

Art Guide Australia

Cornucopia

by Sarah Werkmeister

It could be said that in 2007 when Ferran Adrià, famed head chef of elBulli restaurant, was invited to participate in Documenta 12 the collapse of art, food and celebrity came to a head. But, now is a pertinent time to be talking about food, its relationship to nature, and our consumption, and yes, fetishisation of it. Looking past the proliferation of food shows and the celebrity chefs (some could argue celebrity artists or just celebrities) there's a lot to be mined in the rich topic that is food. After all, we all depend on it and are, or will be, effected by its production and consumption.

Food can make or break humanity. It's social, environmental, political and, at times, deeply personal. In 2013 in Istanbul, for example, food and eating together was a form of protest at a time when the government was trying to tether frictions, later depicted by artist Christoph Schäfer. In Australia at the moment, there's a movement to gain deeper respect for Indigenous agricultural methods via Bruce Pascoe, whose book *Dark Emu* tells the story of Indigenous agriculture and how it worked in knowledge systems pre-colonisation. Renowned food ethicist Michael Pollan now has his own Netflix show on getting back to basics with food. There have been numerous contemporary artworks exploring food in our culture, for example Rirkrit Tiravanija's relational interventions in gallery spaces.

But in Australia, aside from *Harvest* at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2014, which looked at both historical and contemporary issues around the topic, there have been few comprehensive exhibitions on food and the political, social and environmental issues surrounding it.

What curator Anna Briers has done in *Cornucopia* at the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) is produce an exhibition that helps us detangle multiple nuanced webs around food culture. She has used Shepparton's place as the 'food bowl of Australia' and expanded it to look at broader symbolism around food issues. As Briers says, "We could have gone down the road of engaging celebrity chefs and having large opulent banquets, but we've gone a much more local, grassroots route."

Shepparton is known to be a bountiful place, with fruit and sheep farming prominent in the area. While this may evoke pastoral imaginings, Shepparton is also a hotbed of multiculturalism. Lauren Berkowitz's piece *Salt and Honey*, 2002, references the rituals and meanings that edibles are imbued with in different religions, in this case Judaism. Standing on 175 kgs of salt are different spices, oils and foods, from pomegranate to olive oil, are arranged to correlate with the eight festivals of the Jewish calendar year. Briers notes that "Shepparton has a extremely diverse religious and ethnic demographic so we thought it spoke to those traditions."

The Hotham Street Ladies, with the idea of the Country Women's Association cookbook in mind, worked with Shepparton women to produce a cookbook on opening weekend. Called *Flavours of Shepparton*, these locals contributed their favourite recipes turning the purported parochialism of country Victoria on its head by picturing it as a sort of collective feminism. The Hotham Street Ladies also present a site-specific installation that mimics a living room you could imagine yourself in, in a country town, using their signature royal icing as well as rummaged furniture in *Dinner for One*, 2016. The room itself evokes a kind of sadness or loneliness; a forgetfulness that asks viewers to engage more empathetically with these rural situations.

Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup II: Cheddar Cheese*, 1969, is hung in a somewhat unspectacular fashion (it works) next to Melbourne-based artist and jokester, Kenny Pittock's sculptural vending machine, *31 Dinner Options While Waiting For the Last Train Home*, 2015. At first glance, the food in the vending machine is your usual junk, but Pittock has given each item a pithy name, punning on multinational corporate identities and jamming the marketing strategies behind them: Smiths crisps become Myths crisps, the chocolate Flake becomes Mistake, Mars becomes Venus. Both Pittock and Warhol refer to marketing and food industrialisation. They sit nicely together. The Warhol work, however, also hints at local ties. Shepparton has a Campbell's factory. A local even brought in their collection of vintage cans to display at the front counter.

Post-industrial sustainability is addressed in works such as the Denmark-based group Superflex's film, *Flooded McDonalds*, 2009, and Mishka Henner's *Coronado Feeders*, Dalhart, Texas, 2012. Both works refer to the environmental impacts of industrial food production. While Superflex almost posit a wry dystopian future for the fast food industry, Henner examines the view of land from the present, in particular factory farming in the United States. The image itself is somewhat ambiguous, but looks like the heart of a land torn open. As Briers notes, "Mishka Henner's satellite image, taken via Google Earth is made possible by the corporate food industry because that sort of mass factory farming exists to supply the industry." To some extent, Gabrielle de Vietri's work also references the environmental impact that waste can have, albeit in a more solution-oriented way. Her photograph of dumpster salvaged food mimics a Renaissance painting style.

Food's relationship to the body and labour is explored in Kawita Vatanajyankur's absurd videos: *The Scale*, *The Squeezers* and *Carrying Pole*, taken from the artist's *Work* series, 2015. In these videos performers use their bodies to examine narratives of power and balance. For example, by using the body as a scale on which bananas are literally balanced. Georgie Mattingley's photographs of abattoir workers from the Shepparton area also address issues of labour.

Both the beauty and ferocity of nature are represented in Julia deVille's *Sentience*, 2012; Patricia Piccinini's seductive *Metaflora (Timelapse: Aqua)*, 2015, a growing and wilting flower that resembles (Piccinini's typical) human flesh; and Sam Taylor-Johnson's *A Little Death*, 2002, a timelapse video of a hare slowly disintegrating.

When making an exhibition about food, it's important to engage with locality in order for the locals (and visitors) to empathise with the issues around it, leaving the spectacle to Master Chef. Cornucopia has succeeded in this, with a diverse range of photographs, paintings, sculptures, installations and video works. It's punchy and well thought out. And because food is something that we all need, the show is completely accessible.

Cornucopia
Shepparton Art Museum
Until 22 May

<http://www.sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/>

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