

Consuming Beauty: There's Eating and Drinking in that

By Cristín Leach

The phrase “You are what you eat” has always felt peculiarly Irish to me, but its origins lie in France apparently, in the year 1826, when the lawyer, politician, epicure and gastronomic essayist Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.” Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are. Food is not only or just what we are; it is part of who we are too. Food is language and gesture. Food is where we come from. Food is fuel, identity, necessity, love.

This exhibition, Meat and Potatoes at the Crawford Art Gallery, opens with an image of an artist in bed, sick. She is surrounded by food. She appears to be in her sickbed in the kitchen, but according to records this is the bedsit in Rome where the painter Jean Cooke and her husband, the painter of this image, John Bratby lived in 1954. John paints Jean, painter to painter, husband to wife. Included in that dynamic are questions about food. Was Jean also the one who made, arranged, and served up the food? Or did they fight over whose job it was to keep the kitchen and their bodies going? Is the abundance of fruit in bowls all around Jean's bedding-tossed mattress typical of their lives, or one of those moments of curious glut that occur when friends and family bring sustenance to aid an invalid's recovery? In the context of this show, the painting Jean in Bed with Jaundice becomes not just a painting about illness but a painting about domestic duties, a painting about feeding, a painting about nourishment, a painting about food yes, but also a painting about fear and love. It fits well within a series of “tabletop paintings” Bratby made at this time.

With food comes connection, but also fear of scarcity, fear of illness, weakness, dependence, fear of death. This show includes mostly Crawford Art Gallery Collection works, supplemented by artist loans and this painting, which along with Tommy Sutton Getting in the Spuds in the Snow, painted by Camille Souter in the 1960s, comes from the Glebe Gallery Collection in Donegal, managed by the Office of Public Works.

Monika Crowley's silkscreen printed Domestic series was first exhibited at the Molesworth Gallery in Dublin in 2012. The works here not just about using the language of Pop Art to jauntily capture some of the everyday familiar food items that might sit in an Irish kitchen cupboard, they also tell a story about legacy and time. With a family recipe passed from generation to generation through the initiation ritual of motherhood, with ingredients as talismans, food as love, Crowley is also asking pertinent questions about convenience and labour. She embraces food label branding as a particular form of nostalgia, while acknowledging the judgement, guilt, pleasure, and memories to be found in the family mixing bowl, a broken egg, a tin of old baby food repurposed to store baking soda.

It's impossible to encounter the works in this show without considering the long history of still life painting. From Barend van der Meer's sombre Still Life with Fruit and Oysters painted around 1680 to Gerard Dillon's vibrant blue Still Life with fish, onions, and lemon (c.1950), right up to Geraldine O'Neill's Still Life - Leeks and Red Cabbage. O'Neill is an artist working firmly in a 21st century realist painting mode with a solid eye on tradition. In producing her food-packed composition for the Great Southern Hotels collection in 2006, she responded to another collection painting by

Norah McGuinness, which included a watermelon. "It seemed so exotic," O'Neill has written, "Where would a watermelon have been got in the early part of the 20th century?" O'Neill was an emerging artist at the time, recently graduated, and working in a rented studio in an attic in Dublin city centre. She sourced a rare watermelon from a local wholesaler: "...all the meat and vegetable shops sold things like cabbage, lamb hearts etc. Local produce only! A watermelon was not to be seen. It seemed nearly audacious and pretentious." That connection between food and the street and local produce traders is emphasised here by the inclusion of Jack B Yeats' Shelling Peas in Moore Street (1936) and a reminder of the food culture of France with Alexander Jamieson's Dieppe Market (1904). Food is a universal theme.

The work of Abigail O'Brien is part of both the Meat and the Bread sections of this show, bookending its exploration of the essential basics and entangled larger politics of it all. How to Butterfly a Leg of Lamb by O'Brien and Mary Kelly, is twenty years old but remains pertinent in its exploration of ritual and gender. Food is often about life and death, at both ends of the chain. Comhghall Casey's realist painting of a raw and butcher-tied shoulder of lamb rubs up against Sarah Atkinson's 1883 Still Life of a still-feathered dead duck, while Maria McKinney's Sire series - with its photographic images of prize breeding bulls sporting artificial insemination straw sculptures while paraded by their owners - opens up even more provocative and visually audacious avenues of exploration. From this layered artistic delve into where genetics has taken food production today back to Edith Somerville's 1888 The Goose Girl painting, we are returned to a reminder of the relationships between animals as food producers and their owners, carers and breeders, pointing again to ever evolving and ongoing questions about food cultivation and human consumption.

Potatoes are a provocative symbol of more than just food in Ireland. Deirdre O'Mahony's The Persistent Return is a film exploration of the political implications of reliance on this particular foodstuff, globally and locally. Questions of abundance or otherwise are raised again by the juxtaposition of Comhghall Casey's 2015 still life painting of fifteen potatoes, neatly collected and piled, with Charles Maclver Grierson's 1903 pastel Potato Diggers in the West, or Robert Richard Scanlan's Emigrants Awaiting Embarkation, West Cork, produced in 1852, officially the final year of what was once only conveniently called the Irish "potato famine". The impact of those years of starvation had a long and ongoing reach. Between 1848 and 1950, more than 6 million Irish adults and children emigrated from Cork Harbour.

Food access and supply has always been tied to politics, power, and control. In the final section of the show, all of this is brought back home by Muriel Brandt's c.1950 painting, The Breadline 1916, and its reminder that when all is said and done, human beings must eat to survive.

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