

The Sydney Morning Herald

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Back to the source for Shepparton Art Museum's cornucopia exhibition

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Published: February 25, 2016 - 12:59PM

What would Andy Warhol have made of the asparagus roll, staple of an Australian country buffet?

The answer may lie in Shepparton. A new exhibition in its art museum unites two titanic influences of the 20th century – Warhol and the *Country Women's Association Cookbook*. While urban Melbourne obsesses about pulled pork and Yotam Ottolenghi, Shepparton is going back to the source.

The northern regional town has its origins in food production, each generation growing, harvesting and packing. Inspired by the bounty, the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) is opening a new show themed around food, titled *Cornucopia*.

"I'm interested in the way we can refer our exhibition program to the local context," says curator Anna Briers. "Shepparton is known as the food bowl of Australia and pretty much the whole economic and social foundation of the town has developed as a result of canneries and orchards. We have Campbell's soup here, we have SPC Ardmona."

The exhibition menu is quite the degustation of ideas, from historical still life painting to supermarket waste by way of *The Hunger Games*. First course for *Cornucopia* was in fact cooked up by an iconic American; a Warhol screenprint borrowed from the National Gallery of Australia.

"The Andy Warhol was very meaningful to bring to Shepparton because of the Campbell's soup connection. It's cheddar cheese-flavoured. I thought it was funny they used to make soup that was cheddar cheese flavoured!"

The bedrock of SAM is a ceramics collection, so the exhibition includes more than 90 works of what Briers calls "Australian commercialware", floral vases and actual cornucopias. The term itself has its origins in antiquity, a horn of plenty, symbol of abundance. There's also a contemporary resonance, for anyone familiar with the dystopia of *The Hunger Games* books and films.

"The cornucopia takes the form of a structure in the arena", Briers explains. Contestants fight to get to the cornucopia's stockpile of food, water and weapons needed for survival. "As a contemporary metaphor it has a strong connection to our global context," she says. Indeed the exhibition gains some grit from politically-charged debates around the ethics of mass production, food security and globalisation.

Mishka Henner's work relies on satellite imagery to explore an American feedlot, a factory farm of cattle.

"An aerial view reveals thousands and thousands of heads of cattle, then we look down at a great pool of manure. It's very much looking at the environmental implications of mass food production," says Briers.

Danish artists Superflex have created an immaculate reproduction of a life-sized McDonalds store in a swimming pool, then flooded it and filmed it – a dramatic tilt at cleansing and purification. Meanwhile, Julia deVille's little deer waits ominously on a serving dish.

"Another theme at play is the complication and subversion of the still life," adds Briers. "Sam Taylor-Johnson's *A Little Death* is a video work that's very much a poignant 21st century meditation on the still life and the notion of memento mori – 'remember you're going to die'. It's an incredible four-minute time-lapse where a rabbit or a hare leans against the wall and it slowly degrades and moults and rots before your eyes."

Gabrielle de Vietri leaps literally into the subject with her photo *Dumpster Dived Dinner*. Under cover of night she exhumed produce from supermarket dumpsters.

"She constructed a photographic tableau, a still life of all the dumpster dive food. It has cascading grapes and glossy red tomatoes, it's a brilliant commentary on consumer waste and the food industry. Then she ate all the food afterwards with friends."

If you've no appetite for a bin banquet, the exhibition loops back to the homespun – rural life and its baking, giving eternal life to the *CWA Cookbook*.

The Hotham Street Ladies arrive in town to create an elderly lady's living room environment, with their material of choice – icing. Doilies, lampshades and the rug should look nice. But beware "the kitty litter in a corner with some cat turds made of icing", warns Briers.

SAM's first exhibition for 2016 opens as Rebecca Coates slips into the director's chair. Appointed in January, she'll oversee the planning for a new purpose-built home for the museum. With SAM reaching its 80th year, she's re-hung the permanent collection and looked ahead to exhibitions that explore "key ideas that have a specific local context but are universal".

From June the museum hosts a collaboration between the Chinese artist Chen Qiulin, whose work explores migration, and Sydney's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

To Coates "Shepparton is really interesting in terms of its waves of migration ... its histories; people bring something from one place to another, you carry that with you, but equally you need to discover through new eyes".

Cornucopia is at Shepparton Art Museum from February 27 to May 22.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/back-to-the-source-for-shepparton-art-museums-cornucopia-exhibition-20160225-gn2i66.html>