

BOROONDARA  
ARTS



# DISH

TOWN HALL GALLERY  
WED 7 FEB – SAT 27 APR 2024

  
BOROONDARA



## BITES OF BELONGING: FOOD AS A LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

**Alana Seal, Town Hall Gallery Curator**

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The foods we consume are more than the act of eating or ingesting. What we eat is influenced by our experiences, values, where we live, our health; access, cost, taste, time. Will it make us happy? Will it make others happy? Food is both consumed and consuming, occupying our conscious and unconscious thoughts every day of our lives. 'DISH' investigates how what we eat is beyond mere sustenance and is intrinsic to who and why we are.

Food is often tasked with acting as a universal language transcending cultural and linguistic barriers to communicate history, values, and shared experience. Mechelle Bounpraseuth's ceramic sculptures dually reflect the Asian diaspora and reinforce a sense of belonging and continuity. Depictions of dishes, both familiar and othered, represent sources of comfort, validation and mediation of culture and connection while growing up in a white Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Food can convey choice and with any choice comes the opportunity to define ourselves against our social and physical environment. 'Value!' illuminates and celebrates the abundant food and technologies of Zena Cumpston's Barkandji people and, more broadly, south-eastern Aboriginal peoples. Cumpston explores the relationship between self-determination and food sovereignty for First Peoples, inviting viewers to "understand the importance and centrality of our traditional foodways for Country and culture".<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Willing's 'Linens' explores how our body plays host to food, medicine, and bacteria. What is welcomed in our mouths comes with ethical and psychological considerations.<sup>3</sup> Shapes and patterns across her work reference our choices: ones that keep our body healthy, satiate our desire, or help us through our lived environments.<sup>4</sup>



Whether collectively or individually, the freedom to evaluate and decide what is good for us serves as an expression of identity, empowerment, and autonomy. Retaining a sense of identity becomes a struggle in the wake of external influences. The harmful impacts of the bush foods industry and agricultural practices is a subject prevalent in Cumpston's work.<sup>5</sup> Callum Preston's monolithic structure 'Sign of the times' speaks to our increased inability to instill personal values through decisions, as small businesses are forced to compete with modern supermarket chains and fast-food giants offering affordability, variety, and convenience.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the ethical conflicts of choice, we can't help but draw on food to inform and communicate. 'It tastes like home' by Laetitia Olivier-Gargano presents the routine, ritual, and predictability found in all elements of life: the charming, satisfying, mundane, and off-putting.<sup>7</sup> Objects both created and collected offer familiar, playful

nodes to how food forms part of our domestic spaces, reflecting our external influences, lived experiences, and how we present our sense of self to others.

The comfort and consistency food gives us in our daily lives means it is the perfect object to imbue with deeply layered, socially understood meaning. For Bounpraseth, love was communicated by her parents through food and she recognises that love through making those same foods and flavours she grew up with the subject of her practice.<sup>8</sup> Food facilitates the opportunity to come together and connect; ChiliPhilly's playful food-inspired costumes evolved out of a desire to bridge relationships from unfamiliarity after moving to Melbourne.<sup>9</sup> Anxiety, too, can be felt in a desire to belong, many of Willing's laboriously hand-stitched compositions mirror dinner settings: alluding to the social pressures that comes with hosting others.<sup>10</sup>



Much of food's symbolic power comes down to its unique ability to cement memory through a multi-sensory experience. Memories are individual, but ChiliPhilly can rely on popcorn or ice cream to be recognisable, triggering a memory that draws people in with the promise of finding a connection through shared experience.<sup>11</sup> This reliance also permeates through Preston's nostalgic signs, indicating an unspoken but ubiquitous connection to others through shared meaning in something no longer part of our present.<sup>12</sup>

The artists in 'DISH' compel us to navigate our identities through our communities, decisions, environment, and connections. Through food, each artist evokes broader questions about society, memory, hospitality, and our natural world. Still, there is a degree of assurance in knowing we can find common ground in our identities through food: a means to belong regardless of who we are and how we came to be.

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1. Sophia Cai, "If you know, you know", exhibition catalogue, Mechelle Bounpraseuth: My parents didn't cross the Mekong River so I could shit in a hole, 14 April - 7 May 2022. <https://www.chalkhorse.com.au/exhibitions/my-parents-didnt-cross-the-mekong-river-so-i-could-shit-in-a-hole>.
  2. Zena Cumpston, email correspondence, 21 December 2023.
  3. Elizabeth Willing, "Forced Rhubarb", artist statement, Elizabeth Willing: Forced Rhubarb, 28 May - 18 June 2022. <https://tolarnogalleries.com/artists/elizabeth-willing/>.
  4. Elizabeth Willing, email correspondence, 24 October 2023.
  5. Zena Cumpston, email correspondence, 21 December 2023.
  6. Callum Preston, email correspondence, 18 December 2023.
  7. Laetitia Olivier-Gargano, email correspondence, 10 December 2023.
  8. Sophia Cai, "If you know, you know", 2022.
  9. ChilyPhilly, email correspondence, 8 December 2023.
  10. Elizabeth Willing, "Forced Rhubarb", 2022.
  11. ChilyPhilly, email correspondence, 8 December 2023.
  12. Callum Preston, email correspondence, 21 December 2023.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

### **EXHIBITION OPENING**

**Sat 10 Feb, 2–4pm**

**Free, bookings essential**

Join us for the official opening of 'DISH'.

### **EXHIBITION TOURS**

**Sat 10 Feb, 1–2pm**

**Sat 6 Apr, 2–3pm**

Join a curator-led tour of 'DISH' and gain a deeper understanding of the artworks on display.

### **KITCHEN ART: NATURAL INK MAKING**

**Tue 20 Feb, 6.30–8.30pm**

Discover the artistic potential in your kitchen cabinet by using everyday ingredients to create ink for painting with artist Chaco Kato.

Tickets \$60 / \$48 Conc

### **CINEMA SESSION**

**Wed 6 Mar, 6–8.30pm**

Join us for a screening of 'Ottolenghi and the Cakes of Versailles'.

All tickets \$10. This event has limited capacity.

### **DUMPLING DELICIOUSNESS**

**Sat 19 Mar, 6.30–8.30pm**

Learn sewing and finishing techniques in this hands-on textile workshop with artist and maker Sai-Wai-Foo.

Tickets \$60 / \$48 Conc

### **FOODIE TEA TOWEL DESIGN WORKSHOP**

**Sat 16 Apr, 6.30–8.30pm**

Create a functional work of art for your kitchen using pigment inks to design and decorate a tea towel with artist Miranda Sims.

Tickets \$60 / \$48 Conc



For more information and to make a booking visit:  
[www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/arts](http://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/arts)

## IMAGE CREDITS

### Cover

Mechelle Bounpraseuth, 'Bánh mì', 2022, glazed earthenware, 12 x 19 x 14cm, image courtesy of the artist and Chalk Horse.

### Inside Cover

Zena Cumpston, detail from 'Value! #1-10', 2023, linocut collage on Fabriano paper with kopi, artist's proof, 59.4 x 42cm, image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Christian Capurro.

### Essay

ChiliPhilly, 'Watermelon Hat', 2015, acrylic yarn, polyfill, dimensions variable, image courtesy of the artist.

Elizabeth Willing, 'Flower of beer', 2021, linen, cotton, thread, acrylic paint, 108 x 106cm, image courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries. Photograph by Chris Howlett.

### Public Programs

Laetitia Olivier-Gargano, detail from 'It tastes like home', 2023, polyurethane resin, polymer paint, varnish, polymer clay, ceramic dishes, snail shell, plastic bread tags, cicada, fly, moth, bark, peg, leaves, gecko, 60 x 60cm, image courtesy of the artist.

#### OPENING HOURS

Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm

Sat, 12–4pm

Closed public holidays

#### HAWTHORN ARTS CENTRE

360 Burwood Road,

Hawthorn, Victoria

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Town Hall Gallery is a member of the Public Galleries Association of Victoria. Town Hall Gallery participates in the Cultural Gifts Program.