

ARTIST STATEMENT: EPICUREAN ENIGMA

I find the subject matter of food very compelling and an integral part of my life, as I enjoy cooking and preparing meals as well as studying contemporary topics on health, food, and nutrition. Food is an inevitable part of our lives as human beings. We rely on it to survive and provide nutrition and growth for our bodies, but there is more to food than simple nourishment. In our American culture, the subject of food and eating involves a myriad of personal choices and individual taste preferences. Many people in the world today are not able to always get food when they need it, and surprisingly, many people still die from hunger and malnutrition despite the fact that the world produces more than enough food to feed everyone on the planet. In contrast, most people in our society not only have the luxury of choosing foods that provide sustenance, but are also pleasurable, desirable, tantalizing and satisfying. Most of us live in a reality where a huge variety of food is overly abundant and available. With such excess, we are placed in a strange position of what I like to call an “Epicurean Enigma.” In our attempt to seek pleasure and enjoyment from the foods we eat, we are also overwhelmed by the variety of choices and perplexed by the sensuous qualities of food, causing a complex psychological relationship to develop with not only the eating of food, but also in seeing representations of it.

The primary focus of my work is food as complex objects, in the context of American culture. The goal of my paintings is to question our relationship with food and the choices we make associated with food in our world today, including what we choose to eat or *not* to eat, how we prepare and present it, and how we are tempted or seduced by food. My work is an examination of the problems that have developed with our bond with food, especially the

psychological and physiological issues that occur in seeking out the pleasure of food. I question why we are so drawn to certain foods as a society. My work mainly explores the psychology of food, including why we crave certain types of foods, why we enjoy “comfort” foods, and why we are disgusted or not enticed by other foods. I confront the viewer with feelings of temptations in my representations of brightly colored, larger than life, decadent, and comforting “junk” foods, much like what one might feel in the qualities and power the actual foods can have over us. In some ways, we are biologically geared to seek out “comfort” or “junk” foods, but the overabundance of food representation in the media amplifies the situation and has a deep influence on us. The paintings investigate my own personal “epicurean enigma,” reflecting on the types of foods that I grew up eating or not allowed to eat, and how I matured in the eating choices that I make now as an adult.

Firstly, food in our American society is something very unique. Our culture creates, promotes, and consumes foods like no other country on earth. An interesting psychological phenomenon is common among us. There is an underlying understanding that bigger is better in most arenas of our American lifestyle. This concept is especially true with food. Portion sizes of all sorts of foods have skyrocketed in recent years, connected to our new ability to be incredibly productive. With the industrialization of our food supply and the increasing use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), we are able to produce more quantity faster, cheaper, and often in a larger version. For example, strawberries on the shelves of supermarkets are no longer the dime-sized wild version, but mammoth, often golf ball-sized distortions. We have become trained to believe the latter is better in both taste and nutrition. We have also become accustomed to trying to get “more bang for our buck. “Not only do we have a mentality to seek out large versions of foods, but we also expect to get as much as we can for every dollar we spend. Often

quality is completely overlooked in place of size and quantity when Americans make decisions about the food they choose to buy and consume.

I explore these concepts of bigger is better and the oversized portions of our society in each of my paintings of food, painting them all on a larger-than-life scale. This deliberate decision in my work comments on our apparent need to buy and consume large versions and quantities of foods. In the painting *Banana Split*, the viewer is confronted with an ice cream dessert that is larger in scale than most of our actual human bodies. Banana splits are a wonderful example of American excess, made up of not only ice cream, but three different flavors of the sweet, cold treat, and also an abundance of add-ons and toppings. They are often inexpensive, and are about as filling as an entire meal. They are a prime example of plenty of quantity for the price.

These big foods and big portions have become more common in part because certain types of foods are cheaper to produce, and therefore create a larger profit margin for food corporations. Usually these sorts of foods are more calorie-dense, full of sugars, salt, and fat, which happen to be the kind that we as humans naturally crave the most. Such cravings and reactions are not simply irrational desires, but rather a part of an ingrained physiological drive. As Dr. David Kessler states, our bodies have evolved over thousands of millennia to seek out the most satisfying foods to our biology, namely foods that contain sugar, salt, and fat. The higher the concentration of these contents, the more we will be eager to attain them. “Powerful biological forces are at play that make us *want* something enough to pursue it and then make us feel momentarily better once we obtain it. The anticipation of reward provides motivation to act” (Kessler 10). Biologically, these foods are the ultimate reward because they trigger immediate satisfaction (as with salty or sugary foods) or can remain over time with us (as with fatty foods). This was very important when food was scarce, up until about the last century when our

American society became overly efficient at producing food. We now have a problem earlier humans could never have imagined, an overabundance of highly sugary, salty, fatty foods. We cannot simply turn off our biology that seeks out these foods.

The painting *All American Meal* comments on not only the large portion size but also on the type of food in this commonly eaten meal. Cheeseburgers, french fries, and sodas have become a symbol or cliché of our favorite meal. Nearly every person in our culture has dined on them at one point or another in our lives, whether it was the fast-food version, prepared at a restaurant or diner, or homemade on the grill. Often times, the portion size of this meal is massive, spilling over the plate or basket on which it is served. This hefty helping is a cheap to produce, calorie-dense set of foods, full of salt, sugar, and fat. While some health conscious individuals may choose not to eat this type of food and may even be disgusted by seeing this imagery on a gigantic scale, many of us eat this meal quite regularly, craving it or finding comfort in it. Since we are biologically geared to seek these types of foods, seeing an enormous image of them has almost a suggestive power to make one feel hungry.

The large-scale of the foods I paint also make it difficult to ignore their presence and impact on our psychological emotions. Food has an incredible connection to our psyche and can have an intense power of temptation. We choose foods that we enjoy because we have such a variety available in our culture. But we also tend to choose foods that are visually engaging, aesthetically appealing, eye-catching, or that draw us in by their bright colors, texture, or size and shape. Our past experiences with food and the memories we have of smells and tastes create certain reactions and cravings that vary from person to person. We connect feeling good with eating foods we enjoy because they satisfy us, if only temporarily. Many people have a weak spot for sweet or salty foods, and painting large representations of these types of foods cause different reactions than healthy foods. People have a variety of reactions when they see imagery

of sweets and “junk” foods. One feels differently about a donut or piece of chocolate cake than they do about a salad or a piece of bread.

Cravings are also unique to each individual. Food imagery plays upon our desires and yearnings to attain specific types of foods that we have had before in which we have found pleasure or comfort. The idea that food gives us pleasure creates an association that food is good and can bring happiness. The Greek philosopher Epicurus spoke of attaining moderate amounts of pleasure in life, and that pleasure is connected to good while pain is linked to evil. Too much pleasure can lead to pain, however. In other words, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. Too much reliance on pleasure and comfort coming from food has created an obesity epidemic in our society, along with a variety of eating disorders.

Since a wide range of foods are readily available and affordable for most Americans, as a nation we are overindulging and becoming more and more overweight. Much of the problem could be linked to a feeling of entitlement, that we can eat any type of food we desire. Author Michele Simon speaks in her book *Appetite for Profit* about the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF), an organization that lobbies for food companies and promotes that consumers have the right and freedom to choose to eat anything they enjoy. “The implication is that the interests of the people who advocate for sound nutrition policy are somehow diametrically opposed to everyone else's, and that anyone concerned about good nutrition is a killjoy with no interest in enjoying food. This taps into the popular view that cheeseburgers, fries, shakes, soda, and other standard junk foods are as American as apple pie, while eating healthfully is elitist, dull, and rather sappy” (Simon 49). Food companies do not necessarily make a profit on the healthiest foods for consumers, but rather the cheapest, most addictive and enjoyable foods. We often make food choices based on what we think we deserve or by what is popular with those around us. But many of us have a healthy relationship with food. Every one of us has a certain of “comfort”

food we desire. In fact, “comfort” foods mean something unique to us all, bringing to mind memories of foods we ate or prepared in a comfortable setting, with family, or that we know are filling or extra satisfying to our own tastes. For many of us, we find sweets to be considered these comfort foods. In both *Donut Served on a Silver Platter* and *Cupcake with Pink Frosting* I question the types of sweets we choose to eat. Donuts happen to be a comfort food of mine. The piece *Donut Served on a Silver Platter* emphasizes the luscious quality of the cake and frosting of a donut, and also the attractive nature of the brightly colored sprinkles. The appeal of the bright pink fluffy topping in *Cupcake with Pink Frosting* can hardly be ignored as well. The donut is half-eaten and a big bite has been taken from the cupcake, as if their temptation could not have been resisted. They rest on silver platters, attempting to raise their status to a higher level of sophistication.

The paintings *Plastic Cinnamon Rolls*, *Plastic Blueberry Muffins*, and *Plastic Donuts* similarly speak to some of us as forms of “comfort” food. When I see a package of cinnamon rolls with gooey icing in the supermarket, I have a hard time ignoring them because of the comfort and pleasure I remember from eating them in the past. My mother's homemade from scratch version are mostly what I crave, but I know that the packaged supermarket bakery kind are usually almost as good. This is an interesting idea to point out. We often assume that the store bought, packed in plastic variety of the foods will be as delicious and satisfying as the memory of that best comfort food we ate in the past. We have come to accept the pre-made, ready to buy types of foods will be as good in quality and value as anything we could prepare ourselves.

We not only react to comfort foods that are sweets, but also other types of “junk” foods. Many of us would rather have a crisp, salty snack than a rich, sugary treat. In both *Bag of Doritos* and *Bag of Potato Chips*, two types of snack foods spill forward tempting the viewer to

reach for a handful to satisfy a craving. As many of us know, it is easy to lose track of how much you have eaten as you pull them out of the bag one by one. How many of us actually count out the serving size and eat only that number of chips? In our minds, we enjoy the freedom of being able to grab and eat as many chips as we like, and stop when we feel satisfied, or even guilty.

Furthering the idea of how much food we should eat, I explore the theme of consumption in the series of *Empty Bowl* and *Empty Plate* paintings. Many of us have the belief in our heads that we must “clean our plates” and finish everything we were served, whether we are hungry for it or not. We act upon what we think we should do rather than what our body tells us it wants.

This idea, passed down through the generations most likely from the Depression era, was something our parents told us when we were children to encourage us to eat a healthy serving of our meal. But as adults now, we know that often what is on our plate can be much more than one serving for a normal adult, and by “cleaning our plates” we in fact are overdoing it. But many of us still do this, as if we will disappoint our mothers if we do not finish. The series of empty plates and bowls are quiet reminders of some sort of human presence interacting with food. While I wanted to maintain the beauty and intimacy of the place settings and emphasize consumption of a well-prepared meal, they are not as tempting or as bold as the untouched or even half-eaten large representations of foods. These pieces may appear somewhat unappealing because they are nearly empty with only left behind discarded remains. What causes us to leave a few last bites or scraps of food, while at other times nothing but tiny crumbs linger?

There are other psychological influences that cause us to consume the types and amounts of foods we eat as a society. We deal with a bombardment of food imagery on a daily basis. We are constantly exposed to the latest and greatest, with flashy colors and bold packaging. It is profound and at times overwhelming. The mass media markets food to our desires and cravings, and even our need for convenience and affordability. Food packaging often includes hyper-

realistic photography of the product, place, or way of life that appeals to our senses and our deeper desires to be happy (Hargreaves 14). Philosopher Jean Baudrillard warns of the problems that arise with the overabundance of hyper-realism in our society. Since we see so much of this overly real, almost surreal and fantastical imagery on a daily basis, we almost come to identify more with the reproduced visuals than with the actual objects themselves. We become tricked into believing these images are reality. Rarely are we encouraged to eat what is healthy and balanced, but rather to choose what is a juicier, sweeter, bigger, more mouth-watering version of some type of food we know and love, for a better deal than last week. Even the strong-willed have a hard time ignoring the constant repetition of food commercials, billboards, and advertisements in print or on the Internet, for both products to buy from a grocer and meals to try from fast food or restaurant chains. Driving to work, school, or daily activities, we often find ourselves passing by a string of restaurants and drive-thru windows with imagery pulling us in to try a new “triple mocha caramel latte” or “surf and turf feast.” It becomes hard to ignore and not think about food.

I explore our response to the barrage of food imagery through the way in which I present my food paintings. Many of them are cropped-in, up-close perspectives of ideally arranged foods served in or on fancy bowls or plates. A few of them are ironic, such as *Hot Dog & Cheetos a la Delph* because of the placement of such cheap, low quality foods on a high quality dish. My food paintings also mimic the staged, styled displays, much like food advertisements and billboards everywhere in our culture today. The observer may feel their mouth water or feel hunger pangs when viewing the paintings, similar to how food imagery in the media has almost trained us to respond to its advertisements.

Food was represented in different ways in the past. Throughout art history, it was imbedded with symbolism and meaning related to the culture of the time. While food has

become so much a part of our everyday imagery, it has only been so widely dispersed visually within the past of century. Before the invention of the printing press, food was not put into print the way in which it is now, and actual food was not as abundant for the average American.

Imagery of food is found in the history of fine art though. It was traditionally used in paintings in many ways. While still life was considered lower on the hierarchy of subject matter in painting, food played an important role in these compositions, displaying deep symbolism and meaning. And “higher” figurative art was often painted with scenes which involved food, whether as a feast or in preparation or in hunting and gathering. The beautifully rendered Dutch Master paintings of fruits and feasts have led me to consider the types of foods we hold in high regard in today's society as compared to the past. Johannes Vermeer, Pieter Clasz, and Abraham van Beijeren are three of these artists whose still life paintings have inspired my work. Other still life artists that have influenced my work include: Juan Sanchez Cotan and his painting *Still-life with Quince*; Giuseppe Arcimboldo and his food portraits of the seasons (such as *Summer*); Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's still life's such as *The Ray*; and Paul Cezanne and his many paintings of fruit still lifes (Bendiner 86, 91,211).

Interestingly, each of these artists dealt with foods that held symbolism and spoke of humanly desires. These still life paintings of the past often contained perishable foods such as fruits, vegetables, and meats, which made a statement on then current beliefs about the transience of life and the inevitability of death. Today it seems many of the processed foods we eat will never mold, decay, or lose their color brilliance, which comments on our more contemporary notions of placing value on youthful beauty, feeling as if we are immortal, and even ignoring death. Are we avoiding the inevitable and seeking only the immediate gratification that modern foods provide? Fruits, vegetables, and meats still obviously remain in our culture, but are overshadowed by bigger, fluffier, gooier, brighter, more attractive, often processed concoctions

and creations we eat and take for granted daily. This is the main reason I have chosen to focus on these types of foods in my work.

In a more contemporary context, several artists who use food as themes in their work have also inspired me. Originally I explored the work of Wayne Thiebaud. His cakes, pies, and pastries seemed to be a subject matter I was interested in painting (Cooper). While I appreciate his palette and beautiful use of pastel and arbitrary colors, I found that I was more interested in painting in a more realistic manner with bright colors. I then discovered California artist Nanda Palmieri. She paints highly realistic donuts, ice cream, and other sweets on a very large scale.

After creating a few reproductions of her work (*Cupcakes*, *Two Jelly Doughnuts III*, and *Constrained I*), I felt very comfortable with trying to paint homemade foods, sweets, and “junk foods” in a realistic approach. Evelyn Evelyth also influenced me with her food paintings. Her donuts display a flesh-like, eerie quality rather than a highly realistic rendering.

My process is driven by my intention to evoke a reaction in the viewer. By using oil paint and realistic representations of these foods, I am tempting the viewer, connecting them to the actual foods we desire and crave. I have chosen to use bold, bright colors in my palette with the intention of making the food objects appear almost hyper-real like advertisements. I set up actual displays of the foods I choose to paint and then photograph them and work from the reference photographs. The food is usually placed on fine china, silver platters, and fancy tablecloths in order to emphasize the importance we have placed on these types of foods as a society. I have chosen to paint on stretched canvases and panels, in order to raise this food to the level of fine art and connect to the tradition of food as used in still life paintings from art history.

In conclusion, I will continue to experiment with ways to execute the main goals of my concept within my paintings. The overabundance of food in our society creates an interesting relationship, causing some to struggle with an Epicurean enigma. “To one degree or another, the

question of what to have for dinner assails every omnivore, and always has. When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer, deciding what you *should* eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are liable to sicken or kill you. This is the omnivore's dilemma ...” (Pollan 3). We feel entitled as a society to consume whatever foods we want in large portions with quantity trumping quality. Cravings, temptation, and seduction often dominate our food choices, seeking Epicurean pleasure from food. I hope the viewer ponders and questions his or her own personal reactions to images of food when analyzing my work.

Bibliography

- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Hyper-realism of Simulation*. Originally published: 1979.
<http://www.launchprojects.com/IMAGES/Jean%20Baudrillard%20.pdf>
- Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations" from *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.166-184.
https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html
- Bendiner, Kenneth. *Food in Painting from the Renaissance to the Present*. Reaktion Books Ltd.: London, 2004.
- Cheney, Ian, Curt Ellis, and Aaron Woolf. *King Corn*. Videorecording. Bullfrog Films: Oley, PA, 2007.
- Cooper, Gene. *Wayne Thiebaud: Survey 1947-1976*. Phoenix Art Museum: Phoenix, 1976.
- Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille. *Still Life: A History*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: New York, 1998.
- Hargreaves, Ben. *Eat Me: Delicious, Desirable, Successful Food Packaging Design*. RotoVision SA: Switzerland, 2004.
- Kellner, Douglas. "Jean Baudrillard", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/ baudrillard/>
- Konstan, David, "Epicurus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/epicurus/>.
- Kessler, M.D., David A. *The End of Overeating*. Rodale, Inc.: New York, 2009. Palmieri, Nanda. Website: 2008. <http://www.nandapalmieri.com/>
- Pollan, Michael. *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. The Penguin Press: New York, 2006.
- Salinsky, Eileen and Wakina Scott. *Obesity in America: A Growing Threat*. National Health Policy Forum. The George Washington University: Washington, D.C., July 11, 2003.
http://www.nhpf.org/library/background-papers/BP_Obesity_7-03.pdf
- Shapiro, Laura. *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*. The Penguin Group: New York, 2004.
- Simon, Michele. *Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines our Health and How to Fight Back*. Nation Books: New York, 2006.
- Yood, James. *Feasting: A Celebration of Food in Art, Paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago*. Universe: New York, 1992.

Creator: Beth Jacobson

Exhibition Name: Epicurean Enigma

"Deluxe Pizza". Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

"Blueberry Pancakes". Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches.

"Potato Chips". Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.

"Doritos". Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.

"Sprinkled Donut". Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

"Cheeseburger, French Fries, and Coke". Oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches.

"Assorted Snack Cakes". Oil on canvas, 22 x 24 inches.

"Frosted Cupcake". Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

"Frosted Cupcakes". Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

"Assorted Donuts". Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches.

"Blueberry Muffins". Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches.

"Cinnamon Rolls". Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches.

"Jelly Donuts (After Nanda Palmieri)". Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches.

"Frosted Jelly Donut (After Nanda Palmieri)". Oil on canvas, 19 x 19 inches.

"Cupcakes (After Nanda Palmieri)". Oil on canvas, 18 x 18 inches.

"Empty Bowl III (Tomato Soup)". Oil on canvas, 12 x 14 inches.

"Empty Plate II (Grilled Cheese)". Oil on canvas, 12 x 14 inches.

"Empty Bowl II (Chili)". Oil on canvas, 12 x 14 inches.

"Banana Split". Oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches.

"Hot Dog and Cheetos". Oil on canvas, 24 x 32 inches.







bnj



brj







by











Ingredients:
1/2 cup butter
1/2 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup white sugar
1/2 cup milk
1/2 cup vanilla extract
1/2 cup cinnamon
1/2 cup nutmeg
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup baking powder
1/2 cup salt
1/2 cup yeast
1/2 cup water
1/2 cup eggs
1/2 cup oil
1/2 cup honey
1/2 cup maple syrup
1/2 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup white sugar
1/2 cup milk
1/2 cup vanilla extract
1/2 cup cinnamon
1/2 cup nutmeg
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup baking powder
1/2 cup salt
1/2 cup yeast
1/2 cup water
1/2 cup eggs
1/2 cup oil
1/2 cup honey
1/2 cup maple syrup

bmy



brj













