Taste with your eyes, see with your mouth
Elizabeth Willing's *Between Courses*

Lisa Bryan-Brown, October 2015

Eat to live, or live to eat? On one hand sustenance, and on the other pleasure. Food is undeniably necessary, located right at the very bottom of Maslow's pyramid[1], but it has the potential to be so much more than necessary - to excite, entice, enrapture. Food can be decadent, hearty, refreshing, moreish; in its many and varied forms, eating food is a ritual we all partake in multiple times a day. Whatever our circumstances, the need to stop what we are doing and enjoy a meal is a constant among life's variables.

Food is an agent of true universality, so fundamental are the pleasures it offers. People of every race, culture, age and class instinctively know the comforting warmth of a bowl of soup or cup of tea, the refreshing feeling of a cool drink on a hot day, the sticky-sweet drip of a juicy piece of fruit. These sensations are part of the shared human experience, transcending social differences like language, class and culture.

The pleasures derived from food are not exclusively the purview of the mouth, either. Our biology has us wired to respond positively to food in general – we are innately attracted to its colours, textures, smells, and even its sounds. Food engages all of our senses in a fundamental, carnal way, stimulating our bodies and inspiring desire. Ghrelin, the so-called hunger hormone, is an anti-starving mechanism built into our very chemistry, causing us mouth-watering sensations when hungry and food-coma lethargy post-feasting.

Your ghrelin level may well contribute to your gut reactions when viewing Elizabeth Willing's *Between Courses*. Practicing at the intersection of food and art for nearly a decade, Willing's work breaches the divide between the gallery and the restaurant, playfully and cleverly blending the rules of one with the other. As institutions they are not so different – both are highly codified and steeped in class expectations, and indeed these days what major gallery does not have its own café, or vice versa good restaurant contemporary art on its walls? Stretching the boundaries of where art and food might each begin and end, Willing toys with the vernacular of both worlds to locate their intersection.

Willing's infinite spirals of antipasto are simultaneously sumptuous and nauseating, devilled eggs and rolls of cold cuts fanned neatly for presentation. Collaging photographs found in dated cookbooks, Willing's *Banquet, Flesh* and *Cold Platter* works teeter on the edge of taste in both senses of the word, their instantly recognisable but now entirely unfashionable style of photography transformed into mesmerising expanses of kitsch. Visually complex works, each one is surreal in its overwhelming excess, particularly when compared to the stark cleanliness of her

Help series. Images of multiple sets of hands demonstrating bizarre collaborative recipe steps, the crisp whiteness of these works serves to amplify and dislocate the craftsmanship of food preparation. A wry comment on cooking as a social activity, the *Help* collages present a contradiction - many hands make light work, but too many cooks can spoil the broth.

If the collages are Willing using her studio as a kitchen, her sculptures see her kitchen become a studio. Her fascination with food itself as an artistic medium is endless; where you and I see ingredients for a meal, she sees sculptural potential. Viscosity, texture, colour – irrelevant for making lunch, but very important when making art. Bright yellow and cheekily curved, *Pear liquor for one* is the sculptural equivalent of an abandoned half-finished drink, or alternatively the food equivalent of a neon-light installation. Having been sucked through this upscaled crazy-straw, the vivid sticky substance rests abjectly at gravity's behest. *Pear liquor for one* explores formalism, line and colour as much as it is also a reflection upon the shared experience and performance of drinking alcohol.

Food as an essentially social experience is a recurring theme in Willing's work, and *Between Courses* sees her begin to explore the ties between particular foods and national identities. Concisely articulated in *Banquet (Australian)* and *Banquet (German)*, food's agency as a facet of cultural identity is significant, and a natural avenue of reflection for Willing having recently completed residencies in Berlin and Helsinki. *Homemade* explores this idea within the context of Australia with nuanced complexity, contemplating Australia's colonial history and its ongoing relationship with the UK. A hand-carved shortbread mould featuring a map of Australia, Willing extends an invitation to opening night attendees to break apart and consume their nation.

Willing's major new work for *Between Courses* is *Dessert III,* an intimate participatory art-eating experience. Five courses of food-sculpture are consumed degustation-style by the participants, who wear Willing's signature *Serviette shirts*. The point where her collage psychedelia meets relational aesthetics, these kaleidoscopic shirts retain the trace of the *Dessert III* experience, a lasting memento of the performative event. As for the menu, Willing's visually stunning courses are each a multi-sensory extravagance; drink a wedding cake, listen to a pancake, smell wearable herbal headdresses. Continuing her ongoing exploration into dining room décor, in testament to her impeccable attention to detail, Willing has also designed a tablecloth upon which *Dessert III* is staged and produced *Parted,* a kipfler potato-print wall paper installed as part of *Between Courses*.

Always looking to disrupt the expected, combine the incongruous and surprise the senses, Willing's greatest strength as both an artist and a chef is her ability to simultaneously execute the equally transformative experiences of art viewing and food consumption, either both at once or one through the means of the other. Playing excess and simplicity off one another to strike a precarious balance between too much and just enough, Willing's *Between Courses* offers viewers and participants a satiating sensorial experience.

1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory regarding human motivation, which posits physiological needs (sleep, water, food, shelter) as the foundation for all other needs (safety, belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualisation).
   Maslow, A.H. (1943) A theory of human motivation, in *Psychological Review,* 50 (4), p. 370-96, accessed at <psychclassics.yorku.ca> on 28 October 2015