

ARTIST PROFILE

GOOD TASTE

Elizabeth Willing's practice has a distinct materiality that engages all the senses. Her work pushes the limits of everything edible, from foraging and food anxiety to marshmallows and marzipan.

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THERE'S A WONDERFUL (some may even say delicious...) irony to **Elizabeth Willing's** interest in the many meanings of taste – and her thoughtful, witty and rather empathetic exploration of them within the context of the reinstated Melbourne Art Fair.

Willing has been working at the intersections of art and design – “a constant preoccupation of my practice” – since completing her Bachelor of Fine Art from Queensland University Technology in 2008. Traversing sculpture, installation, performance and participatory social events, Willing's practice has a distinct materiality that engages all the senses. In past works, she has tested the limits of materials including toffee, marshmallows and marzipan, using nostalgia, humour and a sense of the familiar to examine the social and cultural shifts that accompany rituals of cooking, eating, procuring and presenting food. Recently, she has begun to explore ideas of sustainability, food anxiety, foraging, native plants and the ways that food cultures develop.

Willing's exhibition with Tolarno Galleries at MAF is a series of independent, multi-sensory works designed to “cross-pollinate”, says the artist. They come together as the singular installation, *Strawberry Thief*, which is also the title of Willing's **William Morris**-inspired wallpaper. The wallpaper, which “physically and conceptually frames all the other objects”, is accompanied by a series of collages, abstract sculptures and participatory performances.

The wallpaper re-imagines Morris's iconic 17th-century design, replacing the pattern of British fauna and flora with native Australian plants. For Willing, “the use of native Australian foods both complements and contrasts the English heritage of the original. A substantial portion of what we

understand as Australian food culture comes from English roots, but this paper adopts content from a much older local culture.” In placing these Indigenous plants within an English framework, Willing comments not only on the current fashion of using native ingredients, but the irony of international gastronomic trends leading us back to flavours of Australia that were here long before the English arrived.

Dark (2017–18) is her series of giclée print collages, the latest in a series that Willing began more than six years ago, extracting nostalgic images from found 1970s cookbooks. These particular works take as their inspiration “the absurdity of the fruitcake tradition, a steaming dense Christmas pudding on a hot December day”, says Willing. “And its laborious cooking process, amplified through the obsessive process and forms of these collages.”

Willing's two sculptural forms, *Untitled* (2018) have been made from recycled Australian hardwoods and preserved with the traces of their past lives: knots and nail holes and borer marks. Into them, Willing has carved “enormous, absurd” shortbread moulds, “continuing the discussion [in *Strawberry Thief*] around the dominant roots of Australian food culture: the introduced, the environment for which we have made the introduced

“Willing is not only an artist but a cook, designer, engineer and scientist...”

RACHEL PARSONS



Documentation from Elizabeth Willing's *We Who Eat Together* in collaboration with Josue Lopez, 2017, QAGOMA, Brisbane. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND QAGOMA, BRISBANE. PHOTO: MARK SHERWOOD.



Installation view of Elizabeth Willing's *Tastes Like Sunshine*, 2017, Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE.

adapt. I am quite aggressively carving the introduced food traditions (shortbread) into the native Australian timbers, which act as host to these impressions.” The upright standing sculpture doubles as a minimalist, domestic drinking bar, around which Willing's series of hour-long performances will take place over the course of the Fair.

The cocktail recipe used in her work *Anxiolytic* (2018) has been created in collaboration with Melbourne mixologist **Cennon Hansen** and takes Willing's homemade valerian tincture, replete with designed bottles and labelling, as its central, soothing ingredient. Continuing her interest in foraging cultures, *Anxiolytic* also addresses Willing's concerns with anxiety, self-medication and the current conversations around mental health and creativity.

Says Willing: “If the viewer partakes in the cocktail performance, they will be engaging with taste, touch, and olfactory senses, as well as a level of intoxication, which will influence their experience of the rest of the installation.” They will also drink from *Pacify* (2018), a series of specially designed, tapered, etched glass cups made from altered beakers, with all their associations of alchemy and illegal drug production. Willing has pierced each glass with a tiny hole, through which the liquid gently weeps. “The drinker is encouraged to stem the flow with their finger, to comfort, soothe, pacify the cup in its state of loss,” says the artist. “In the act of blocking the tiny hole, the drinker is more aware of their body; the delicate choreography of their hands, and the act of drinking that is normally so trivial. We also have a direct

connection of the cocktail with our fingertip and our mouth, creating a full circle of pacification.”

This will be Willing's first time showing at the Melbourne Art Fair, but her work has been exhibited both internationally and at home since 2008. Now with a Masters of Fine Art from QUT, recent major solo exhibitions include *Shades of Yellow* at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin in 2015, which was part of her 2014–15 Australia Council Berlin residency, and *Impossible Guest* at New England Regional Art Museum in Armidale in 2018, also the product of a 2017 residency.

Willing has undertaken mentorships with **Janine Antoni** in New York, **Thomas Rentmeister** in Berlin and the Experimental Food Society in London. Recent special projects include *We Who Eat Together* at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art restaurant in 2016, in collaboration with GOMA executive chef **Josue Lopez**. The seven-course degustation performance was conceived in response to the GOMA exhibition *Sugar Spin: You Me, Art and Everything*. In addition to the Australia Council Berlin residency, Willing has also been the recipient of several Australia Council grants, the 2013 NAVA Freedman Foundation Travelling Scholarship and the 2015 Helsinki International Art Programme Residency.

ELIZABETH WILLING'S *STRAWBERRY THIEF* SHOWS AT MELBOURNE ART FAIR, SOUTHBANK ARTS PRECINCT, FROM 1 TO 5 AUGUST 2018.

MEGAN FIZELL

Independent curator and arts writer, Sydney

“Elizabeth Willing’s multidisciplinary practice encourages audience participation and is part of an established lineage of 20th-century artists using edible materials. Her dining performances recall the experimental and multisensory banquets of the Futurists, combined with Rirkrit Tiravanija’s relational eating encounters, constructed situations in which interaction and social exchanges take place. In these performances, Willing expands this avenue of inquiry by manipulating familiar dining conventions to disrupt expected norms and behaviours associated with food consumption. She achieves this by designing custom utensils: a double-ended straw you share with a neighbour, a tipping plate that tilts away from the most glutinous, and a round vessel with ceramic lips you carefully kiss in order to drink. Willing’s meals probe some of the uncomfortable aspects of collective dining and the intimacy of eating.

Her wall-mounted confectionary installations utilise aesthetic forms of minimalist sculpture to frame the abundant materials, a tactic also employed by Felix González-Torres in his stack-and-spill artworks of the 1990s. While the candy in González-Torres’s spills is replenished at the close of each day, Willing’s installations display the opened wrappers and half-consumed biscuits as an evolving map of eating patterns and interactions. Her practice reveals an ongoing interest in not only what we collectively eat, but how we eat it.

Willing’s art identifies a shift away from privileging vision as the primary method to encounter artwork towards more multifaceted experiences drawing on the entire sensory register. Through installations and experimental dining encounters, she invites participants to touch and taste her work, collapsing the distance between artwork and audience.”

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JAN MINCHIN

Director, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Elizabeth Willing first came to Jan Minchin’s attention in 2016, Minchin’s curiosity piqued by Willing’s experimental dinner at GOMA in collaboration with chef Josue Lopez. “At around the same time, she made works using chocolate, peanut butter and cheese,” says the gallerist. “Inventive, ambitious, even dangerous, they were totally engaging and became even more so when I discovered how conceptually tough they are, grounded in a deep knowledge of art, culture and design. As New England Regional Art Museum curator Rachel Parsons said: ‘Willing is not only an artist, but a cook, designer, engineer and scientist, testing and manipulating the material qualities and limitations of food and applying her highly refined sensibility.’”

Tolarno Galleries has been working with Willing since late 2016 and presented her *Guava Season* as a Backroom project in April 2017. Minchin also included her work *Pink Poles* in @50, the 2017 exhibition celebrating Tolarno Galleries’ 50th anniversary. Created from purchased icy-pole strips, “*Pink Poles* is an innovative, minimalist work evoking childhood memories, as well as being a witty reference to Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles*, purchased by National Gallery of Australia in 1973”, says Minchin.

Minchin is particularly excited to be showing Willing’s project, *Strawberry Thief*, at the Melbourne Art Fair. “It’s a new chapter at MAF,” she says. “The energy and enthusiasm is palpable. We felt that Tolarno should match MAF’s vigour with a bright new talent. Elizabeth’s performances are completely engaging and she’ll work in tandem with Melbourne mixologist, Cennon Hanson. *Strawberry Thief* will be a feast for the senses. We think she’ll be the hit of the fair!”

Strawberry Thief prices range from \$200 to \$5,000 for individual works to \$40,000 for the entire project, in keeping with her previous sales, according to Minchin. Considering the kinds of collectors who might be interested in Willing’s work, Minchin thinks that “collectors who fell in love with her 2017 *Saltwater Freshwater* ceramics will be keen to acquire the new *Pacify* glasses, while those new to her fruitcake collages and shortbread sculptures will be captivated. Who doesn’t know that art, food and wine is the perfect mix?” ■



Elizabeth Willing, *Pink Poles*, 2017. Icy poles, 100 x 250 x 2cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE. PHOTO: ANDREW CURTIS.

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