The first signified the vulnerability of the body, (my Dad) to age, degeneration, mortality.

The second was like a joke. My Dad was eighty when he died and he still had his own teeth. Long tombstone teeth they were, set wide apart in his gums. I can so easily recall this visual memory. I would not have expected his biscuit of choice to be probably the hardest ones you can buy. Under the circumstances the irony was amusing, I closed the drawer.

Once the installation *Meat and Three Veg.* is completed the work transforms itself beyond my control - it is Other; life of a different kind, and once it is dismantled records are all that are left. Documentation in the form of photography is a vital element in the preservation of ephemeral works. Photography can be used as a way of permanently recording subjects that exist only temporarily. But the work itself includes the incorporation of space; three dimensionality instigates a very specific bodily relationship. The smell of the piece is also a crucial factor, from the light sweet aroma of freshly sliced vegies to a heavy, cloying, rancid, sourness of three week old brussel sprouts and all those variations in between, that influences a viewer's reaction to the work.

Also visually the element of time is a dominant factor. Ideally my viewers should be in a position to experience the work as a temporal piece. The installation demands that you revisit it.

When *Meat and Three Veg.* was up for three weeks, those visually vibrant slices that had begun their lives as replete areola touching each other on all sides, shrivelled and shrunk to produce a very different look. White space appeared; when viewed from a distance a pointillist effect occurred, particularly the carrots, which according to the size of the slices and density of placement, the wall was covered in varying tones.

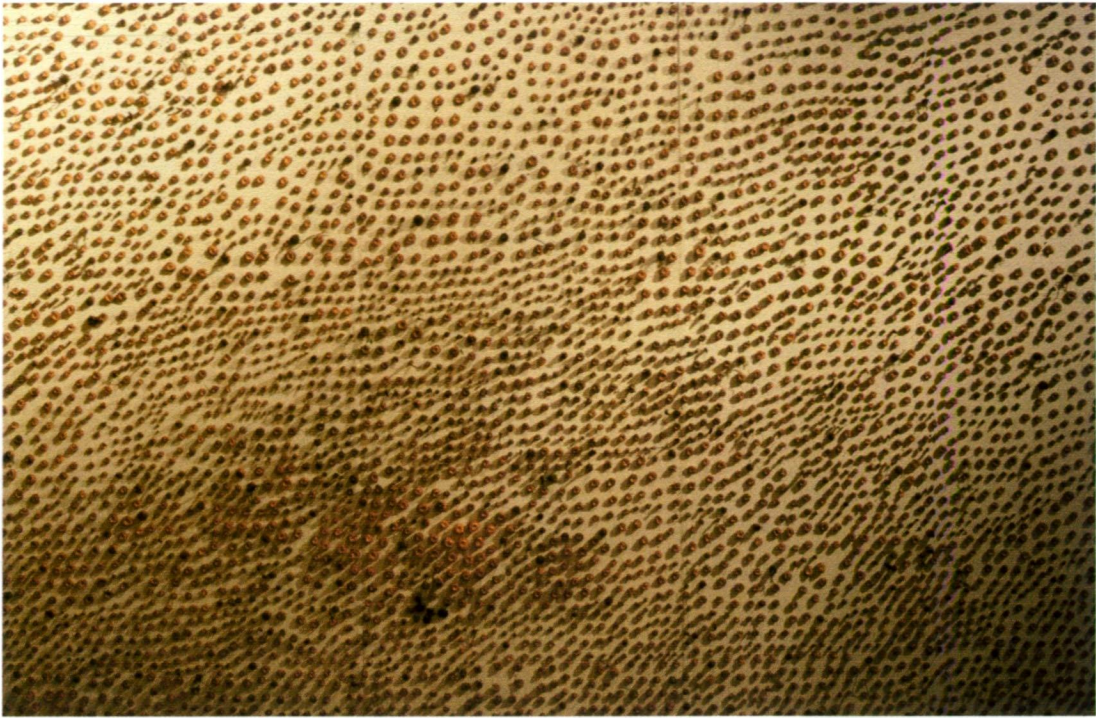


Fig.15 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Meat and Three Veg. #1, Carrots*, 1998.

Thus the work moves through drying and shrivelling to decomposition and finally desiccation. This outcome was unexpected and added another element to be utilised in later works.

There is one work in which the camera is a vital tool in the production of the artwork and that is *A Bloated Swollen Belly*. In this case a calendar, composed of photographic images is the piece.

The work consists of nine photographic images of various vegetables.

Each vegetable gets progressively larger to accommodate the previous one. A pea sits inside a clove of garlic and they are then placed inside a hollowed out brussel sprout. These three are inserted into a beetroot. Each new vegetable encapsulates those that came before it, until finally the series is completed by a pumpkin.

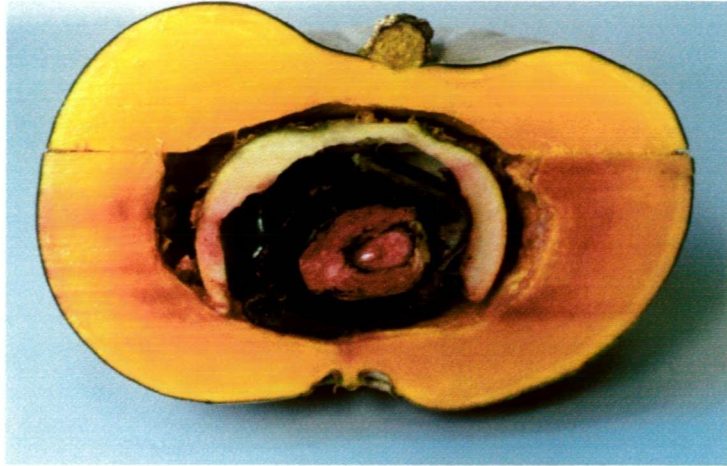


Fig.16 Barbie Greenshields *Stuffed Pumpkin*, 1999.

The images are presented in the format of a calendar. The calendar begins in the month of my conception and continues until the month of my birth nine months later. The pictures were taken step by step, as one vegetable was snugly fitted into the next.

A sign of pregnancy, the completely stuffed pumpkin represents a bloated swollen belly. Pregnancy is the only time when nourishment is from belly to belly, a time when the borderline between self and other is still permeable. When I contemplate this calendar, because of the dates, I experience a slippage or ambiguity of time and person. I regard this work as having a strong sense of my Mother's time. I thought birth was the subject matter of this piece but in retrospect my Mother comes to the fore, once again. This is not surprising as all mothers personify birth.

Growth and Decay

Albert Einstein stated:

There are two concepts regarding the nature of the Universe: the world as a unity dependent on humanity, and the world as a reality independent of the human factor.²¹

The processes of growth and decay, the replacement of the old with the new, these are physical realities. The solid molecular structure of the natural world can be regarded as overshadowing the ephemeral constructions of philosophies and theories.

Food is a label for a whole group of *stuff*. The primary ingredients exist as something else before they become food. We intellectually turn that *stuff* into *food*.

Within the literature of anthropology, Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and The Cooked*²² and Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*,²³ discuss the cultural determining of what is placed in the mouth as food.

The famous fourth aphorism, "Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are"²⁴ originated in Brillat-Savarin's classic work *The Philosopher in the Kitchen* first published in 1825. Levi-Strauss

²¹ Prigogine, Ilya "Capturing the Ephemeral" from *Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Published on the occasion of the exhibition 'The Arcimboldo Effect' - Palazzo Grassi Thames and Hudson, Venice, 1987 p. 333.

²² Levi-Strauss, Claude *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* Octagon Books, New York, 1979.

²³ Douglas, Mary *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., Boston, 1980.

²⁴ Brillat-Savarin, Jean-Anthelme *The Philosopher in the Kitchen* Translated by Anne Drayton Penguin Books, London, 1970 p.13.

expanded that aphorism into *food must not only be good to eat, but also good to think*. I take the meaning of this concept to be that, prior to consumption, food must be identified *as* food. In other words, some substances, which are potentially nutritious, are not used as food because we cannot bring ourselves to think of them as such.

Mary Douglas discusses culinary cultural taboos, giving as examples Western revulsion at the idea of eating dogs and cats (generally regarded as pets, strictly for emotional consumption), and the religious taboo in India against the consumption of cows. Douglas sees this selection of foodstuffs that are eligible to eat, as indicative of a culture's ordering of the universe. The hierarchy of value and status that is assigned to people, animals, plants and insects influences a culture's cuisine. Bell and Valentine elegantly describe this as 'eating your world view'.²⁵ Douglas also points out that transgressions of these cultural norms are considered revolting. So much so that the body will seem to act instinctively to vomit nutritionally viable food that has been consumed against the dictates of the societal norm.

But as well as these culturally determined criteria, do we have some kind of biologically inbuilt recognition, or collective memory, of what is potential food and what is not? It interests me to speculate that there may be an archaic memory, which is attracted, or repulsed by certain substances, forms or images. Literally a taste which is physically *integrated* within our blood, cells and molecules. An awareness which expands beyond what is learned.

²⁵ Bell, David and Gill Valentine *Consuming Geographies. We are where we eat* Routledge, London, 1997 p.31.

Sydney Mintz, in his book, *Sweetness and Power*²⁶ refers to our automatic liking of sweet tastes, as stemming from the fact that human milk is sweet. He also makes reference to a thesis which argues that mammalian responsiveness to sweetness arose because for millions of years a sweet taste served to indicate edibility; no sweet foods are known in nature that are poisonous. He concludes that hominid evolution from arboreal fruit - eating primate ancestors makes this thesis permissible.

Regardless of whether our culture or our biology leads us to accept or reject something as food, the primary ingredients have their own agendas. An example of such an agenda would be that of a seed. Once the seedling emerges from the soil it grows a green leaf, then the yellow, orange, red of fruit occurs and then the brown of decline. The fruit drops to the ground, where the purple and whites of mould, of decomposition and rot appear, returning nutrients to the black soil.²⁷

As well as growth to maturation and decline to decomposition, another purpose of all life is procreation. Specifically, the potential of a seed or a fruit highlights this cycle: as far as it is concerned ripeness is all. The sole function of ripe fruit is reproduction. With the seeds and the tissue surrounding it, a fruit is like the ovary of a plant. Fruit tastes best when it is ripest, which is also when its seeds are mature. It will be noticed – juicy

²⁶ Mintz, Sydney *Sweetness and Power* Viking, New York, 1985 p.8.

²⁷ Ashton Kaye "d-composition: A Textile Exploration of Alchemy" in *Craft Arts International* No.47, 1999-2000.p.42-45. A textile artist, Julie Ryder works using fermentation of fruit to make prints on fabrics, when discussing the major works of her exhibition called *d-composition* (1999) she states that the four major works are called by alchemical names: *Nigredo*, black; *Albedo*, white; *Citronatas*, yellow; and *Rubedo*, red. These colours refer respectively and chronologically to the colour palette of organic matter undergoing decomposition.

and tight, brilliantly coloured, sweet and perfumed. It engages all of the senses.²⁸

Ripening can begin only when a fruit has reached its physical maturity, its full size and intended shape. When a fruit drops from its tree it remains alive, capable of respiration, metabolism and reproduction. But its life is drastically changed, it feels physical pressure on its skin for the first time and the direction of the force of gravity has changed. Now the fruit begins to decompose and, eventually, if conditions are favourable, it will germinate. Or, because of the intervention of an animal, it is eaten. Brillat-Savarin does this noble destiny justice with his description of the process.

As soon as the esculent substance is introduced into the mouth, it is confiscated, gas and juice beyond recall. The lips cut off its retreat; the teeth seize it and crush it; it is soaked in saliva; the tongue kneads it and turns it over; an intake of breath pushes toward the gullet, the tongue lifts it to help it on its way; its fragrance is enjoyed by the sense of smell as it goes by, and down it plunges to the stomach, there it undergoes further transformations; and throughout the whole of this operation not one particle, not one drop, not one atom had escaped the attention of the apparatus of taste. It is this perfection which makes man the only gourmand in the whole of Nature.²⁹

Within the culturally constructed relationships we have made with elements we have assigned the title; 'food' is ambiguous. We are lone participants in this relationship. In the biological world where humans and primary elements are one and the

²⁸ Do a test on an apple.

²⁹ Brillat-Savarin [1970] p.47.

same thing, (both potentially being food) we are equal participants. The fruit and its cycle demonstrate the story of life, death and decay and can also be used as an allegory for the same cycle of human existence. We have constructed a cultural story that tries to obliterate the biological one. Accordingly the biological story reasserts itself relentlessly, as it is compelled to do.

When considered biologically we are just another factor in this cycle of life. All attempts at denial are unsuccessful in the end. Culturally we have limits, unlike those undeniable fundamentals of growth, nourishment, regeneration and decomposition.

Staining

The development of my practice after *Meat and Three Veg.* was a natural one. One that took its lead from natural processes. It was an extension of the condition of the pinned up vegies when I took them off the wall. The *Shrouded Fruit* piece is a work that deals with the phenomenon of decomposition and preservation. It stems from a desire to lay the past to rest.

There are two physical levels utilised in the piece; the tabletop and the floor space directly beneath the table. The shrouding of the fruit is an effort to make preparation for what essentially has to follow. The bright, full-blown indulgence, the juicy voluptuousness of prime time is past. The pinnacle reached, only decline is left.

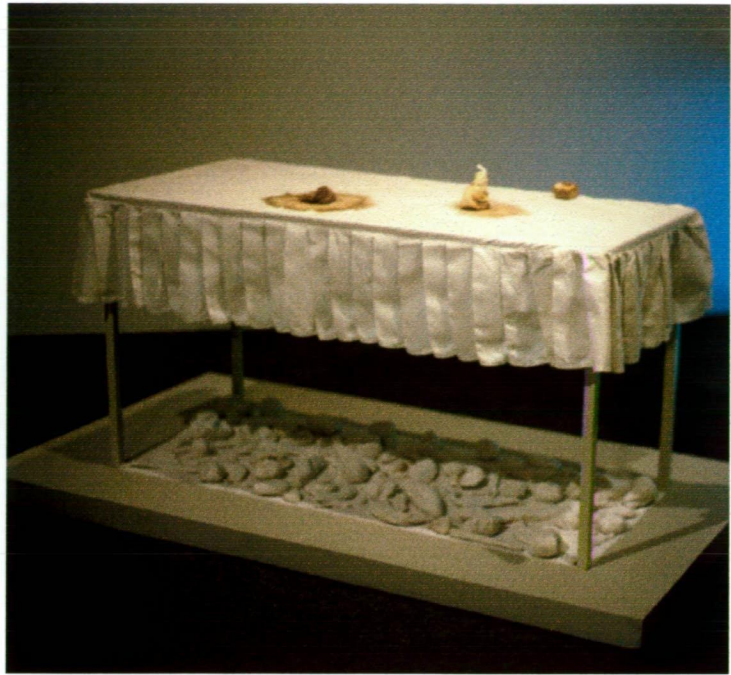


Fig.17 Barbie Greenshields *Shrouded Fruit*, 1998.

The activity of ferment is now in control. A fermented substance is an altered substance, one that has become other, often regarded by nomadic peoples as *magic*. Bill Mollison³⁰ in his book *The Permaculture Book of Fermentation and Human Nutrition* discusses for instance the shunning or prohibition of fermented foods because of their magic properties. The change of character that fermentation brings about can be likened to insanity. The person we once knew is gone and replaced by someone who is unrecognisable and to be regarded with suspicion.

³⁰ Mollison, Bill *The Permaculture Book of Fermentation and Human Nutrition* Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, Australia, 1993 p.10 intro.



Fig.18 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Shrouded Fruit*, 1998.

The fruits were stitched into their shrouds of discarded bed sheeting when ripe. During their encasement I took particular care to capture as much detail of their bodies as was possible, fitting and stitching as I went. The fruit, duly shrouded, were left on the tablecloth to shrivel, leak and stain, as is their wont. As the weeks passed, the solid firmness (varying for each particular species), gradually disappeared until the fruit became light as feathers and the fabric buckled at the softest touch. Those few pieces, which held their form best, are now on display on the tabletop.

The others have been placed on the floor directly beneath the table, like a shadow. Salt is sprinkled thickly over the shrouded fruit in a symbolic attempt at preservation. Intended is the suggestion

of endurance, surviving remnants of a past. Also with the use of salt, the underside, the tender belly, will be toughened for the next encounter.

The next work I wish to introduce is also concerned with the biological, but more specifically as an aspect of the abject. It incorporates the materials of rotting food and the subject matter of mortality and death.



Fig.19 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Sop*, 1999.

Sop comprises a double bed covered by a white fitted bottom sheet, at the top of which are two pillows in white pillowcases. There is a white top sheet placed loosely near the foot of the bed. The bed is raised slightly off the floor. The title is a reference to a bread trencher used in medieval times, before the invention of plates, to soak up the juices of the meats. After the meal, sops were usually given to the dogs or the servants to eat. The bed is a *sop* to soak up the secretion of bodily fluids.

Fresh fruit and vegetables were placed on the mattress, upon the fitted sheet and, over a period of eight weeks, were allowed to decompose and leak. I arbitrarily removed the decaying organic

matter throughout this period to produce the *look* I wanted.

Evidence of that which stained (very wrinkled, dry, self-adhesive eggplants and rockmelons) is left so as to make the viewer aware of the stains' sources. The rockmelon placed on a pillow, and indenting it makes reference to the head and the eggplants remaining could refer to the reproductive or sexual connotations of the stained double bed.



Fig.20 Barbie Greenshields Detail *Sop*, 1999.

These are organic stains. This object gives one view of life as experienced by the body. I refer here to the isolated biological individual as well as a collective body of all the people. Everyone who sees this work will have bodily experience of its content. When you sleep there may be a loss of

body restraint and seepage may occur. This work is about the body as both object and subject; it is the object that produced the stains and it is the subject that views the stains. The fetid smell of the rotting vegetable matter could imply the connection that what we eat is what our bodies are. The individual items of these fruiting bodies of other life forms could represent the viscera, the soft internal organs in the cavities of the body.

Food is also something that is separate from the body but becomes the body; menstrual blood, breast milk, excrement, spittle and food are all at one time the body, then no more the body.³¹

These detachments, these oozings that are the focus of the piece, address this psychologically complex inversion.

In this society the way we react to bodily fluids issuing from orifices, is usually with revulsion and embarrassment. Menstrual blood, excrement, spittle, urine, pus, semen and breast milk (breast milk confuses categories, it is both food and bodily seepage) is marginal stuff. These reactions spring from anxieties and taboos concerning transgression of body boundaries.

The threat of loss of control at such a base level as 'body' stirs up very deep-rooted fears of old age, disease and death. A civilised sealed homogenous unit that is under control at all times is the socially condoned and accepted mode of existence. *Sop*, questions the model of a polite well mannered body which seeks to deny the truth of bodily leakage and seepage.

³¹ Poole, Gaye *Reel Meals, Set Meals. Food in Film and Theatre* Currency Press, Sydney, 1999 p.5.

A Metaphorical Meal

Thanks to the myths, we discover that metaphors are based on an intuitive sense of the logical relations between one realm and other realms; metaphor reintegrates the first realm with the totality of the others, in spite of the fact that reflective thought struggles to separate them. Metaphor, far from being a decoration that is added to language, purifies it and restores it to its original nature, through momentarily obliterating one of the innumerable synecdoches that make up speech.³²

Like Levi-Strauss, I regard the metaphor as a tool for approaching an idea from a different tack, revealing angles unseen in its original light. The restating of an idea in an oblique way can, by taking a different route, clarify on arrival. The use of food to speak of other things, this is the metaphor I engage in my concept of *A Metaphorical Meal*.

When the idea first came to mind I regarded it as an *original* thought. What naivety! On further research I found it had a long history. The first recorded example would be that of Trimalchio's feast, recounted in *Satyricon* (43BC) written by the Roman Petronius.³³

The basic theme that runs through *Satyricon* is the perversion or inversion of patterns and relationships in various expressions of culture. The food in Trimalchio's feast echoes a state of affairs, where reality has been extracted, all the dishes are

³² Levi-Strauss [1979] p.339.

³³ Tanner, Tony "Puns, Perversions, and Privations" in *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* The Johns Hopkins University Press, London, 1979 p. 54.

disguised as something else, devoid of all reference points. In Tanner's description of Trimalchio's feast he states there was a hen carved in wood revealing eggs that contain orioles, a wild sow was surrounded by pastry piglets sucking at her teats, there were quinces like sea urchins and pigs stuffed with sausages.³⁴ Sheer excess and abundance induces complete loss of meaning. The meal is a metaphor for a society's perversion of its relationship to nature. The food is a description of the deterioration of a society in which nothing is what it seems.

Another metaphorical repast is the ritual, which is still practised in Christian churches around the world, the Eucharist. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*³⁵ discusses the concept of ritual. She states that symbolic enactment provides a focusing mechanism, the enacted ritual becomes framed, limiting the experience, shutting in the desired themes and at the same time shutting out those that would otherwise intrude. This framing primes the participant for a special kind of experience.

Within this context of a metaphorical meal the concept of the Eucharist as part of the Christian ritual is fascinating. The Body of Christ used in the Eucharist illustrates the interplay between food and human spirituality. This meal is consumed as part of an elaborate ritual. The basic foods of bread and wine were chosen to represent the flesh and the blood of a God / man, named Jesus. Jesus at the Last Supper gave instructions that the actual foods in this shared meal should become symbols. These symbols in church services materialised into food again, manifesting themselves as thin wafers and

³⁴Tanner [1979] p.53.

³⁵Douglas [1980] p.63.

diluted wines. Explanations are delivered weekly on the symbolic conversion of bread and wine into flesh and blood; hence the mundane experience of eating becomes a spiritual experience.

...verily, I say unto you, except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Who so eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him.

(John 6:53-56)

When you eat the transubstantiated Body of Christ you are partaking of a metaphor (you know that you are not really eating human flesh which is strictly taboo in Christianity). So to consume this edible deity is not the same kind of eating we share with animals. In this case the reason for eating God is to assimilate godly virtues. The concept of assimilation involves taking something into you and making it part of yourself. The idea that foods contain properties beyond their nourishment value ie... the *wholesomeness* of bread, the *strength* of meat, the *intelligence* of walnuts, the *sensuality* of oysters and the *refinement* of haute cuisine and in this case the *holiness* of the wafer, are analogues of the type used widely in the rendering of the two dimensional view of the world known as still life which I will discuss at greater length later. This logic implies that this sanctified food blesses those that consume it.

The belief that you absorb the characteristic attributes of the food you eat plays a very large part in the Hare Krishna religion. A belief system that is also referred to as 'the religion of the

kitchen³⁶ because of the importance that it places on food. This religion practices the Vedic philosophy of eating which nourishes the soul, the body and the mind. The food is prepared with spiritual consciousness, then is offered to the God Krishna. With this ritual of offering, what is ordinary food is transformed into what is known as 'prasada' that is then consumed by the devotees. The effect of eating prasada is *a heart that becomes purified*. The God-consciousness of the cook, the offering to Krishna and the physical internalization of the food culminate in "an escape from the cycle of birth and death, and by eating only prasada even the most sinful person can become a saint."³⁷ These are the words of Srila Prabhupada, a spiritual leader of the group.

A different cultural rendition of this theme of transformation is the film *Like Water for Chocolate* (1991).³⁸ It deals with the belief that just as food absorbs the flavour of herbs and spices it is cooked with, so it also absorbs the emotions of those that cook it. Based on a Mexican magic realist novel by Laura Esquivel,³⁹ the film follows the life of Tita, the cook, and the heroine, who has the ability to project her emotional state into the food she prepares, so that those who consume these foods consume her emotions, with life-altering effects.

A more didactic approach to the concept of the metaphorical meal is that of an 18thC Amsterdam burgomaster, who presented his guests with a meal that has been described by Simon Schama in

³⁶ Adiraja dasa *The Hare Krishna Gourmet Guide of Vegetarian Cooking* The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Sydney, 1984 p. 42.

³⁷ Adiraja dasa [1984] p.29.

³⁸ *Like Water for Chocolate* (1991) Mexico; Dir: Alfonso Arau

³⁹ Esquivel, Laura *Like Water for Chocolate* Previously published as *Like Water for Hot Chocolate* Translated by Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen Black Swan, Great Britain, 1993.

*The Embarrassment of Riches*⁴⁰ as Fatherlands Food. The guests were treated to courses that corresponded to the history of the Fatherland. So the first course, served on rude pewter, was mostly fish, bread and ale (the nation's infancy), while the second (representing the prime years) was meats and fine fruits served on porcelain. Smothering the food in wine sauces and serving it on elaborate platters finally represented the surrender of patriotic gastronomy to foreign taste. The food in this meal was placed under moral judgement; honest necessities were good and morally contaminating luxuries were bad. This is an idea that was included in the subject matter of Gabriel Axel's film *Babette's Feast* (1987)⁴¹ based on a short story from Isak Dinesen's *Anecdotes of Destiny*.⁴² The time and labour Babette (previously a French chef) invests in the preparation of the feast is juxtaposed with the temporal nature of food, it takes a very long time to prepare and a very little time to consume. The film entertains the viewer with an investigation of two extremely opposing views about how food is seen. The sensuality of the material world of food is opposed to a Godly, chaste, Lutheran world of the plain and frugal diet of bread soup. Much physical sacrifice is made in order to become closer to God in this diet. The film is a celebration of the power of food prepared with skill, artistry and gratitude to transform the lives of those who share it.

As mentioned earlier, the Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published *La Cucina Futurista* (reprinted in 1989 as *The Futurist Cookbook*). This

⁴⁰ Schama, Simon *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*. Collins, London, 1987 p. 166.

⁴¹ *Babette's Feast* (1987) Denmark; Dir: Gabriel Axel.

⁴² Dinesen, Isak *Anecdotes of Destiny* Random House, London, 1958 reprinted 1974.

was a late manifestation of Futurism, the racism, violence and misogyny of the movement's excesses can also be detected in this work with its overtones of the fascist obsession with nationalism and patriotism.⁴³ The recipes in the book regarded food as raw material for art; colours, shapes and textures, packed full of ideas, not flavour; taste was irrelevant. There were food scenarios, food tableaux and food sculptures devised to be better suited to life in a fast moving city. Combinations of the most unsuitable elements (taste-wise), were combined with exotic ingredients and meals that were to be eaten accompanied by perfumes and textures. Whole meals are described in this book, meals that had a theme and were to be served under conditions befitting that theme. These I would call 'Metaphorical Meals'. One such meal is *Astronomical Dinner*.

The table is made of a sheet of crystal placed on shining aluminium legs. The dining room is completely dark. Sources of variable light on the underside of the table, moving through the layer of crystal from bottom to top, and in from the sides toward the centre, illuminate the crystal surface in a hundred different ways, the intensity of colour varying with the foods. All the plates, bowls and cups are made of crystal. Dawn will thus rise within the crystal goblets in the form of a perfect *consumato* made fluorescent with a tiny quantity of *fluorescin*' (sic). High noon will be a mosaic of smoked meat, pistachios and red pepper, sprinkled with lemon and delicately perfumed with vanilla which will rise in the sky. Sunset will consist of a dish of very thin slices of smoked salmon, beetroot and oranges. Then, in the deep night of the room, a cosmographic sphere of ice cream (50 centimetres in diameter), the only

⁴³ David, Elizabeth *Italian Cooking* Harmondsworth, Penguin, London, 1969 p. 94.

illuminated body, will move very slowly across the crystal surface, which now seems to hang suspended in the darkness. A pump in the shape of a telescope will launch parabolas of Asti spumante.⁴⁴

And finally closer to home, and closer in time, is the meal that was served as part of the *Symposium of Australian Gastronomy* in March 1993. Conceived and devised by Chef Gay Bilson and prepared by Chef Janni Kyritsis, this meal was consumed at The Australian National Gallery. This description of the experience is taken from Marion Halligan's article *Too Solid Flesh*.⁴⁵

It was set in a long and narrow room, on one side a red wall, on the other side were windows overlooking the sculpture garden. Down the centre was a long table covered in tripe: the stomach of dead animals, raw unbleached and smelly. The raw tripe was not for consumption; it was rolled up and removed by waiters whose torsos were wrapped in white bandages.

The first course arrived, beef tartare and raw egg. The second course was a beef consume accompanied by marrowbones piled high in baskets set along the centre of the table. Fish skin fried very crisp was next, then blood sausage followed by pigeon breasts surrounded by pigeon and duck hearts, followed by fresh goat's cheese in puff pastry. Then the waiters blindfolded the guests. When the blindfolds were removed, muscatel grapes had been placed all the way up the middle of the table and covered the centrepiece, which was a young girl.

⁴⁴ Marinetti [1989] p.137.

⁴⁵ Halligan, Marion 'Too Solid Flesh' in *Island* no.58, Autumn 1994 p.3-6.

After the meal was over the menu could be viewed: stomach, egg, flesh, bone, skin, blood, heart, milk, fruit, virgins' breasts and dead men's bones, the last two are biscuits served with coffee.

Eating the body was the theme of this meal, demonstrating the fact of flesh as meat, that each of us inhabits flesh, that each of us is potential meat. A celebration of life through death, a reminder of our fate to be born and to die.

In my own metaphorical meal the cultural construction of metaphor is used to enlighten a combination of evolutionary theory and a fundamental biological event. The meal that I will describe is made for one person to consume alone. The solitary experience of dining alone is also the experience of living one's life; no one else can do it for you, no one else can nourish your body, absorb nutrients for you. Here living and eating are the same.

The theory of this meal takes in simultaneously both a macroscopic view, that is the evolutionary journey of humankind, and a microscopic view, an individual's lifespan. Dividing the human condition and evolutionary theories into developmental stages, each dish represents a stage from both scenarios; macro and micro.

There is a language to this meal, the words as ingredients, the sentences as dishes, the conversations as courses. The strict sequential element must be adhered to, meaning is acquired from relations with others in the sequence, and it can function in no other configuration.

The Metaphorical *Evolution of Humankind* and an Individual's Life Meal for One.

MENU

White Soup: The first course, the amorphous, primordial soup. The qualities of soup are considered essential, as they allow a diner to form first impressions of the meal to come.

All the ingredients of this soup are the germs of life: ground blanched almonds, ground white rice, the yokes of boiled eggs,⁴⁶ the milk and curd of soya beans and ground white peppercorns. These are all derived from seeds, packages that contain potential.

All the ingredients are white, the colour of milk, the primal food, a dependant infant's diet.

The method of cooking is in a bain-marie. The pot of soup is surrounded by boiling water and cooked by second-hand heat transfer, a direct flame makes no contact with the pot. The vessel containing the soup is reminiscent of a womb, the soup the potential life suspended in the embryonic fluids. The French anthropologist Claude Levi- Strauss's structuralist theory of the raw and the cooked comes into play here. He theorised that with the addition of fire to food comes the addition of culture, (which I will elaborate on throughout the main course) so without direct contact with the flame this dish of soup could be seen to straddle the boundary between nature and culture.

Steaming soup engaging the sense of smell is a sign of fecundity. The texture is a smooth and unformed consistency, its heat and moisture are essential conditions for the propagation of life.

⁴⁶ In this case the small tinge of yellow does not change the overall effect.

Amphibian Entree: The transitional stage, a most precarious time. Like an animal shedding its skin, one is most vulnerable during the process of change. This is the state of adolescence, a time when tests are made and chances are taken, when the past is negated and the future is all.

The dish is a pair of frog's legs set in an oval shaped mould. Half of the mould is fish stock set with agar-agar (a setting agent made from seaweed). The other half is beef stock set with gelatine (a setting agent made from mainly cows' hooves and horns). The mould is placed on a shallow pool of lightly dyed blue sauce. Blue can be regarded as the colour of the unknown 'out of the blue'. The blue of cold, the blue of bruising; evidence of a struggle. A cold dish of a cold-blooded creature that dwells in two media. The ingredients used are from land and water, as are both states of matter; solid and liquid.

Main Course: The barbecue is the only place where we are truly aware of the fire that cooks our meat. The meat burns and sizzles and smokes. Claude Levi-Strauss, in *The Raw and the Cooked* theorised about the action of applying heat to food. His structuralist theories were developed by reducing enormous amounts of information into cultural systems. He held the belief that cultural systems incorporated trans-cultural themes, which contained essential elements that are structured by the unconscious. By analysing the relationship between these systems, one can gain an insight into an innate and universal human (non-rational) logic. He stated that

...in any particular society, cooking is a language through which that society unconsciously reveals its structure.

The theory of the raw and the cooked reflects the classic nature/culture dichotomy. If you eat raw meat you are on a par with carnivorous animals, but application of fire transports you into the world of humans;

...not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be most unquestionably natural.⁴⁷

Essentially, to eat cooked food is to know your own death. In Levi- Strauss's studies of mainly South American myths, when fire is mastered and cooking becomes possible is the time when people become human. He defines being human as knowing one's own life and having knowledge of one's own death.

The main course is predominantly red in colour, the colour of flesh and blood, and the colour of warmth, heat and fire. Red meat is particularly prized and symbolises strength, aggression, sexuality and passion. This is a dish of adulthood, a time of procreation and stability. A recipe of the land, it uses meat from the bovine species and an accompanying red vegetable of the earth that smells like dirt - beetroot. The dryness of the land and the heat from the fire are taken directly to the plate and served. The extremely complex aromas released by the browning of meat stimulate our senses, activating salivation in anticipation of a distinctive sensation. No food in its raw state can reproduce this intricate experience. Cooking anoints raw ingredients as food.

⁴⁷ Levi-Strauss [1979] p.164.

Ambrosia: The food of the gods of classical mythology, imparting immortality. This is food inspired by matters of a spiritual, ethereal nature; its appearance evokes spires, intricate weaving, and complexity. This is a dish that could be associated with old age. A contemplative time, a time when one is closest to matters pertaining to heaven.

The ingredients used are highly processed, high white sugar content, a refined, tall, air-bound, spun sugar construction made of the golden yellow of toffee.

Dessert as a counter-part to soup...softens the blow of departure, that plunge into the void which engulfs the eaters until the next indulgence.

Jean-Paul Aron⁴⁸

Coffee and Cheese: This is the final course; intense and bitter, the black circular disc of coffee, a full stop. A black hole, infinity, the end and the beginning. A non-colour, black is also the colour of the fertile, compost-rich earth containing rotting and life-giving matter, it has regenerative properties. This final dish, 'the black coffee' represents the final conscious act of life, death. The action of decomposition takes over.

With the coffee, a small piece of decomposing matter is offered; mouldy cheese - aged food for an infant - a profound element in this context. Mouldy cheese is milk that is decomposing, breaking down in the process of feeding another organism. This morsel represents the relinquishment of control.

⁴⁸ Bayley, Stephen *Taste: The Secret Meaning of Things* Pantheon Books, New York, 1991 p.194. Bayley has quoted from *Nana* by Emile Zola who himself quoted Jean-Paul Aron in *Le Mangeur au XIXeme siecle*.

Validated with destruction by the mouth, authenticated as part of life and death, the work is completed. To take this artwork into the body, to assimilate this food, transforming it, is a profound act. This exchange echoes the universal shuffling around of matter. The re-configuring of molecules, without which, stagnation occurs, nothing grows, nothing changes, stasis.



Fig.21 Barbie Greenshields *A Metaphorical Meal*, 1999.

Decomposition - regeneration - life - death - decomposition - regeneration. This cyclical format is repeated in the arrangement of the table and the continuous length of cloth that the meal is served on, so as to reinforce the idea of the ongoing nature of the subject matter. One meaning of a circle is simply that of containment, holding within a defined space. A more complicated implication of *belonging* can also be read into a circle. Ironically, having your own meal was historically facilitated by the circular plate that was introduced in medieval times, with the conception of the single serve as opposed to the communal bowl. This encouraged the idea of an *individual* person, separate, independent, and alone. These are the contradictions of the circle; you can be inside one or outside one.

Chewing and Spitting

Your mouth is a cavity in your head, used in eating. Your teeth are a set of hard structures set in your jaws, used for biting and chewing. Your tongue is a muscular organ in your mouth, used for tasting, licking and swallowing. The mouth could be thought of as a doorway. The mouth is moist, pink and soft, qualities associated with interiors. Importantly it is the start of the digestive tract. Even though it is exposed to the air it doesn't hurt as a wound would. The mouth is a liminal zone neither inside or outside; it is the route where food crosses the boundaries; the threshold through which the interior can be revealed. This is the site at which food is taken in; initiating that which is *other* to become as one.

According to my individual judgment, 42 is the number of times one should chew a mouthful of food. A seemingly simple task, but the patience, calmness and willpower expended to achieve this in regards to the odds set against one is indeed a huge triumph. The pace at which we live our lives and those lives that surround us, all too readily over-power our bodily requirements. You chew as you live; chewing is a pacesetter. The speed and number of times you chew sets in motion a rhythm that your entire body adopts. Swallowing food without adequate mastication makes a statement about the way one approaches the world. A need for immediate gratification is reflected in one's refusal to chew thoroughly. It is indicative of a desire; that hungers in life are satisfied without taking the necessary steps. When food is chewed rapidly and insufficiently the

ramifications are felt internally and manifest themselves in the demeanour of the person.⁴⁹

My interest in Janine Antoni's work as referred to earlier came about on discovery of images of *Gnaw* (1992).⁵⁰ Antoni's work is not medium based, not specifically about food. The work is more concerned with the process of the artist's own body. Her body is a tool; the most basic of activities are turned into sculpture. Whereas the pivotal point on which my work revolves is the medium *food*. Techniques of manufacture are regarded in relation to that point.

The artwork *Chew Your Food* consists of an eight-seater table covered with a white damask tablecloth. The table is covered with chewed and spat bread to spell out the words *chew your food* 42 times. The repetition in this instance also makes reference to the cultural indoctrination received as a child. It is impossible to count the number of times one's mother has said "chew your food".

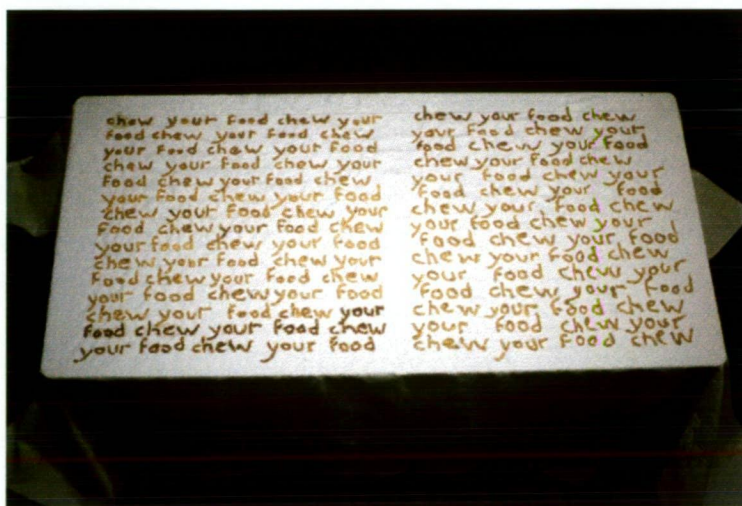


Fig.22 Barbie Greenshields *Chew Your Food*, 1999.

⁴⁹ David, Marc *Nourishing Wisdom: A New Understanding of Eating*, Bell Tower, New York, 1991 p.155-159.

⁵⁰ Antoni, Janine *Slip of the Tongue* publication to accompany exhibition at Centre for Contemporary Arts, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, July 1995 p.45.

It is an interesting idea to contemplate my part in the production of this piece as one of parasite. There is a hierarchy of the consumer of which the parasite inhabits the bottom rung. First there is the predator consuming prey, then the scavenger consuming carrion and last the parasite consuming its host. A parasite prevents assimilation, subverting the nutrients to its own body, or in this case a perversion of nutrients for ulterior modes of consumption.

I regard the food on this table as *anti-food*, that which once was food but is no longer. It is fouled, defiled by saliva. 'Matter out of place' is the poetic phrase coined by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*⁵¹ to describe the concept of dirt. As Douglas observes, filth and food are to be kept separate. Saliva is related to the bodily function of digestion; a personal experience of life. Once it has been spat, saliva is excreta and the mixing of excreta and food is taboo. *Chew Your Food* is a challenge directed towards social manners and etiquette. The act is a potent subversive action, violating conventions and rules associated with food-related behaviour.

After experiencing it once, I knew the technique of chewing and spitting held more in store as a vehicle to advance my research. I decided it was time to eat *A Metaphorical Meal*, eat the metaphor, metaphorically. I put the food in my mouth chewed it (but not 42 times) and then spat it out into a bowl. I proceeded through the five courses in this manner until I had masticated the whole meal. (Actually all that my stomach could have held, so there was some left on the plates). In the bowl, what under normal circumstances would

⁵¹Douglas [1980] p.48.

have been in my stomach, was a red coloured, (because of the beetroot) strangely uncomfortable subverted mess that fifteen minutes earlier had been food. Because it had been introduced into my body and had been denied its proper outcome, it was now tainted.

This activity of chewing and spitting was very strangely interesting.⁵² As I was doing it, I felt that this activity was the closest I'd come to the essence, in this investigation I was undertaking. The desire to swallow was very strong and there was the feeling of revulsion spitting the mashed up food into a bowl. I felt I was denying a natural bodily function – swallowing. At the end of the meal the sight in the bowl was mildly disturbing. It had originated from me after all, making it easier to tolerate. Others were totally repulsed by it. The smell of it was quite disturbing; I put the lid on and put it in the fridge for a couple of days until I decided what to do with it.



Fig.23 Barbie Greenshields *Red Eggs*, 1999.

I decided to mould the pulp into egg shapes because of their symbolism. As food, an egg is on the cusp, not an animal; it is not 'quite' meat, and

⁵² This action of chewing and spitting is an intriguing enigma. The Chinese believe that the saliva contains your *chi* (life force). On the other hand, spitting in Western culture is seen as an aversion signal and a sign of contempt.

neither is it vegetable. Eggs produce strong reactions in people, especially when they are raw. To some the idea of consuming a raw egg will bring about extreme reactions of disgust and distaste, while others regard the consumption of such food as virile and a potent source of ingesting life force.

Also there was the significance of an egg as an allegory of the world; it encompasses the four elements, the albumen represents water, the air sack represents air, the yoke represents fire, the shell represents earth.⁵³ This idea and the fact that I have always regarded the form of eggs to be situated in the realm of the sublime, combined with the function of eggs as the anonymous female component in reproduction suited my needs. I *blew* some hens' eggs (free range) in preparation for their new fillings, and with the addition of some gelatine to the mixture, filled the empty eggshells, using all that I had masticated. I placed the filled eggshells back in the fridge to let them set. I later took them out, peeled the shells, to reveal shiny red orbs. I was rewarded, I had not chewed and spat and blown in vain.⁵⁴

⁵³ Carrier, Robert *Great Dishes of the World* Sphere Books Limited, London, 1973 p.121.

⁵⁴ Chewing and spitting could be regarded as some strange eating disorder but in this context it has other meanings. In contrast, at the same time I was engaged in this activity, I heard on ABC Radio morning news, 20/8/99, a report concerning a woman who chewed her hair for years, producing a matted hair ball the size of a football which was removed from her stomach. I know this is not exactly the same thing but maybe if she had *spat* she would have been better off.

When the idea of *A Metaphorical Meal* was still quite young, the meal was to have been consumed by my Examiners (separate, private sittings for each of them). This idea was in force for many months (I was so excited by the idea I really couldn't go beyond it) until my final critique. It became clear to my peers that the investigating I had been undertaking and the actions I had been engaged in during the last few months held the key to the further development of the piece. The participation of the Examiners as a vital link in the completion of the work allowed too many variables. I therefore decided that chewing and spitting was to replace this element. This decision led me to make my second video, *Chew and Spit* as an added component along with the publication of a booklet outlining a menu of thoughts and ideas concerning *A Metaphorical Meal*.

The *Chew and Spit* video is a loop, continuing the theme of *a cycle* that is present in the other components of the piece. The chewing and spitting of the food is a continuous activity. The last mouthful of cheese (which signifies the decomposition of one body of matter to feed another) is spat into the bowl and is followed, in the video, by the first mouthful of soup (which signifies the origins or the potential of a body of matter): there is no end or beginning.

The clarity and frontal framing of each dish before I start to chew and spit can be likened to a still life painting. I am reminded of the still life paintings of Juan Sanchez Cotan, a monk of the Carthusian order in seventeenth century Spain.



Fig.24 Juan Sanchez Cotán (1561-1627)
Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber.

The setting of *A Metaphorical Meal* is similar to a still life painting in that these are static objects in an interior and against a dark background; and they are dramatically lit by a shaft of light. The stationary image of the table with the silver bowl upon it has an air of calm stillness; nothing moves until I enter the frame.



Fig.28 Barbie Greenshields *Chew and Spit*, 1999.

The video is about human interaction with the food. Imagine walking up to a still life painting, stepping into it and eating the banquet, those gleaming grapes and that vivid red crayfish.

I take this food into my mouth but I don't swallow it. I don't assimilate the food but does this action signify the rejection of the metaphor?



Fig.25 Barbie Greenshields *Chew and Spit*, 1999.



Fig.26 Barbie Greenshields *Chew and Spit*, 1999.

When food is deliberately destroyed, defiled, perverted or rejected the person responsible is making a statement on a fundamental level.

Could this imply my engagement is superficial? The constants are the progression of the dishes, and the elements of food symbolic of the forces of life. My part is fleeting, temporary. Does my incomplete consuming of this meal represent the position I hold? Or is this simply the way you eat a meal of a different dimension?⁵⁵ These are questions to pursue at a later time.

On the other hand there is the brilliant opening description written by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, (1982)⁵⁶ that can be brought forward at this point. This description evokes the particular sensation of abjection. Kristeva describes abjection as 'the place where meaning collapses'. This sensation, on the edge of meaning, has the effect of violent convulsions experienced by the body.

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes sees or the lips touch that skin on the surface of the milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring - I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasm in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire. 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, and 'I' expel it.⁵⁷

On the edge of meaning, is a very appropriate phrase, to use in relation to *Chew and Spit*. This

⁵⁵ In three dimensions you chew, you swallow, you assimilate, and in two dimensions you chew and you spit.

⁵⁶ Kristeva, Julia *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982.

⁵⁷ Kristeva [1982] p.3.

fuzzy, fragile border, food that "...lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game,"⁵⁸ these feelings that are stirred up by this perversion do not easily fit into logical explanation. The action that is the content of the work, is both confusing and powerful.

What is in the spit bowl is between two worlds. The gleaming silver spit bowl receives the food in place of my stomach. The stomach is the cavity into which food passes, from the oesophagus and in which the chief part of digestion is done, this is the place where food begins its transformation into another being. The metal walls of the bowl are impermeable, there is no assimilation here only conglomeration, this is a mixture isolated, left to its own devices.

For me the idea of the abject brings up more questions than it answers. Does the context of art purify this abjection? Does it name, objectify, give this abjection place and reason, is it now located and meaningful? I feel these are all questions to be examined by art works as yet unconceived. I feel this to be the direction of my art practice in the future.

⁵⁸ Kristeva [1982] p.2.

Still Life/Time Life

In some respects the 16thC Italian court painter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, was a starting point for my current interest in still life.



Fig.27 Guiseppe Arcimboldo *Vertumnus-Rudolf II*, 1590.

I remember my surprise and fascination when about ten years ago, I first encountered reproductions of his composite head paintings. The Four Seasons; Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, where each subject in the separate paintings progressively ages and the Four Elements composed of every-day objects, animals, plants and still lives. Initially I was entranced by the concept of representing these fundamental forces with elements that exist because of them. Also, the

artist's renderings of objects of the world of ephemera in the depiction of elemental forces, which are synonymous with eternal things, intrigued me. This juxtaposition of oppositions kept me returning to these images over many years. I am also interested in the idea of the use of many smaller independent units to compose a larger whole; one of Arcimboldo's recurring motifs. The concept of units is very basic; you can start with molecular structures and end up with the solar system. In the case of Arcimboldo my fascination is with the way single units retain their original identity so that the meaning that is held within the particular is retained at the same time that the language of the larger whole functions. The images are bilingual/ double-voiced; there are two languages being spoken at once.

A more contemporary visual artist whom I also keep returning to with this idea of still life in mind is Peter Greenaway. On my first viewing of Greenaway's film, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, (1989),⁵⁹ I was captivated by the wonderful use of the *look* of formal still lifes as sets in the film. Greenaway's painterly approach in the representations of inanimate objects, devoid of a narrative, combined the illusion of vitality and the reality of inertia.⁶⁰ In addition most of the action was played out in either a restaurant or in the kitchen of the restaurant and most of the conversation was in one way or another connected with food. I found this film fruitful research material to view and contemplate. There is one section that I found of particular interest. At the beginning of the movie, two delivery vans arrive

⁵⁹ *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* France - Holland, Director Peter Greenaway 1989.

⁶⁰ Pascoe, David *Peter Greenaway Museum and Moving Images* Reaktion Books, London, 1997 p.173.

in the carpark at the rear of the restaurant. One contained various meats; the other was full of fish. They were parked and left and did not reappear again until mid-way through the movie, when one was used as a get-away vehicle for the wife and her lover. The doors were opened; the vans were now filled with flies and what had once been solid flesh had been liquefied into a stinking mess. The quiet inevitability of decay had taken its course.

Greenaway uses rotting food as an extension of the still life paintings he refers to in the sets of this film. This rotting flesh is the enactment of the paintings; if they weren't *still* this is what would happen. The use of moving pictures, the incorporation of actual time is an elongation, a stretching of the still life into *time life*, a notion that the *Chew and Spit* video reflects. Pascoe in his book *Peter Greenaway Museum and Moving Images* refers to the still life rendering of such decays.

...the Dutch were adroit at painting dead meat - plucked or unplucked, butchered or merely slaughtered. Some painters of the art were such slow practitioners that their subjects deteriorated before their eyes - flowers faded, fruit decayed, vegetables decomposed, meat rotted - prophetic activity when painting was commissioned to be a moral reminder of time passing - an ironic still life would self reflectively include the mould and the fungus.⁶¹

17thC Dutch still life paintings, specifically paintings of *vanitas*, address the mortality of all types of matter. The connection between abundance and decay, the condition of ripeness at its peak and that, which follows, is a major focus.

⁶¹ Pascoe [1997] p.175.

Emblems are combined to form the language of still life; fallen petals, bruised fruit, withered flowers, a moulted feather that floats to resettle a moment later, the bad spot in the peach - these are the emblems used to present the concept of the ephemeral. This use of objects as emblems, that when placed together deliver complicated messages in a visual language, is my other interest in this subject. Meanings are conveyed by the use of objects; objects that stand in for the human condition, objects that portray humanity. In most *vanitas* paintings this is achieved by contrasting a human element beside the symbols, thereby including man in those same cycles of growth and abundance and death and decay. Initially a means of identification by association, the object or food was its attribute, but an object sometimes does more than just identify, it may stand *instead* of some thing, a kind of visual metaphor. Some well-known examples in Dutch and Flemish 17thC still life paintings are an egg - a symbol of creation which came to be associated with spring festivals of revival and rebirth; the peach - a peach with one leaf attached to it represents the heart and tongue and was adopted by the Renaissance with the same meaning as the attribute of truth (which springs from the unison of heart and tongue); flowers - especially with drops of dew are symbols of short-livedness and hence decay.⁶²

Still life painting is the depiction of objects in isolation and interiors. The major spatial value used in still life painting is nearness. By the use of light, colour and finely modulated details, textures and surfaces are imitated with such accuracy that they seemed real, in real space and time, thereby

⁶² Hall, James *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* John Murray Publications, London, 1992.

overwhelming more than the visual sense. The viewing experience is brought closer to the body.

How we relate to a sculpture and how we relate to a painting are very different. We relate to a sculpture from the side from which it is viewed, with an awareness of its three dimensionality, with an ability to imagine the other sides we cannot see. It is possible to walk around an object so that through time the whole figure is reconstructed; we engage with it physically.

Oil painting is a highly cultivated technique with a long history. Its use in the rendering of still life to illustrate life is the combination of the two aspects, the culture of painting and the biology of decay. This means that the *vanitas* does more than just pictorially record items in a composition, it also records an idea: the idea of *mortality*, or *love*, or *high culture*, or *patriotism*.

A Metaphorical Meal is my still life. The cultural construction of the metaphor, and the social construct of dining (equivalent to the idea of oil painting as an academic institution) are used in combination with the fundamental biological event of eating (the painted canvas). Whereas painted still lifes are scenes frozen in time, time will affect *A Metaphorical Meal*; consequently I regard my piece as a *time life*.

THE OUTCOME OF THE PROJECT

Initially the project was an investigation of the stuff of food, with my own cultural experience of it as the subject matter. As I worked with food as a medium for making art, its wider possibilities both materially and conceptually slowly became more evident. As the project matured the work developed into a closer look at food and the body. This connection between food and body is undeniably strong. I started to produce works that imitated the functions of bodies. Finally the project attempted to use food and eating to identify some of the knowledge of life we have gained through our bodies.

A change of thinking takes place as the work progresses. When listing the works according to the time of their making, the emergence of two definite points of focus becomes evident. I can identify the progression I made from one point to the next. The turning points are obviously located. The list has four definite sections, in two groups of two alternating between the investigation through the making of objects from a particular aspect, to the point at which I reached a conceptual watershed and changed tack. This process occurred twice throughout the allotted time.

These are the works listed chronologically:

Meat and Three Veg.
Crumbed Dining Suite
Image/Motto series
Seduction video
Crumbed Suitcase
Shrouded Fruit

A Metaphorical Meal

Chew Your Food
Stuffed Pumpkin
Red Eggs
A Metaphorical Meal booklet
A Bloated Swollen Belly
A Metaphorical Meal video

Sop

In the first section of the list, the works are directed toward an investigation of my own cultural experience of food. At this time I was combining cultural meanings of foodstuff with cultural meanings of domestic objects. A glimpse into a change of point of view was about to emerge when the shrouding of the fruit was my sole activity for about six weeks. The intensity and effort that went into their making gave me time to ponder about aspects of myself that I had not considered very thoroughly before. This, and the fact that they, the enshrouded fruits, changed; changed from what I understood to be thought - provoking objects into interesting entities of their own making.

In the list of works, those that sit alone, *A Metaphorical Meal* and *Sop* have been singled out because they can be seen as transition points. Conceptually, once I had reached either one of these points, a different focus was brought into view. From its time of conception the idea surrounding *A Metaphorical Meal* has persisted and will continue into the future. After working through this piece for many months, which entailed simultaneously working with the cultural aspect and the biological aspect, I found I had reached a time of exciting changes in direction. My desire at the time was that I needed to dispose of any extraneous objects. After all the trappings that are involved with a five-course meal, I wanted to look at the food and me, as a body, a tool of interaction. To investigate some meanings of my body's effects on the food and the food's effects on my body. So then I launched into the staining, chewing, spitting and bodily functions stage of this investigation. This was a very different experience for me. I felt I was much closer to what it was I was searching for.

The last piece I made which is included in this body of work is *Sop*. When I finished this piece, I knew I had completed my research project. I had reached my second watershed and realised I was on the verge of taking off on another tangent. I was becoming fixated more on the body and what it means to be one. So I feel content that this work is my final piece. A bed is an appropriate metaphor for finalising a project, a place to lay something to rest, for the time being any way.

As I stated in the introduction the aim of this project is to explore form and meaning when using food as a primary medium and as a subject of an

art practice. Also to test the assumption that the biological experience of food consumption is universal and that food is a key signifier of ethnic identity.

The outcome of the research project is demonstrated in the works chosen for the exhibition. These works were made throughout the entire period. This visual component demonstrates the ability of *food* as medium and subject matter to provide a means of communicating experiences of life as a cultural and a biological being in the world. The exegesis examines the journey I took and the discoveries I made. Using text to relate this journey was very different from the making experience and challenging in itself.

The project has brought to conclusion several of the issues I consciously set out to investigate. Because the works are specifically made to be shown as one body of work in a gallery space, the exhibition still has its significant and central part to play in the project. So, not until the works are viewed in this context by others will I know whether I have been successful. The project has also brought up several issues that were lurking sub-consciously just below the surface. During the program the more I narrowed my topic down in one direction the more it seemed to balloon out in another direction. This is because of the wider ramifications of the subject matter. Because it is so fundamental and basic, the network of connections is infinitely far-reaching.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Greenshields, Barbie *Home Brand* (1997) white sliced bread, size each unit 100 x 100 x 100mm.
2. Jones, Charles (1856-1959) *Onion Rousham Park Hero* (vintage print) c 1895-1910 gold-toned gelatine silver print size 152 x 108mm from *The Plant Kingdoms of Charles Jones* by Sean Sexton and Robert Flynn Johnson, Thames and Hudson, London, 1998.
3. Kon, Michiko *Cabbages and Bed #3* (1979) photograph from *Still Lives* by Michiko Kon, Aperture, New York, 1997.
4. Skoglund, Sandy *Spirituality in the Flesh* (1992) photograph from *Reality Under Siege. A Retrospective* by Carol Squires, Harry W Abrams Inc. Publishers, New York, 1998.
5. Antoni, Janine *Gnaw* (1992) 600lbs. chocolate gnawed by the artist, size 24" x 24" x 24" and 600lbs. lard gnawed by the artist, size 24" x 24" x 24" from *Slip of the Tongue*, Janine Antoni, Dublin, July 1995.
6. Greenshields, Barbie *Breath* (1998) colour transparency.
7. Greenshields, Barbie *Inhabit* (1998) colour transparency.
8. Greenshields, Barbie *Jeer* (1998) colour transparency
9. Greenshields, Barbie *Seduction with Ants* (1998) colour transparency.
10. Greenshields, Barbie *Seduction with Ants* (1999) video.
11. Greenshields, Barbie *Crumbed Dining Suite and Suitcase* (1999) breadcrumbs, light-shade, kitchen table, three kitchen chairs, suitcase, dried biscuits, size 900 x 1800 x 88mm.
12. Greenshields, Barbie *Meat and Three Veg.#1* (1998) potatoes, pins (detail).
13. Greenshields, Barbie *Meat and Three Veg.#1* (1998) carrots, pins (detail).
14. Greenshields, Barbie *Meat and Three Veg.#1* (1998) brussel sprouts, pins (detail).
15. Greenshields, Barbie *Meat and Three Veg.#1* (1998) carrots, pins size 2 x 4m.
16. Greenshields, Barbie *Stuffed Pumpkin* (1999) photograph, size 150 x 290mm.

17. Greenshields, Barbie *Shrouded Fruit* (1998) sheeting, decomposing fruit, salt, tablecloth, table size 610 x 1360 x 730mm.
18. Greenshields, Barbie *Shrouded Fruit* (1998) sheeting, decomposing fruit, tablecloth, table (detail).
19. Greenshields, Barbie *Sop* (1999) double bed, sheets, pillows, rotting fruit, size 2020 x 1500 x 350mm.
20. Greenshields, Barbie *Sop* (1999) double bed, sheets, pillows, rotting fruit (detail).
21. Greenshields Barbie *A Metaphorical Meal* (1999) five tables, damask, crockery, cutlery, partially eaten food, size 10 x 10 x 1m.
22. Greenshields, Barbie *Chew Your Food* (1999) damask tablecloth, chewed bread, size 1500 x 750 x 720mm.
23. Greenshields, Barbie *Red Eggs* (1999) moulded chewed and spat food, size 300 x 300 x 100mm.
24. Cotan, Juan Sanchez (1561-1627) *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*. Signed Canvas size 64.8 x 81cm from *Looking at the Overlooked: four essays on still life painting* by Norman Bryson, Reaktion Books, London, 1990.
25. Greenshields, Barbie *Chew and Spit* (1999) colour transparency.
26. Greenshields Barbie *Chew and Spit* (1999) colour transparency.
27. Arcimboldo, Guiseppe *Vertumnus-Rudolf 11* (1590) oil on panel, size 70.5 x 57.5cm from *The Arcimboldo Effect*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987.
28. Greenshields, Barbie *Chew and Spit* (1999) video still.

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