

Squashings, pressings and stains

food as a medium in printmaking and works on paper

by Megan Fizell, Sydney-based curator and writer specialising in the representation of food in the visual arts. Fizell is gallery manager at Brenda May Gallery, Sydney where she recently curated *Sugar, Sugar*, an exhibition that featured contemporary art made exclusively with sugar by ten female artists

In the 1960s, artists began experimenting with food as a medium; from the performative meals at Daniel Spoerri's Eat Art Gallery to the chocolate sculptures by Dieter Roth, the applications of this material were exploratory and wide-ranging. Considering specifically the body of work termed 'squashings' and 'pressings' by Roth from the mid '60s alongside the *Stains* portfolio from 1969 by Edward Ruscha, these practices serve to illustrate one way artists of this era challenged the established artistic canon. Examining the work of New York artist Martynka Wawrzyniak and Australian Elizabeth Willing alongside the early practitioners demonstrates a new handling of this medium by contemporary artists.

Edible materials initially appeared within the practice of American artist Edward Ruscha in his 1969 series *Stains*, a collection of seventy-five pages of stain blots. Ruscha executed the creation of the stains through the use of an eyedropper – a tool typically linked with scientific investigations and medical examinations. This method of application negated the hand of the artist, as there was

Martynka Wawrzyniak, *March*, 2013, cucumber, celery, fennel, rainbow chard, kale, broccoli, collard greens, beet greens, dandelion greens, spinach, parsley, cilantro, ginger, lime juice, lemon juice, *Field of Greens* powder, and spirulina powder on thirty-one 15.2 x 15.2 cm paper napkins, 86.36 x 115.57 x 2 cm. Image reproduced by courtesy of the artist and Envoy Enterprises, NYC.



Elizabeth Willing, *16 singles*, 2014, cheese on paper, 150 x 150 cm. Image reproduced by courtesy of the artist.

no gesture in the markings and the technique was positioned between painting and a form of printmaking. The curator Melissa Ho writes, '...Ruscha was careful to keep personal expression to a minimum going so far as to hire other people to drip each stain onto the center of its page'.¹ The substituted hand of the outsourced mark-maker was used to remove the artist's decisions and aesthetic expression. The hired hand paired with an eyedropper was Ruscha's pseudo-attempt at an automated and mechanical application of the organic substances to the paper. Because each mark-maker operated autonomously, even with the exact same application technique, the stains varied slightly from set to set. Although Ruscha's marks were intentional, he chose to use a suggestively accidental word – *stain* – to name the portfolio. Again drawing on the discourse of Melissa Ho, she argues that as stains, many of the marks were failures.² As materials, tap water and mineral oil barely left a trace, if one at all. Comparably, other stains in the portfolio faded over time, given the inherent transience of the organic matter.

Ruscha continued his investigation of edible materials as ink in the portfolio made the following year titled *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews & Dues* (1970). This suite of six prints was made with incongruous and unexpected concoctions – salmon roe and blackcurrant pie filling were mixed to create the pigment for *News*. Ruscha was not the first to send organic materials through a printing press – in 1965 Dieter Roth began experimenting with a technique he termed 'squashings' and 'pressings'. In these works, foodstuffs ranging from bananas and fruit juices to chocolates and cheese were used as 'ink' in the works. The edibles were compressed into the paper by the printing press to a thickness of less than two centimetres.³ Much of his practice from this period was termed 'decay art', objects made from edible or degradable materials that were often left or encouraged to rot away. The process of decay was integral to the concept and aesthetic of Roth's work.

The 2013 series *Feed* by New York-based artist Martynka Wawrzyniak is an exercise in seriality. The project revolved around the daily meal, the ingredients of Wawrzyniak's evening supper were meticulously recorded and a large square napkin was used to collect the residual foodstuffs on her lips and face. In an abstract sense, Wawrzyniak's mouth is used as a tool for printmaking and the 'ink' is the food residue; the shapes and marks –

evidence of consumption – are pressed into the surface of the napkin. The series alludes to Daniel Spoerri's *tableaux pièges* (trap pictures) of the 1960s where used napkins were displayed alongside the wall-mounted tabletops, loaded with dishes and food debris. Both Wawrzyniak's napkins and Spoerri's *tableaux pièges* function as a documentation of an action, in this case the gesture of eating.

Elizabeth Willing's recent work titled *16 Singles* (2014) uses processed cheese to construct a grid on a large sheet of white paper. In selecting the cheese she relates, '[it] jumped out at me in a supermarket here in Berlin because it was sold straight off the shelf, warm, no refrigeration, and that screams "unnatural" and hilarious to me'.⁴ According to Willing, this series developed through her considerations and explorations of food acting as a natural adhesive. Like Roth's 'decay art', time is an essential component in the formation of the piece; as the cheese dries out over a number of days, the liquids evaporate and the fats leech out of the cheese causing the paper to pucker and buckle forming a three-dimensional object from a two-dimensional plane.

Collecting and examining these textual/food works demonstrates the way artists have challenged established artistic canons by incorporating banal and edible materials. Through *Stains*, Ruscha questioned ideas of painting and printmaking and Willing's *16 Singles* employs the natural processes of decomposition to 'sculpt' the paper in uncontrolled ways. Although the neo-avant-garde artists were the first to engage with foodstuffs as a material, contemporary artists are extending their ideas within their own practices. •

References

1. Melissa Ho, 'Edward Ruscha,' in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*, ed. Ann Temkin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), p.134.
2. Ibid.
3. Deborah Wye, *Eye on Europe: Prints, Books & Multiples, 1960 to Now* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), p.113.
4. Elizabeth Willing, email to author, 1 November 2014.

Elizabeth Willing's *16 Slices* will be on view at Brenda May Gallery, Sydney in the curated group exhibition **Paper Works III**, 14 April to 2 May 2015.