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She's so sweet and so much more: the cookbook as artist's manual

Abstract:

Food, for me, has always been a primary alchemical medium. It connects us to kin, shapes identities and morphs our bodies as they intersect with other ecosystems. Food gives flesh to our existence. It can be beautiful, grotesque and is fundamentally visceral. It is for these reasons that I have been drawn to food in making art while exploring the shifting grounds of the myths we live by. I am interested in elevating our sensing body's voice since western culture has contributed much to its subjugation. We know this through critical discourse but perhaps more potent are our bodies memories and metaphors for living arising from home and hearth. Our pantries offer a palette of possibilities and cookbooks set guidelines for chemical transformations, guiding visual and sculptural presentation, appropriate social relations, spatial organization, connections to heritage and global location. Much of my research pivots around recipe books and food magazines because they are rich in 'narratives' for material metamorphosis along with performances of place and identity. In particular, I seek embodied qualities embedded in food symbolism – those unconscious experiences residing in our cells and stored there, because we have eaten. In this paper, I will discuss these dynamics through a body of photographic works, *She's so sweet*, where I explored motherhood and dilemmas of being a contemporary female with materials from the kitchen and pantry.

Biographical note:

Barbara Doran works as an artist and university lecturer. She was born in Wagga Wagga, Australia and grew up in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Her cross cultural beginnings cultivated an interest in food as an alchemical medium that connects us to kin, shapes identities and morphs our bodies as they intersect with other ecosystems. Many of her artworks have been stimulated by research into food and cooking especially in relation to the shifting grounds of global understandings. Barbara's work has been exhibited in several solo and group shows and selected for significant exhibitions including UNESCO's Bioethics and Art, Olive Cotton Award, Redlands Westpac Art Prize and the 'She' Award. Barbara has a MA in Environmental Planning and a PhD in Art.

Keywords:

Foodwriting – Art – Cookbooks – Materials – Methods



Fig. 1 Barbara Doran, *Vardy Doll*, photograph, 2006. Artist dressed in icing bodice, marshmallow necklace and armband, skirt decorated in whipped cream swirls and pink meringues. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2006 I made a body of photographic artwork titled *She's so sweet*. The works exemplify the multifaceted influence of food and cookbooks in my creative process. Many of my artworks feature relationships with food but this body of work embraced food – materially, technically and symbolically. *She's so sweet* is a series of rosy pink photographs exploring contemporary dilemmas around female identity. The series begins with a hybrid Dolly Varden¹/prom queen (performed by myself), dressed in a bodice of piped pink icing and a full skirt decorated in cream swirls. She features a beehive wig of melting fairy floss and meringues and is bejeweled in a necklace made of pink, love heart marshmallows with manicured 'jelly beans' nails (see Figs. 1, 2 & 3). Later our prom queen transforms into domestic goddess and career climber.



Fig. 2. Barbara Doran, *Yummy mummy*, photograph, 2006. Artist sports 'one piece' made of pink iced buds, marshmallows and a cap of pink and blue fairy floss and pink meringues. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3. Barbara Doran *Sweet cycle IV*, photograph, 2006. Artist consumes her costume. Courtesy of the artist.

At home, it is her *Udder delight* to cook up a storm of shiny, pink patty cakes in her apron made of multiple rubber gloves (apparatus of many a kitchen). In her public and economic role, we see her sporting a twin set made from pink chux cloths while clutching a handbag made of bacon (yes, she brings home the bacon)! The imagery harks back to the 60's prom queen and housewife while depicting the new 'evolved', 5 star energy rated woman who 'does it all'² – she cooks, cleans, works outside the home, and keeps herself looking good and connected to our kin (see Figs 4 & 5). These images are ponderables questioning how far have we come particularly in light of feminism. Is it about having it all? How much fun are we having? Was and is damned domesticity all that bad? In many ways, the works call for a revaluing of home and hearth, drawn from my own experiences in the kitchen.



Fig. 4. Barbara Doran, *An udder delight*, photograph, 2006. Artist as distained domestic goddess, shiny cup cakes, baby bottles and cleaner. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. Barbara Doran, *Bringing home the bacon*, photograph, 2006. Artist off to work in a pink Chux cloth 'two piece', couture clutch made of bacon rashers. Courtesy of the artist.

A brief word on my process – an EEEM

I consider my process to be an EEEM – an embodied ethnographic exploration of matter – and my artworks, as situated narrative responses to cultural stories that are personally, socially, ecologically and materially embedded³. Most artists are drawn to a particular medium and in some cases, several simultaneously. For me, the mediums that attract are narratively intertwined along with identity/ies and qualities of manifest energy. Similarly, attraction to a particular narrative is embodied in my own range of experience that channels my attention and explorations of relationships, histories, memories, sensations and scale. Because these dynamics are complex and multi-faceted I like to use materials that reach into these spaces by manipulating the familiar. What better medium is there than food for exploring our stories and the way they shape our embodiment?

I have always loved cooking. My mother often reminds me of my first significant expression of interest to be independent in the kitchen. I was five years old. The story goes, I asked to do some 'cooking'. My mother made a few suggestions and I responded by saying I knew how to cook. Since I was so certain of what and how I wanted to cook, my mother stood to the side, giving me space to carry out my 'vision'. I proceeded to half fill a small saucepan with cold water and then place a blob of butter and a teaspoon of sugar into the water. I stood on a stool, placed my mixture on the stovetop and watched intently, waiting for something to happen. After a few minutes, I was perplexed as to why nothing much had changed. My mother took this as an opportunity to re-introduce the idea of recipes and methods. It was the beginning of my interest in and understanding that cookbooks were indeed like magician's handbooks for alchemical transformations. My mother had a number of recipe books on hand but we opted for *The common sense cookery book* (first published in 1914) as my first guide into the world of cooking. Though at first it was

beyond my level of literacy, I would return to it for guidance in basic methods and food categorisations. In the interim, my mother sourced a children's cookbook (which I still have) – *Floury fingers* (Hinde 1962). It had pictures and clearly laid out methods, equipment and ingredient portions – features I still prefer, especially pictures! I made many small cakes and rock cakes feeling pleased that I had progressed from mud pies to something that really could be ingested and shared. It was not very long before I was looking to expand my repertoire, especially from a visual and sculptural perspective. At the back of *Floury fingers*⁴ was a small section on icing, cake decorations and marzipan fruit. Though the images were line drawings, a world of colour, sculptural possibility and festivity lured my imagination. My visualisations would be limited by ingredient availability but fostered by a cross cultural platter.

I grew up in Swaziland, a small, tribal country to the East of South Africa. Many ingredients were limited or unavailable. We only had powdered milk, there was no cream, no ice cream (only ice confectionary) and chocolate or cocoa was hard to come by. Though options were constrained, I encountered a wide range of foods and cooking traditions. Our community was made up a diverse mix of people from all over the world including Scandinavians, Americans, Dutch, British, Irish, Scottish, Indian and, obviously, the Swazi. There was a culture of sharing, much of which centred around food, recipes and cookbooks. There were two hero books – *The American woman's cookbook* (Berolzheimer 1939) and the *Joy of cooking* (JoC) (Rombauer & Rombauer Becker 1975). I remember being impressed by smorgasbords of new foods, especially those from the *American woman's cookbook* including caramelised peanuts, carrot cake, pumpkin pie and corn bread. I also tried black bread and pickled fish (at Norwegian friends), curries, samosas and pan masala (at Indian neighbours) and meat gravy, putu (maize porridge) with Swazis. I learnt that food involved far more than taste and filling our bellies. I learnt about differences in table and food etiquette, food as a marker of the sacred and profane⁵ (as, for example, for Swazis and Indians, much to my envy, eating with your right hand was acceptable while the left hand was designated for dirty work). Moreover, I became aware that the alchemical dynamics of food extended well beyond my elementary adventures at the stove and that they left their signatures in our bodies. The range of food cultures around me revealed how the foods we often eat systemically infuse our bodies, especially our scent. These early food experiences were the beginning of an enduring interest in food, people and their cultural practices. They were underpinned by a creative curiosity, a love of making and community gatherings (especially the performative and celebratory aspects).

There are two cookbooks that have influenced my creative expression since these early times – *Joy of cooking*, mentioned above, and the *Australian women's weekly* (AWW) *children's birthday cake book* (Blacker 1980). Books, like ingredients, were hard to come by in Swaziland. My mother has recounted her pleasure in finding a single copy of the *Joy of cooking* in the town bookshop. It seemed to me that our home food experiences became more interesting from then on. It wasn't long before I was literate enough to make use of this manual myself and, for my 18th birthday, I was given my own copy. I have been pondering this book's influence on my creative

skill development. I have been using it for so long now that its lessons have become implicit. Recently, I was helping my seven year old son's class make an artwork with modelling clay. In explaining how to tease the clay into form and texture I used pastry sculpting as an example. Memories of countless explorations in crafting and cooking dough and pastry began to arise. It occurred to me that my experiments – guided by the *JoC* (638–66) – in crafting and decorating pastry shells, tart lids and cookies were my training ground in sculpting techniques well before I ventured onto clay and other media. Furthermore, my experiments in pastry alone have honed an appreciation for methodical and empirically based attention to material behaviour and the significance of subtle variations that produce significant differences. My experiments in pastry continue and cookbooks such as *The Italian baker* (Field 1985) and *Tartine* (Prueitt & Robertson 2006) have expanded options even further. I particularly appreciate *Tartine's* approach because the recipes are intricately detailed. Directions on butter temperature and mixing techniques have resulted in my best pie shells yet.

Many artists use Mayer's *The artist's handbook on materials and techniques* (1957) as their entrée into exploring specific materials and methods. The *JoC* has been equally influential in my creative development. Throughout, my questions and interests in understanding food, cooking techniques and cultural traditions have referred to the *JoC* as a starting point. I have explored butchery techniques, methods for stuffing and binding flesh, the energy qualities of food (kilojoules and calories), preserving, the qualities of acids, salts and sugars, contrasted versions of similar cakes, icing techniques and table presentations. I have used recipes in salt baking crusts to make masks, used butchery and flesh binding techniques to make a dress from squids (see Fig 6) and table arrangements (especially those drawn from European traditions) to develop a still life layout (see Fig 7).



Fig. 6. Barbara Doran, *Squid dress*, photograph, 2003. Part of a group show at Ground Floor Gallery, Balmain, Sydney, where artists responded to the topic of 'food chains'. Here the artist models a dress made of squid, later fed to lurking seagulls. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig.6. Barbara Doran, *Saccharine pursuits*, photograph, 2007. Drawing on the traditions of still life and the era of enlightenment, this work explores relationships with sugar and the introduction of the cane toad in Queensland, Australia. Courtesy of the artist.

My creative responses (like most artists) derive from multiple sources. In the same way the *JoC* provided formative skills for my own practice and approach, so too did the *AWW* children's birthday cake book. Perhaps it was the way the (synthetically) colourful pictures extended my field of play, where toys, games and symbols of treats became merged with birthdays (that rite of passage marking our individual significance)? Perhaps it was inspiration derived from appropriating mass produced food products as they intersected with popular narratives of identity (be they fairy tales, story books, cartoons, toys and traditions) and infusing them with imagination? Whatever it was, this book has honed my engagement with food, festivity and popular culture⁶. One of my pastimes was to pour over the pictures, especially when a birthday was approaching. In later years, I have enjoyed other sources that extend upon this, including *Roald Dahl's revolting recipes* (1995), *Carl Warner's food landscapes* (2010) and Heston Blumenthal's *Fat duck* (2009) (see Figs 8 & 9).



Figs. 8. & 9. Barbara Doran, Creations from *Roald Dahl's revolting recipes* (1995), photographs, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 8. *Mr Beardface*: mashed potato, sausage, French fries, mushrooms, egg and olives.

Fig. 9 Barbara Doran *Mr Crocodile*: baguette covered in ricotta and pulverized spinach, frankfurts, hardboiled egg, olives, gherkins, almonds for teeth and a sliced ham for the tongue.

When we moved back to Australia, ingredient availability exploded my imagination. Trips to the supermarket became journeys in imagination. I still view supermarkets, food shops and fresh food markets as sites for material and conceptual stimulation. I have made direct reproductions from the *AWW children's birthday cake book*, but I find it more interesting to create my own – especially for my children. I often draw upon techniques such as colouring coconut, using jelly for water and various lollies or confectionary as sculptural detail. In fact, it was the discovery of pink, heart shaped marshmallows that stimulated *She's so sweet* (see figs 1, 2 & 3).

When making a sculptural cake, the substrate becomes important. It needs to hold structure when stacked, cut into shapes, joined with moist (cream or icing) or rigid (toothpicks, skewers or card) fixings and dressed on the surface. I have experimented with many different recipes but the little cookbook that was most helpful was inherited via my grandmother's community – *The corona cookbook* (1968), a compilation of several variations of local favourites (see Figs. 10 & 11). At first I thought it odd that a cookbook should offer the same recipe several times over with mild variations of ingredients and quantities. However, in searching for the perfect substrate cake, I settled upon Mrs L. Dorey's (of Broadwater) Butter cake (2) since it consistently performed well.



Figs. 10. & 11. Barbara Doran, Traditions in recipe sharing and comparing reflected in cake competitions at the Sydney Royal Easter Show 2007, photographs, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

While at university I made cakes for friends inspired by Picasso and the Dadaists. Later this morphed into catering at exhibition openings where colourful and sculptural presentations of platters and vividly coloured dips became participatory events. An initial source for toying with bright coloured vegetable dips was Rodin's *Middle Eastern food* (1974) infused with ideas drawn from food magazines.

However, inspiration for events as a kind of theatre was founded in another childhood experience. When I was ten, my family moved to the newly formed Zimbabwe. Our first months were spent at a colonial farm mansion belonging to some friends. Civil war had meant that the farm had been shut down for almost two decades. While the adults were occupied with restoring the overall functioning of the property (including

orchards and a large kitchen garden complete with a coffee tree), kids wandered free. The huge house was like a living museum. There were myriads of rooms and cupboards filled undisturbed remnants of the past. The house had clearly been designed to host parties and dinners. Apart from the elevated, wide verandas (with grills that could be put in place to stop drunk guests falling over the edge) and the dinner table equipped with a buzzer at the head, there was a huge kitchen with a parlour and pantry. Alongside the kitchen was a corridor accommodating several smaller rooms. My ventures into three of these rooms left an indelible impression of a heightened (and privileged) way of life full of spectacle, detailed traditions and specific symbolism. The first room housed an extensive collection of linens stored in plastic bags, still crisply starched. The second room was filled with several sets of crockery and shelves of tarnished silver including platters, serving dishes and goblets. The final room was filled with books. There were books on table and buffet layouts, dinning etiquette and a wall of cookbooks written in French. This experience unleashed a different engagement with food, one that was deeply imbued with history and a detailed language of aesthetics linked to performing identity, class and the ghosts of civil unrest. It was an experience mired in paradox – I could sense the high-spirited pleasure of entertaining and also the kind of subjugation it was founded upon. My inquiries turned to 'The World Authority Larousse Gastronomique: The Encyclopedia of Food, Wine & Cookery' (Montagne 1961). Here commenced a more penetrating exploration of food and cooking traditions from across the globe (see Figs. 12 & 13).



Figs. 12 & 13. Barbara Doran, From the exhibition *Elle à Donné* (2007) exploring food metaphors, coloniser values and environmental disturbance, photographs, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 12 *Consuming Passion*. Follows the tradition of painted portraits of landed gentry while examining the ironies of excessive consumption and the egg as a historic symbol as the seed of life.



Fig.13. Barbara Doran, *Hand maide*, photograph, 2007. A young, colonial girl looks off wistfully as she cradles the vestiges the wool and sheep consumption industries – extensions of man over nature, male over female and the quest to build civilised empires of which she is both servant for and perpetrator of. Courtesy of the artist.

While my academic studies pursued questions of culture, identity and environment, I always sought to ground them in material explorations. Cooking became a lens into history and the alchemy of ecosystems be they those that form our own body, flora and fauna or terrestrial systems at large. I became interested in the Chinese view of food as medicine, each food type having context specific and dynamic qualities that can foster or hinder homeostasis. I began to cook Chinese herbal soups and teas while listening to their register in my body (see, Beinfield & Korngold 1992). My interest in Asian cooking extended into the South East and across to India where David Thompson's cookbooks on Thai cuisine (1993, 2002) and Ranjit Rai's *Curry, curry, curry* (1990) enhanced my understanding of cooking traditions (especially curry pastes and spice mixes). I began to explore nutritional qualities in fresh fruits and vegetables while considering the way food trade had influenced cultural and environment shifts. While reading *A history of food* (Toussaint-Samat 1992), I used *Australasian ingredients* (Werle 1997) and the *Encyclopaedia of Asian food* (Solomon 1996) to extend my ability to identify and draw foods. As my knowledge of food trade and agricultural systems evolved, I became committed to supporting locally grown foods. My taste buds assured me that small-scale farming and local produce was superior while research in nutritional quality, health and degradation of the environment confirmed an internal logic to the slow food movement (Koch 1996, Bonar 1992, Schlosser 1996, Pollan 2009).

Other artists exploring and responding to our global engagement with food include Damien Hirst and Fiona Hall. Hirst's 2004 *Pharmacy* (a restaurant and installation) examines the ironies around food production, nutritionism and capitalist culture's embrace of medicalization and pharmaceuticals (Sotheby's 2004, Frank 2004). Hall, on the other hand, asks us to find biological connections with our foods and their cultural use. Her works consistently explore these themes, which are easily recognisable in *Cash crop* (1998) and *Biodata* (1994).



Figs. 14. 15 & 16. Projects developed by *Green is a beautiful colour*, founded on the principles of the Slow food movement, community participation, simplicity and freshness.

Depicted here, *A classy school lunch*: a collaboration between a public school, local chef (Jeremy Strode), regional farmers, the *Week of tastes*, *Sydney international food festival* and local businesses.
Barbara Doran, Photograph, Sydney, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

My explorations of gardening, agriculture, histories of trade and cultural transformations have taken a trajectory of their own but, insofar as cookbooks go, I became committed to an ethos of simplicity, seasonal freshness and seeking a solid knowledge of traditional approaches to growing, cooking and sharing food. In many respects, my artwork is expressed across two domains – a heightened and theatrical rendition of the zeitgeist (which includes *She's so sweet* and other exhibited bodies of work) and a participatory, community based approach celebrating the processes of growing, cooking and sharing food. My earlier days of catering for exhibition openings have shifted to community events. More recent initiatives have fallen under a collaborative venture: *Green is a beautiful colour*⁷, aiming to foster a love of the simple art of eating locally grown, fresh food (see figs. 14–19). Our approach is inspired by slow food advocates including Stephanie Alexander (2010) and Alice Waters (2007). Because growing, researching, creating and sharing food is inseparable from my embodied experiences, I will continue to explore the multiple valencies of food. Even when keeping it simple, I am overwhelmed by what I have yet to learn and there are many cookbooks laden with techniques and knowledge I have not even touched on.



Figs. 18 & 19. *Green is a beautiful colour* project: *Corn in the park*, a pop up community picnic in a local park featuring locally produced corn, bread and butter.

Fig 18. Doran and Moore, A flyer from the event, line drawing inspired by botanical drawings, graphics reminiscent of 'good old days', print, 2009. Courtesy of artists.

Fig. 19. Doran, *A happy little muncher, developing olfactory appreciation for fresh and simple food*, photograph, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Endnotes

1. See Cedro for an interesting history of the Dolly Varden cake.
2. The works were also stimulated by Haussegger (2005) who discusses the paradox and thresholds encountered by modern women as they encounter the myth of 'having it all'.
3. This process has been informed by Carolyn Ellis' work on autoethnography and David Abram's work finding the sensuous in ethnography.
4. I always liked the title; it acknowledged the tactility of cooking, which for an artist is one of the attributes that attracts you to a specific medium.
5. Anthropologists Geertz, Counihan, Kottak and sociologist Lupton, have contributed to dilating upon my conceptual understanding of food as a dynamic cultural medium embedded in meaning making and social ordering.

6. Toni Risson (2011) discusses the cultural significance of this cookbook. This paper clarified and added value to a process that I had failed to recognise due to its location within popular culture. Revaluing the domestic and secular are especially significant in contemporary urban societies for it offers us routes back to community, understandings of connectedness and a consciousness of our embodied and visceral selves.
7. See <http://greenisabeautifulcolour.com>

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