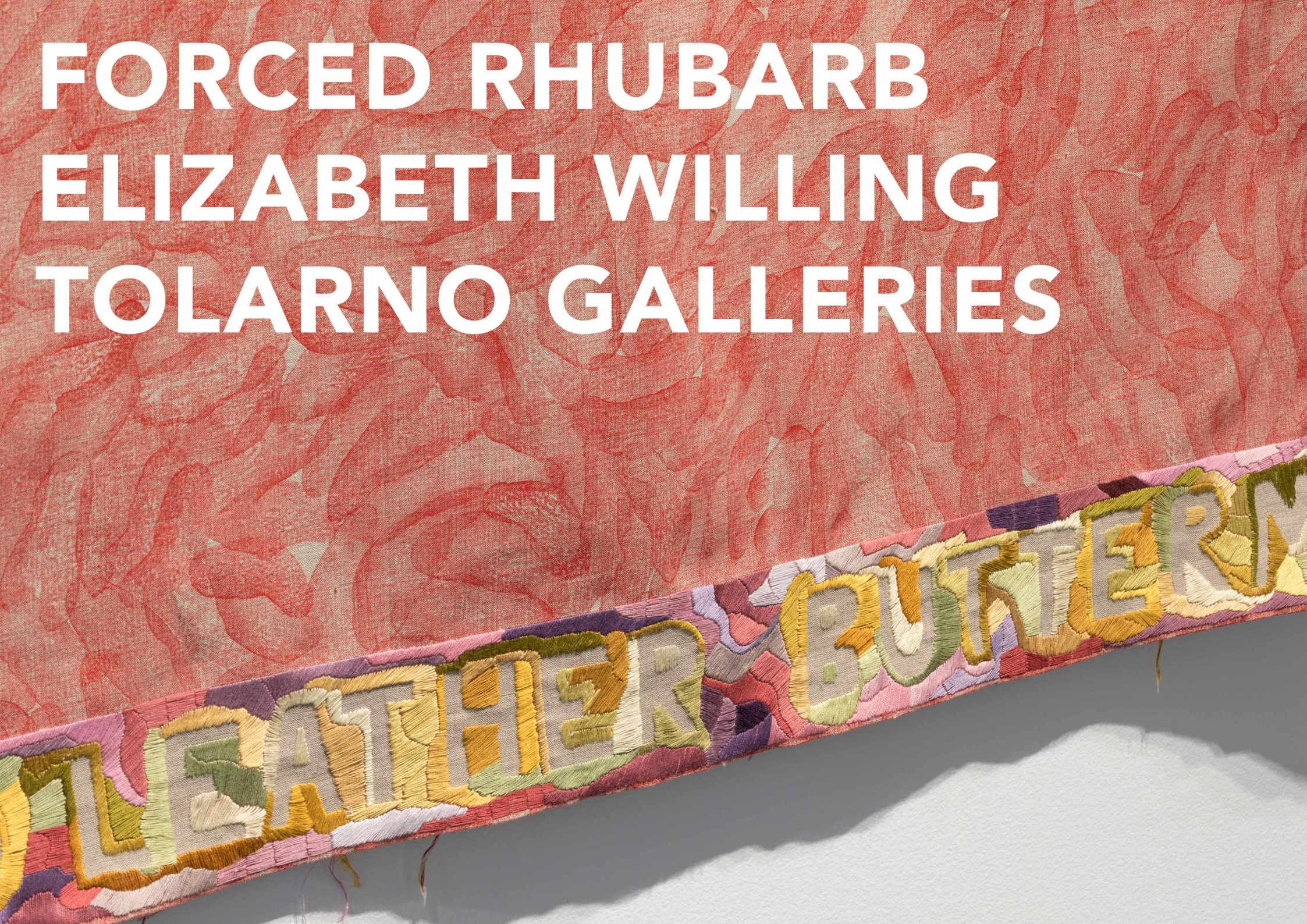
FORCED RHUBARB
ELIZABETH WILLING
TOLARNO GALLERIES



Forced Rhubarb

Food is the catalyst that I use to translate the ineffable body, to reflect on the performance of eating, and facilitate multisensory experiences in an otherwise ocularcentric context. Hospitality is therefore a useful, and somewhat universal framework to understand the relationships that develop in my artworks between the audience, artist and artwork. Bodies performing hospitality leave traces, the details and tensions of the hosting process are sublimated into the artwork. In this sense, my art objects are the mediator and outcome of performing hospitality.

What do we welcome past the mouth threshold? Food, lovers, medicine, living or dead things, and nutrition made in the ground, the factory, and the lab. Hospitality is something we can enact both outwardly and internally, a framework to consider the ethical and psychological decision making involved in consumption, and the rhizomic nature of digestion.

The relationship between host and guest is wired with obligation and service. The role of host in everyday life has often felt uncomfortable to me, and yet within my practice it is a method I've returned to regularly. And so, I perform hosting at arm's length, allowing the artwork and the viewer to commandeer the role. In this new body of work, the Linens, I have turned hosting into a solitary method, sublimating the obligation of labour, duty of service, and commitment of time into form.

I have mined a personal archive of colourful test prints, each a fragment of research from the past ten years. Platters, bowls, and glasses are adopted as templates to collage the prints on fresh linen. Piece by piece the compositions are grafted with laborious minute hand stitches.

The Linens employ an inventory of symbols from my own performative and multisensory lexicon. These reoccurring symbols signal the often intangible sensory or ephemeral materials cast within my broader practice; sedatives, yeasts, medicinal plants, and digestive processes. Implicated in the logic of hospitality, the compositions of the Linens are not unlike Spoerri's tabletop Snare-pictures, but more pointedly entrenched in the labour and service of hosting.

My labour reminds me of the tacky cross stitches gifted to me by my grandmother, or the absurd embroideries created for me by my mother over the years. The Linens too began many years ago as handmade gifts, my debt as guest becoming a lighter load when I can acknowledge and return the service of a generous host.

The floor installation Moviprep stretches across the expanse under our feet in huge loops, one continuous tube made from hundreds of individual sherbet filled straws. Working as quickly as possible, the tubes are cut and joined end to end, the sand-like filling spills from the straw. The sherbet creates trails where the straw sweeps across the ground, tracing the nuances of my hands constructing the work. The sculpture hosts the colour inside it's intestinal-like body, and it spills them too, creating an expressive platform, accompanied by an overwhelming aroma.

A tube of sugar is designed to pour into our mouth, vertically, becoming an extension of the throat, as much a visual and tactile experience as culinary. The highly processed and artificial product can barely be called food, it is instead a play-thing, created for entertainment, with a nod to nutrition, a bit like fine dining.

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I am fairly confident there is a potato farm in Tasmania that paints dirt on their kipfler potatoes. The reason I think this is that the indentations around the eye of the potatoes, and the depressions in their uneven skin, are so so clean. The outside is covered in an even layer of red dirt, like slip. And I know this from relentless exposure to their kipfler potatoes, that there are sometimes brush marks left in the dirt, as if a bristle has wiped the mud-turned-dirt onto the skin. It is settled then, dirt is cleaned off like pollution, and new wholesome dirt is applied. The original traces of agriculture are no longer correct, the potato painting machine can do better. When we take these home, we wash off dirt, for the second time.

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Eating chips from a packet is loud, on purpose. Food manufactures have done their research, the noise a packet creates makes the chips seem fresher, crisper. Flavour comes from the fine dust coating the chips; is it even coloured? And yet this industrial dust reveals its offensive colour when it has built up on your chip grabbing fingers. The gentlest of colours becomes bold. A fine mist now a heavy fog shows itself to be the colour of clay. Dough-like, we get a glimpse back to the industrial drum of flavouring which is fired onto freshly fried potato chips. Meanwhile, your body is saturated in and on.

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There exist magical food items which are designed, whether accidentally or not, to fit and match with our body. The desirable objects are coupled for a moment outside before being sucked inside. No longer a fleeting and inconvenient passage between table and mouth, these food items are accessories, designed by machines to be worn before eating. From the high-end molecular kitchen such as Adria's *Virgin olive oil caramel ring*, Heston's *Sounds of the Sea* or Achatz's *Apple flavoured helium balloon*, to the low end; the push pop, Cheezle, or candy necklace. As a species we have made such radical transformations of agricultural products, that their traces are not just felt inside our bodies as nourishment, but also on our bodies, as accessories and external sensory experiences.

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"late blight is again 'the world's worst agricultural disease' and has made the potato the world's most chemically dependent crop"
Someone once described the potato to me as a sponge, effectively soaking up matter from its soil bed. Human bodies too are pretty porous, the gut intentionally expands its surface area with villi to absorb as much as possible from our food. Much of the matter we ingest will pass through us and become mulch back on the land, though some will be indigestible, stuck in our systems, obstructing our organs, fixed in our orifices, remaining as a parasite until our fossil records reveal these everlasting technologies.

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Tuber with many children is another name for the potato, which is not actually a root, but an engorged piece of the plant's stem. Each 'eye' has the potential to branch out from the underground stem, producing an exact copy of the mother plant. Some living things, such as this potato, exhibits reproduction. A yeast cell, for example, flaunts it's own birth scar, and then a bud scar for each daughter it sprouts. The skin of the yeast (at least to

our microscopes) is otherwise clear of any impression, these are their only adornment, round, doughnut-like protrusions. As humans we indicate our own birth with the bellybutton. Any other scars we incurred as mothers are covered over with clothing and new memories.

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St John's wort is a weed, spreading slowly across Australia, clinging to the land in cooler climates. Livestock who eat the foliage become photosensitive, their skin burning quickly in the sun. For humans though, St John's Wort can be consumed as an anxiolytic. The deep purple oils in the flesh of the flowers, leaves, and buds act as a mild antidepressant. Collecting the flowers and buds, it is almost impossible to avoid getting the staining oils on your hands. In and on the antidepressant goes.

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Ulcer on a horse, diseased caterpillar, jam, corpse in embalming fluid, slimy mud, and forced rhubarb are a few of the documented host environments of yeasts. There is a universality to the yeasts demonstrated in their ability to withstand what appears to be all manner of in/hospitable environments. In wine, the yeast *Saccharomyces Cerevisiae* establishes a level of alcohol that kills off almost everything else attempting to share its host. It is easy to draw parallels with the human attitude to host environments, and further to our increased palatability of in/hospitable habitats on other planets.

Artist Statement – Elizabeth Willing