

# ArtsHub

## Art serves up food this month

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### **BROOKE BOLAND**

Contemporary artists and performers are putting food on the table to playfully explore personal stories as well as question the ethics of its production and consumption.



*Kawita Vatanajyankur, Squeezers, 2015.*

Artists are extending the tradition of food in art beyond the still life to address some of our biggest environmental and ethical concerns. From its unequal distribution, unethical production and genetic modification, to playfully using food as a medium for their practice, upcoming live art performances and a regional exhibition are steering the conversation about food.

'Art and food share a very important purpose and function, which is to get people together and into a space where they can embrace new thinking and challenge their thoughts,' said Artistic Director of *A is for Atlas*, Xan Colman.

'Much like art, the conversation around food can be very bland and mundane ... but equally it can be a vital and a very provocative space. This isn't the only function of food and its not the only function of art either, but it is certainly something they have in common,' said Colman.

The multi-form collaboration *A is for Atlas* gives a new meaning to 'dinner and a show' with its performance work *Dining Room Tales*. Loosely structured around the experience of sharing a meal, each performance invites new artists to act as both chefs and practitioners.

In it's fourth iteration taking place [this week at the Festival of Live Art \(http://foia.com.au/program/festival-live-art-dinner-conversations-2/\)](http://foia.com.au/program/festival-live-art-dinner-conversations-2/), Austrian artists Laia Fabre and Thomas Kasebacher of notfoundyet will lead audiences through a dinner conversation as the artists share their life story over a meal they have prepared.

Colman told ArtsHub, 'The idea is the artists are presenting their food to you as another means of transmitting what they have to tell you in the here and now.

'Their choices around menu and what it is they are cooking for you are essential parts of that story.'

For Colman, food is a vessel for human experience. 'All of our values our history, aspirations, memories, all of these things can be connected or reached through food. Food really carries stories so nicely over generations as well. I think it is a lovely, almost like a really well constructed hammock, and you lie in it to have your experience.'

'We all do food. Every walk of life, every culture has some idea of the breaking bread with each other and sharing, this idea of communion. Not in the religious sense, but in the kind of getting together and sharing experience for our collective wellbeing, so food is really great for that.'

Even though the conversations, setting and artistic practitioner is different for each performance, the ethics of food production and consumption is a key consideration of each work within the *Dining Room Tales* series.

'It does have a sustainability lens. I guess there is a simplistic way to look at that in saying we always try to use organic food and work with ethical food producers that we can source through reliable contacts wherever that is possible. We are working locally in a food sense whenever these works tour, for example if we take a work to Perth we are going to be working with local food producers there,' said Colman.

'But over and above that, I think the sustainability lens for us more explicitly is one of social resilience and how food is actually a really important part of that. It's essential for bringing communities together and enabling them to share their experience.'

Similarly, writer and performer Jamie Lewis also finds food to be a conduit for experience and memories as stories already exist in food.

Lewis' latest work *来吃饭 Come eat* (<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/jamie-lewis-dinner-2-artwork-tickets-21242537000>) is on in Sydney as part of SafARI from 15 March, 2016. To explore questions of cultural identity, *Come eat* facilitates a space for conversation and draws on the connection between autobiography and food.

'It is a starting point for why I venture into food as well as me recognising my own personal world as a migrant and the changing ethics around what I choose to eat or not to eat. There has been a lot of things I have to depart from, as someone who doesn't eat farmed meats myself there are some more traditional recipes I've had to change, adapt or not participate in.

'That's been an interesting conversation for myself, just to question if this is a departure from heritage or culture, but then also re-adapting and making Kangaroo curries and things like that are really interesting explorations.

'The food I prepare is autobiographical in a way, I create Singaporean food which I where I come from in a kind of adaptation depending on what is available. If I use imported things that fact is highlighted and things like that. There is a story there around where things come from culturally and where they are sourced.'

Also exploring ideas around producing and accessibility to food is Shepparton Art Museum's latest exhibition, *Cornucopia* (<http://www.sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/exhibition-item/%21/417/event/cornucopia>). Responding to the region's reputation as the 'food bowl' of Australia, *Cornucopia* adopts the symbol of the 'horn of plenty' to explore connotations of fertility and abundance today.

'As a curator I'm interested in responding to site and context, and particularly with Shepparton. That's something we try and do within our program and our mandate,' said senior curator Anna Briers.

'We looked at the way in which the town developed economically and also socially, through its canneries and orchards and the influx of immigrants that came in to pick and pack and harvest all of these things. That was the beginning point of the concept for the show. We have SPC here and also Campbell's Soup – one of the works in the show is Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can so there was a really nice synchronicity.'

The choice of food as the connecting theme for *Cornucopia* reflects how regional arts organisations are finding ways to [engage with national and global conversations \(http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/visual-arts/gina-fairley/cultural-tourists-head-for-the-outer-suburbs-250607\)](http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/visual-arts/gina-fairley/cultural-tourists-head-for-the-outer-suburbs-250607).

'I certainly felt the theme was applicable to the context, but I also felt it was of the zeitgeist and that the ethics of food, I think, are mainstream attitudes at the moment; people are talking about them,' said Briers.

An immersive and expansive exhibition spanning the top floor of SAM, *Cornucopia* demonstrates the range of artists who have considered the different aspects and themes surrounding food.

Video works in the exhibition include SUPERFLEX's flooded McDonalds video work and Patricia Piccinini's *Metaflora* which depicts a fleshy, genetically modified floral form that unfurls and then dies as a comment on genetic modification and the future of the natural world.

'There are moments of criticism around food production, but then there are really playful light moments like the Hotham Street Ladies' *Dinner for One* which is a dining area tableau which recalls a setting an old senile lady might live in. It has this evergreen recliner, Queen Anne florals, mouldy teacups, and a rug, all made out of icing. Its a little bit repulsive, but also quite endearing and quite incredible in its production process, even the wall paper is made of icing,' concluded Briers.

### ***Dining Room Tales***

**A is for Atlas**

**Tuesday 8 March 7pm**

**<http://folia.com.au/program/festival-live-art-dinner-conversations-2/>**

**(http://)**

### ***Cornucopia***

**Shepparton Art Museum**

**Saturday 27 February to Sunday 22 May 2016**

**<http://www.sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/exhibition-item/417/event/cornucopia> (<http://>)**

### ***来,吃饭 (Come, eat)***

**Alaska Projects - Level 2, Kings Cross Car Park**

**Tuesday, 15 March 2016 6pm**

**<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/jamie-lewis-dinner-2-artwork-tickets-21242537000> (<http://>)**

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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