2007

Food Fight

D. Zane Vredenburg

Iowa State University

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Food Fight

by

D. Zane Vredenburg

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Art

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara J. Walton (Major Professor)
April Katz
Anson Call
Mimi Wagner

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2007

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What is Painting

Do you sense how all the parts of a good picture are involved with each other, not just placed side by side? Art is a creation for the eye and can only be hinted at with words.

Text from the painting, *What is Painting*

by John Baldessari
INTRODUCTION

The intent of this written component is to document my thesis exhibition, *Food Fight*. The idea behind *Food Fight* is to raise awareness of how poorly we eat as a nation and how the media perpetuates this. Twenty-three works of art were displayed in Gallery 181-1 in the College of Design building at Iowa State University January 8 – 19, 2007.

Our lifestyles (whether intentional or not) tend to support a 'convenience food culture' and the increased consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Some factors that prolong dependence on these convenience foods are: rising incomes, longer working hours, more working mothers, time-poor/cash-rich parents, parents that have to work two jobs, and the basic lack of understanding of what proper nutrition is. In the United States we have fleets of trucks that travel across the country to deliver chips, candy bars and soda to our schools and market places. Frozen dinners and fast food meals from the drive through may be a constant for many Americans. Food is no longer a nutritional need, but a novelty that is designed to appeal towards our time restrictions and pocket books, not our health.

The impetus for the subject of food came from a health issue regarding my son. He has Asperger’s syndrome. With Asperger’s syndrome there are impairments in regards to two-sided social interaction and non-verbal communication. Their speech is peculiar due to abnormalities of inflection and a repetitive pattern. Clumsiness is prominent both in their articulation and gross motor behavior. They usually have a circumscribed area of interest that leaves no space for more age appropriate, common interests. An interest in rocks and chemistry is what occupies my seven-year-old son.
One theory regarding the cause of Asperger’s (DeFelice) suggests that people with the disease cannot digest some foods properly. The undigested compounds set off a chain of events resulting in the production of psychoactive chemicals that affect brain function, possibly by creating opiate-like hallucinogenic substances that act on the brain in a toxic manner.

This premise has affected the way our family eats. We have taken a serious look at the food we consume. People react differently to distinctive foods. For example some people with autism can’t digest gluten, which is a component of wheat and is responsible for the elasticity of kneaded dough and the "chewiness" of baked products like bagels. Casein is also another food that may be indigestible for people with autism. Casein is found in milk. In addition, casein is used in the manufacturing of adhesives, binders, protective coatings, plastics, fabrics, food additives and most interestingly to me, paint.

Through my family’s research of food and its effects on our son’s health, we have become aware of many issues regarding food and wellbeing in our society. This was the basis of Food Fight.
FOOD ISSUES

*Food Fight* is a mostly satirical critique of mass media and the influence it has on the way we as Americans eat and how those eating habits affect people’s health.

The Institute of Medicine found that one-third of American children are either obese or at risk for becoming obese and that child onset diabetes is on the rise among youth in this country. At the same time, high-calorie, artery-clogging foods are cheap and plentiful. Healthy foods can sometimes be hard to find. And children are surrounded by increasing amounts of junk-food advertising. The food industry spends an estimated $33 billion a year on ads and promotions. "When you have $33 billion of marketing aimed at you, challenging you to eat more at all times, it's difficult not to eat too much," says Marion Nestle, chair of the nutrition and food studies department at New York University and author of *Food Politics*. (Raeburn)

For this body of work I chose to focus on how the media controls what we eat and how that affects our health. Generally the health of our children is of utmost concern in this body of work.

The top five foods that cause children to become obese are; white refined flour products, white sugar, hydrogenated fat, processed fast foods, and saturated fat. Many cereals advertised toward children contain white refined flour and white sugar. “The shift from whole food to refined and processed foods is definitely one of the biggest contributors to the problem. Stripping a natural grain of its fiber, adding refined sugars, and adding chemicals is a one way ticket to weight gain for most,” says Dr. Joey Shulman author of *Winning the Food Fight*. (Shulman) One study showed that during an hour of Saturday morning cartoons there were eleven food commercials, that’s one food
commercial every five minutes. Out of these commercials one third was for cereal, one third was for fast food and one third was for candy. From this data I determined that my thesis exhibition would give the same ratio of attention to each food type. The series *Candy Corroded* (Fig.1-4), *Cereal Killers* (Fig.5-8) and *Unhappy Meal* (Fig.9-11) were a direct result of this information.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation’s report *The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity* shows that the average child watches 2 to 4 hours of TV per day and views about 40,000 TV ads every year, most of them for cereal, candy, fast food and toys. (Kaiser)

The Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin says, “Small children can’t separate the marketing messages from their favorite shows, especially when the marketing campaigns feature their favorite TV cartoon characters.” (AP)

It is advertising executives against 5-12 year olds. Who do you think is going to win?
ARTISTIC PROCESS

"I'm not sure what 'coming out right' means. It often means that what you do holds a kind of energy that you wouldn't just put there, that comes about through grace of some sort."

Jasper Johns

Much is involved in my work before I touch a brush to the panel. Many ideas have rolled around in my head for quite sometime before they are even written down. When they do make the transition from my mind they enter a small sketchbook, which I always carry with me. From these sketches I find images, create a composition in Photoshop or Illustrator and ultimately begin painting. The first step, however, is creating the panels I paint on.

I have become comfortable with painting on birch plywood. I have found that the solid, rigid surface works well for the type of physical distressing I add to my work. The plywood enables me to scrape, sand and gouge while producing a texture that I find pleasing. I also used the wood texture, grain and color as part of the composition in the series Primal Cuts. Birch panels are also the standard when it comes to encaustic painting. Encaustic paint can become very heavy when used in many layers covering a large area. (On previous work I have used 5lbs of encaustic paint to make two coats on a 4-foot square panel.) The panel is also porous enough for the wax to adhere properly to the surface.

The sizes of the panels I create are proportional to the scale of my sketch or digital composition. If I am working in acrylic the size tends to be a bit bigger than if I
work in encaustic. I like to work with a large format for my acrylic works because I imbed small pieces of material and enjoy working with varying sizes of visual elements within the work of art. Working large enables me to add very small and very large compositional components, which creates a visually interesting composition from varying proximities. The *Cereal Killers* series, *Pimp My Burger* and *100 Percent Real* reveal this quality in my work. Encaustic paint is very challenging to work with on a large area due to the speed in which wax cools when taken from the palette to the panel. This is why encaustic works are generally small in format. Even though working at a large scale is difficult with encaustic, I have accomplished two sizeable paintings, *Easy Target* and *Company Missiles*, which are both over 4 feet wide. Working with encaustic paint can be a struggle and frustrating at times, but it is always a learning experience and I thoroughly enjoy it. I like what Jasper Johns says on this subject. Upon being asked if working with encaustic paint was easy or a struggle, Johns says, “I wouldn’t describe it as either extreme. One proceeds. One watches what happens. Things happen unexpectedly, some that I would be happy to live without. But it has been a pleasure to watch what happens.” (Mattera)

Some of my compositions are formed roughly in sketches and digital files but I have found that the thumbnail sketch is only a very loose guide for me. I created digital thumbnails for *Cereal Killers* and yet I find that I make many compositional decisions on the fly based on how the artwork is progressing. As I create, I gain knowledge from previous works. Visual elements that I find interesting in old paintings are added to new pieces. In this way my compositions communicate with one another and instruct me what to paint next.
My compositions generally focus on layers and how a new layer may affect an old layer and vice-versa. Images are chosen based upon a specific concept and added in sequence to the work. I work quickly to cover the panel with a layer of paint and then scrape words or drawings back into the wet medium. In between layers I may snap a digital photo of the work in progress and load that image into Photoshop. In Photoshop I will adjust colors and add new images or text, in order to calculate what my next step could be. This is where my eight years of experience as a graphic designer have helped me in my artistic process. When I am not sure of what to do, bringing my work into a digital environment allows me to do countless revisions to the composition without making any permanent changes to the physical work.

As I lay down layers of paint and collage elements I am aware of what I am covering up and what I am letting stay visible. I also intentionally cover up areas in order that I may uncover them later. I often use a rotary sander to distress a recent layer and to unearth the previous one. After I have sanded and revealed past layers I proceed to cover up areas with new paint or collage elements. Caio Fonsecaia is an artist with a process that is similar to the process I use when I paint with acrylics. His way of working as described by Karen Wilkin in *Art in America*, resonated with me.

“Fonsecas’s process could, in fact, be characterized not simply as “finding the painting,” but as creating an open-ended set of visual possibilities and then gradually destroying all of them but one, without entirely disguising the evidence of roads not taken… he adds—or possibly re-excavates—small elements, which function as accents, shifting the scale of the final image and adding complexity to the space, while he also often enriches the surface of the overpainting.” (Wilkin)
I also write or draw with various colors of permanent marker on my compositions. At some point in my creative process I found that permanent markers bleed through many layers of acrylic paint when a coat of water based polyurethane is applied. This evolved into a step in my creative process. I apply a coat of polyurethane after every third coat of acrylic paint or so. The ink doesn’t bleed through as the same color it was applied. I haven’t figured out this equation, but the ink colors are different depending on what color(s) of paint they are bleeding through and what color the original ink was. This step is always exciting to me. The polyurethane enhances the color in the work and also allows the permanent ink to bloom or bleed through from the previous layers. I use this process in many of my acrylic pieces such as *100 Percent Real* and *Cereal Killers*.

Each medium used was specific to the piece to evoke a feeling and convey a specific message. The thick encaustic of *Primal Cuts* helps us imagine the thick sludge of saturated fats that collect in our arteries and shortens our life span. *Candy Corroded* is created with enamel paint on the cold surface of plate steel. Various levels of holes are eaten through, much like the enamel of our teeth from corn syrup and sugars.

In this way of layering, concealing and revealing, I intend to create a work that is rich in depth in which a viewer can find new information each time they look at the piece.
“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.”

"In the centre of a spacious table rose a pastry as large as a church, flanked on the north by a quarter of cold veal, on the south by an enormous ham, on the east by a monumental pile of butter, and on the west by an enormous dish of artichokes, with a hot sauce."

Jean Antheleme Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste

There are many items that influence my work. Certainly other artists stimulate me and allow me to conceive new ideas and concepts. Other factors that inspire my work are information I gain from research of topics I am interested in. For this thesis show it was food, health and the media. I am always reading information that pertains to health regarding food, simply because I have children and I want my family to be healthy and safe. Commercials, advertisements, song lyrics, and art that my children make also provide a breeding ground of material for new ideas.

Several artists that power my work in regards to subject matter and painting style are: Caio Fonseca (as I mentioned in the last chapter), Bill Barminsky, Donald Baechler, Wayne Thiebaud and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Each artist produces works that affect my own work in different ways. Commercial media and advertisements also create visual stimulus for my art. Much of my work deals with how we are bombarded by advertisements for food that is unhealthy for us and that this bombardment effects our health and ultimately insults our intelligence. First I will speak about the artists that influence me.

Bill Barminski is a versatile artist who draws from popular culture to create visually complex paintings (Fig. 12). They function as cutting commentaries on our consumer culture by wittily appropriating images from advertising's past. Barminski's paintings
function as puzzles. They are riddles to be solved as the viewer tries to figure out the relationships betweens the words and the images on the canvas. This is what I strived to create with the series Cereal Killers and the digital pieces Satan Gave Me a Taco (Fig.13), Special Sauce (Fig.14), and Sic (Fig.15). Similar to Barinski’s work, my aim is a humorous attack on the mechanisms that propel the consumer food culture.

The Pop Artist Wayne Thiebaud is well known for his highly graphic and lush paintings of cakes, cookies and candy (Fig. 16). Art critic Thomas Hess wrote about Thiebaud’s work:

“Looking at these pounds of slabby New Taste Sensation, one hears the artist screaming at us from behind the paintings urging us to become hermits: to leave the new Gomorrah where layer cakes troop down air-conditioned shelving like cholesterol angels, to flee to the desert and eat locusts and pray for faith.” (Arnason)

This was the intent with Primal Cuts (Fig.17-19). I present cuts of bloody, unnaturally red, beef in an unflattering and unappetizing light, thus commenting on the adverse health affects of red meat.

Donald Baechler and Jean-Michel Basquiat lend me a hand with style. I enjoy the primal qualities of Basquiat (Fig.20), his rendering of pop culture and the addition of text to his work. Baechler creates very large-scale paintings that also have some visual elements of food (Fig.21). What I have gained from him is a sense of variation of size of visual elements. Baechler’s work has helped me maintain an interesting composition from a distance as well as having visual depth at a close proximity.

I gain other visual cues directly from the media. The visual elements and colors in my work are influenced by advertisements and commercials. Burger King’s 2005 commercial for a chicken sandwich that starred the pop singer Darius Rucker of Hootie and the Blowfish and model Brooke Burke is the commercial I credit for starting me in the direction for creating Food Fight. The painting that was directly influenced by this
commercial is titled *Pimp my Burger* (Fig.22) This commercial caught my attention for its overt sexual connotations within its visual and audio content. In the commercial Rucker sings a song to the melody of an old Harry McClintock tune entitled *Big Rock Candy Mountain*. The song lyrics themselves give much insight into the content of the commercial:

```
When my belly starts a-rumblin’
And I’m jonesin’ for a treat
I close my eyes for a big surprise
The Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch

I love the Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch
The breasts they grow on trees
And streams of bacon ranch dressing
Flow right up to your knees

There’s tumbleweeds of bacon
And cheddar paves the streets
Folks don’t diss front you ’cause you got the juice
There’s a train of ladies comin’ with a nice caboose
Never get in trouble, never need an excuse
The Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch

I love the Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch
No one tells you to behave
Your wildest fantasies come true
Dallas cheerleaders give you shaves
Red onions make you laugh instead
And french fries grow like weeds
You get to veg all day
All the lotto tickets pay
There’s a king who wants you to have it your way
That’s the Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch

Come ‘n get it…
```

The commercial uses sex to sell a chicken sandwich. Women are sucking ranch dressing off of their fingers, others are seductively pumping a hand pump rail car, while men are getting French fry erections (Fig.23) and shaves from the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders. Burger king is notorious for using sex to sell fast food. They have used scantily clad women riding mechanical bulls and Paris Hilton washing a car in a bikini to sell their
goods. I have seen ads for Uncle Ben’s Rice and for microwave brownies that also use sex to sell food. “Sex Sells” is the motto for anyone advertising anything it seems; I for one am tired of it and feel that it insults my intelligence. This commercial was my first authentic experience in understanding how often advertisers exploit sex to sell us food; this eventually led me to explore how advertisers sell food to children.

Advertising that is directed toward children is often misleading. Cartoon characters are used to sell unhealthy food to children who cannot discern the difference between food that is good for you and food that tastes good. Great Britain’s Food Standards Agency has put a ban on junk food commercials for this very reason. The Board supported a pre-9pm watershed on advertisements for products high in fat, salt or sugar. Too many characters loved by children are being used to promote foods high in fat, sugar and salt, leaving their parents feeling powerless to say no. This is why Britain is also working on restricting the use of these characters on junk food and sugary cereals and would like them to be used on healthy foods, like fruits and vegetables. (Sabbagh) This information helped me in formulating the concept for the *Cereal Killers* series.
ARTISTIC INTENT

The intent of my thesis show was to help the viewers gain an awareness of the ugly truth behind the catchy, colorful, and memorable advertisements they see on television. I use images from advertisements for sugary cereals and fast food to create an image that I think is what the advertisements would look like if they saw themselves in a truth mirror. The happy feelings of the original commercials or characters are replaced with versions of themselves that are distorted, dirty, sarcastic and sometimes laughable. I want to reveal the dirty truth behind the ads, truth that reveals the characters and commercials to be a hollow facade. When that facade is peeled away it reveals their secret, a secret that eats away our health. I think this intent is specifically evident in the Cereal Killers series and the Unhappy Meal series.

With the Unhappy Meal series the familiar hamburger icon we have all seen in the window of fast food joints becomes a giant, fanged, blood-drawing creature. The icon of the french fries is not greeting us with the usual friendly smile. Instead they are revealed to be angry and intending to do harm. The concept of exposing the deceitful tactics of the media is the underlying idea behind all the work presented in this thesis body of work.

Cereal Killers works in a similar fashion. I expose the characters to reveal the truth behind the facade of the characters. The Trix rabbit and Tucan Sam are recognizable as themselves but have a sordid quality to them. I want them to be exposed as the pushers of sugar, which is the “drug” of choice for children. Along with the sugar come the artificial colors and flavors too. The children are hooked in by the cartoon characters and instantly have to have their fix.
CONCLUSION

Many of us have a general idea that the food I represent in this thesis exhibition is bad for us. I want people to move away from just knowledge of the facts; I want them to act on them. Wisdom is acting on what we know to be true. My hope is that people learn something new about how advertising effects what we eat. I would like them to be aware of what the commercials and advertisements we see are really selling us, and ultimately act on that knowledge.

Anyone eating on the run or at restaurants has probably noticed that food portions have gotten larger. Some portions are called "super size," while others have simply grown in size and provide enough food for at least two people. With this growth have come increases in waistlines and body weight. The media also has distorted what we perceive as a normal portion of food. Foods in advertisements are usually larger than the healthy recommended portion of food that is recommended by the USDA food pyramid.

What I have learned in creating this body of work is that the media has a strong influence on what people eat and in affecting what foods people think are healthy. What I have seen is that many foods advertised on television are unhealthy. That is they contain more fat, sugar and overall calories than an average person should consume.

Artists throughout history have used the medium of painting and design to make social change and to make comments on social injustice. I believe art is a powerful medium and that it can provoke thought and change. I will continue my quest for socially responsible art and design and intend to instill that in others through teaching.
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I want to thank my wife and children for enduring with me my time as a graduate student. If it were not for the love and support of my wife Angeline I would not be the artist I am today. I owe her thanks also for telling me when my work was “something”.

Also I would like to acknowledge my immediate family for their support as well. They have always supported and encouraged me to do what I feel is right and to follow my passion for art and design.

Barb Walton is my major professor and has assisted me in finding a voice for my work as well as being very helpful in guiding me through the graduate program process. Even while she was preparing her own work for tenure she has been patient and helpful in coaching me through the final semesters of my graduate work.

The dedicated faculty who served on my graduate committee also deserves much credit. I would like to recognize April Katz, Anson Call and Mimi Wagner for their service above and beyond the call of their regular duties as professors of art and design. I have received a large amount of good advice and insightful, constructive criticism from them all.

All of these individuals have helped me develop my work into what it is today. I hope to return the guidance and support they have given me through my service to others in teaching art and design.
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Sabbagh, Dan, Junkfood Ads Banned to Beat Child Obesity, Times Online, Nov. 18, 2006.


APPENDIX: SELECTED WORKS
Figure 1

Series: Candy Corroded
Title: Lemon Drop © 2006
Enamel on plate steel. 24”x24”
Figure 2

Series: Candy Corroded
Title: Live Saver © 2006
Enamel on plate steel. 24”x24”
Figure 3

Series: Candy Corroded
Title: Tic Tac © 2006
Enamel on plate steel. 24”x24”
Figure 4

Series: Candy Corroded
Title: Red Hot © 2006
Enamel on plate steel. 24”x24”
Figure 5

Series: Cereal Killers
Title: Frankenfood © 2006
Acrylic, enamel and collage on plywood subfloor. 42”x48”
Figure 6

Series: Cereal Killers
Title: Froot Noose © 2006
Acrylic, enamel and collage on plywood subfloor. 42”x48”
Figure 7
Series: Cereal Killers
Title: Great. © 2006
Acrylic, enamel and collage on plywood subfloor. 42”x48”
Figure 8

Series: Cereal Killers
Title: It’s Tricky © 2006
Acrylic, enamel and collage on plywood subfloor. 42”x48”
Figure 9

Series: Unhappy Meal
Title: Fish Bomb © 2006
Digital Print. 12”x12”
Figure 10
Series: Unhappy Meal
Title: Mean Burger © 2006
Cut Vinyl. 48”x48”
Figure 11

Series: Unhappy Meal
Title: Mad Fries © 2006
Digital Print. 12”x12”
Figure 12

Works by Bill Barmins키
Figure 13

Title: Satan Gave Me a Taco © 2006
Digital Print. 24”x24”
Figure 14

Title: Special Sauce © 2006
Digital Print. 24”x24”
Figure 15

Title: Sic © 2006
Digital Print. 24”x24”
Figure 16

Wayne Thiebaud
Cakes
1963
Oil on canvas
60 x 72 in (152.4 x 182.9 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Figure 17

Series: Primal Cuts
Title: Brisket © 2006
Encaustic and rice paper on birch board. 24”x24”
Figure 18

Series: Primal Cuts
Title: Chuck © 2006
Encaustic and rice paper on birch board. 24”x24”
Figure 19

Series: Primal Cuts
Title: Rump © 2006
Encaustic and rice paper on birch board. 24”x24”
Figure 20
Jean Basquiat
Mitchell Crew 1983
Figure 21

Donald Baechler
Red Sundae (The Blue Bowl). 1998
144”x144”
Private Collection, New York
Figure 22

Title: Pimp My Burger © 2005
Acrylic on Canvas. 24”x24”
Figure 23

Tendercrisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch Chicken Sandwich commercial. Burger King, 2005