

Food in Print (transcript of Dream Lunch)

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Food has been used as substrates for prints for many years. Think of those early childhood memories of making potato prints at school, but why stop at potatoes? Think of Martin Creed's¹ printed broccolis! Of course, prints of food dominate 60s pop art prints, such as Andy Warhol soup cans², and the delightfully glossy words, Annie, poured from Maple Syrup by Ed Ruscha³ not to mention James Rosenquist's hedonistic lithographs of spaghetti⁴.

However, in this talk I would like to look at more personal depictions of food and drink: prints that I have made of feasting in company and alone, and consider how these images have changed in recent months of solitude since the start of the pandemic. The talk is divided into five parts. First I will talk about being hungry and how I was fed. Then I will talk of the tiny linocut print series which I am making, which, like sweets, are portable and snackable treats made to entertain. Thirdly I will talk of Chinese food culture. Next, I will go over this pandemic's effect on my food consumption. Finally I'd like to reflect on how printmaking has some parallels with cooking: in the gathering of ingredients with a goal in mind, requiring a transformative process, and that the end product is for daily enjoyment and arguably feeds the soul.

Back story

In 2016 I graduated from the Royal College of Art. The new shiny building was state of the art, but they'd forgotten to build a canteen and bar, and it was an hour's cycle ride from my house. I was happy to be at college, but always hungry, and my junk food supplies were depleted by my classmates. I remember hoping that, even though I had no idea what I was going to do, that the future would allow me to eat more. As if by magic, I got two phone calls out of the blue: one was from the Royal Academy Schools inviting me to be a fellow, and the second was from a luxury Chinese restaurant who wanted to commission a series of prints about feasting for the upcoming New Year celebrations.

RA Schools

The Royal Academy Schools is the oldest art school in the UK: over 250 years old, with some 40 students in total plus staff. Sephy, the chef, and her husband John, created amazing lunches that built the emotional foundations for the family-like nature of the place. Daily we feasted: quarter of a duck, mountains of mash, cauliflowers sliced in half like trees, hand-crafted burgers oozing juices and towering on pillows of artichoke and fennel, wild salads garnished with dill and homemade kimchi. The students plumpened, staff were relaxed and playful, collaborations were naturally forged over the lunch table. Sometimes in the afternoons, when students came to the print studio, I'd ask them how they were and they would reply, dreamily, oh yes, I'm good, wasn't lunch divine?

With this backdrop of sudden abundance, I started a series of two-colour prints charting daily absurdities and diaristic observations on the world, to send as postcards to my father who remains in a care home. Four years on and I'm still making work in this series. One of the first images I made is called, *More Meat Than I Can Eat*, which was about the size of the pork chop which I had been given earlier that day. It had been too much for me to finish, prompting me to feel both guilt and gratitude. Bigger than my face, the slab of meat resembled a map of Africa.

Food prompts childlike subversion: I found myself making a print called *Lick the Moon*, which shows me sticking my tongue out as if to touch the large lamps that adorned the centuries-old corridors. It was not intended to be so much of a rude gesture than about tasting the history and structure of tradition, sampling the flavour of the world which I'd been welcomed to.

¹ <https://cristearoberts.com/artists/207-martin-creed/>

² https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-campbells-soup-cans-1962/

³ <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/P.1966.06>

⁴ <https://www.phillips.com/detail/james-rosenquist/NY030116/303>

These prints are small, portable, postable and candy coloured. They measure 15 x 20 cm (6"x 8"). They are illustrative, they are easy to understand, thus, I argue, they are easily consumed, like candy. Unlike the grey work popularized by post-modern ironic stances on old-fashioned techniques, which could be compared to diet food, these colourful images illustrate life with a sweet, playful approach.

Chinese Food Culture

At the same time, I had a commission for a luxury restaurant based on the real tale of a historical Imperial feast. The first ruler of the Qing dynasty (1644 onwards), Emperor Kangxi, who had Manchurian heritage, sought to foster harmony with the Han population by inviting officials from both Manchu and Han to share in an amazing banquet. Reportedly 108 traditional dishes were served and the whole event lasted three days. I found myself researching food and feasting and décor in the Royal Academy schools library, and made a series of large screenprints that adorned the walls of the restaurant. *Feast 1–8*. The culmination of the project involved me taking my mum for a magnificent 8 course meal there to celebrate the New Year.

I should mention my cultural heritage: I am of Chinese descent but grew up in the UK. As far as I have experienced, in Chinese culture, food is a means of communication, sharing, soothing and celebration. In 2009 I curated an international print symposium in Chongqing, and saw first-hand the Qijiang farmer printmaking movement, which is a folk art movement that became popular in the 1980s. The prints are naive and colourful, full of joyous depictions of families harvesting, fishing, preparing food and feasting, with a nod to utopian ideas of collective farming and food security.

Indeed, the depiction of eating extends to mainstream Chinese culture too. There are a number of Chinese films whose plotlines revolve around the act of eating together. Jane Hu writes in her analysis of the film *The Farewell*, where she theorizes that the act of being fed is an indirect substitution for verbal communication.

[If food so often functions as a way for characters to express themselves by other means, then *The Farewell* plays on a particular stereotype about food and Chinese inexpressibility. In framing overfeeding as a substitute for undersaying, it joins a host of other "Chinese American films," such as *The Joy Luck Club*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, or any of Ang Lee's earlier Taiwanese-American indie films. To be sure, there aren't *that* many Chinese American movies to choose from, so the fact that the handful of them all repeatedly focus on scenes of eating—and, indeed, *feeding*—is worth examining. Jane Hu (2019)]

<https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/7/23/20706288/the-farewell-chinese-food>

Chongqing Chicken shows printmaking colleagues from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art sharing big pans of chicken stew one frosty night after the opening of a print show and symposium. Now that I reflect upon that symposium, I recall that we may well have spent about the same amount of time eating together as at the private view together.

My brother and his wife who live in Singapore take food extremely seriously: it is their passion and hobby to find new places to eat and ever more exciting things to sample. *Food Frenzy* depicts the madness and bacchanalia of eating delicious dim sum that takes all language away. *Mellow Café* shows the time they took me to a café that serves Cloud Coffee: a coffee with a ball of cotton candy suspended above; as the steam rises, the candy melts like a cloud of rain. IT was ironically too noisy to speak, and the coffee cups became sticky on the outside with melted sugar, but the look was divine. *Tea Time* shows the grand high tea we ate one afternoon, with my brother sister in law and their teddy bears. My cousins in Malaysia took me to breakfast food courts *YY Enterprise*, *Teh Tarik*, and showed me the freshness of homemade noodles and delicacies such as *Fried Carrot Cake* (a savoury dish that resembles fried polenta).

Eating Alone

But now I would like to turn to the current situation and the lost opportunities to gather and share from the same dish.

Sudden isolation due to Covid has changed how I eat. From cooking for friends, suddenly I had an abundance of food, eaten on my own, in the company of flowers, and finally, when despairing of the volume, thrown out with the garden waste. *2020* shows me in my kitchen pouring tea in solitude. The same teacup recurs in this print, *Pray to Blossom*. *Orchid Glow* shows me comfort eating a trifle from the container while hanging out

with an orchid that I'd recently rescued from the local block of flats. Now plants were my dinner companions and friends.

The initial scramble for supplies in the first lockdown led to supermarket panic shopping, bulk family portions, and a quest for comfort. *Belly of the Kitchen*, is about the time I cooked enough for six, then, without ceremony ate straight from the dish all alone, happy at the perfection of the flavor and sad no one was there to eat with me. It is a lamentation to excess and waste.

Enforced immobility reduced my appetite, and my constant hunger vanished. Without a television, and no access to pool and studio, food and the act of eating provided a welcome interruption to this new monotonous lifestyle.

A shot of whisky poured at 6 o'clock marked a transition between living room as office, and living room as cocktail lounge. The problem was when one shot became more than one, and when this was paired with the mock illusion of companionship on video calls. *I'm Doing Fine* shows me horizontal on the sofa, empty wine glass in hand.

Insulate With Cake is about the pacifying effect of food on our mental state. Food literally becomes part of us: and with the extra insulation, we have a thicker defence against the sting of horrible headlines. When we are under attack what more do we crave than an extra serving of our favourite things? For me, that includes some of the following: renkon (lotus root), fish, beetroot, avocado, whisky of course, popcorn, melon, chocolates, noodles...and of course, cake.

Slowly the lack of human contact started to make me question my ability to eat in company. What if all this time alone had resulted in a frozen ghost-like face? How would I be able to hold a dinner conversation? I was increasingly spending time in a silent world. In *Dream Lunch*: I drew the menu for a fantasy meal. It reads: "If you were here, I'd invite you for lunch. We would have mackerel, grilled quickly with crushed up peppercorns and cardamom and steamed rice, and for afters there would be a big bowl of frozen raspberries with ice-cream, and we would sit on the balcony and a million seconds would pass in a flash."

Food and print

I'd like to briefly explore my final point in this talk, and posit an intuitive hypothesis for how prints have crossed over into literal food value. For example, you may be familiar with Jin Joo Chae⁵, who used chocolate syrup to create screenprints of Choco Pies, a south Korean snack cake, commenting on the infamous black-market value of the snack in North Korea.

Printmaking techniques have even made their way into types of food production, for example, fancy cakes are sometimes topped by tuiles: thinly screen-printed sweetened wafers, and recent technology has allowed the rapid printing of selfies on the froth of cappuccinos⁶. You can, for a small sum, order an insert for your home toaster that increases the burn, causing a selective pattern to be created on your breakfast; popular demand is for portraits of Jesus or Elvis⁷. Food has literally entered the printed realm with 3D printed foods which are cooked with laser technology in a pop-up venture called Food Ink in London in 2016⁸.

The price of Hokusai's wave, arguably the most famous print in the history of the world, is always compared to the price of a double helping of soba noodles by print historians and popular press alike. What does this speak

⁵ <https://artinprint.org/review/jin-joo-chaе-the-choco-pie-ization-of-north-korea/>

⁶ <http://www.coffeemuseum.com/blog/2017/12/28/selfieccino-selfie-cappuccino/#:~:text=Selfieccino%20is%20the%20new%20trend,drawn%20on%20the%20foam%2C%20literally.&text=At%20'Tea%20Terrace'%2C%20the,digitize%20and%20reproduce%20the%20photo.>

⁷ <https://www.dailyedge.ie/burnt-impressions-selfie-toaster-1576961-Jul2014/>

⁸ <http://foodink.io/>

of, if not to the accessibility and popularity of print as a way of feeding our desire for beauty and narrative and humour in our day to day, in the same way as we seek entertainment in the things that we eat? It also speaks to the affordable price point of the printed material and its humble origins as a thing to be enjoyed in a personal context, in a homely setting, rather than something to be saved for and available to only a select few.

Of course, there are also parallels to be drawn in how we approach each print as a chef might do, with an idea of how each ingredient might act, but also knowing that the final outcome depends on forces which transform the ingredients into something so much more.

Without touch, removed from each other's company, what proxies do we have instead? How do we remain in remote contact? We are lucky: we have words and images, and the widening reach of digital platforms. Through instruction and poetry, observation and print we can feed each other's human needs for escapism and connection.

Thank you very much
