

Wild Oats Milkwood Gallery

Artists: Miina Hujala, Noemi McComber, Ellen Sampson, Dawn Woolley

4 May – 18 May 2013

Wild Oats is a collection of works by various artists centering on the theme of food, and the culture of eating in contemporary society, held in Milkwood Gallery, Cardiff. Miina Hujala, Noemi McComber, Ellen Sampson and Dawn Woolley are the contributing artists and their collective work features photography, sculpture, film and food. Dawn Woolley also curates.

Noemi McComber's work might be the first piece you see, a looming film projection over the top of the doorway to the next area of the gallery. 'Prise d'assault (Under Assault)' is McComber's humiliating film starring her in a ritualistic performance as she is repeatedly pelted with various food products whilst obediently sitting against a wall. The film is a test of endurance both for the viewer and for the star. It appears as a form of degrading punishment, invoking thoughts of stoning. McComber is commenting on over consumption and the handling of waste in modern society. The sense of force-feeding in the film from an entirely submissive person creates a feeling of greed but also guilt about it, representing an uncontrollable desire for consumption. Also, the wasted food used in the film reflects a very sedentary lifestyle.



Looking around the space you become aware of the rest of the work and Dawn Woolley's still life photographic work is very eye-catching. Three large photographs depict different shots of lavishly decadent and colourful confectionery foods, placed neatly on an equally colourful tablemat. Beautifully shot, in a displaying fashion, sumptuous, sensual and inviting, the images are designed to invoke desire in the viewer. On closer inspection of 'Celebrate', a mousse-like pink cake adorned with decorative white pieces, with a spoonful already taken out and temptingly placed in front of it, you make the shocking discovery that the decorative white pieces are actually human teeth, arranged neatly around the cake's edge. Taken aback

by this new aspect of the image, you must re-evaluate your feelings towards it. With the teeth placed in a circle around the pink cake, it now resembles a human mouth, and your initial desires to consume the object are quickly replaced by repulsion or fear, deterred away by this uncertain element and confused by the strange joust that would occur between mouths if you attempted to eat it. Moving on to Woolley's other two images, in a now more defensive mindset, you find they are equally splendid confections, similarly photographed in a displaying manner, but do not contain this same sinister aspect.



Woolley's work is very sensual and visual, but is reinforced by a very strong socio-historical background. Identifying developing connections and similarities between desires for food and desires for love and sex, she makes a valuable observation regarding social emancipation and gender politics. In consumerist society, advertising is present everywhere, and through the idealisation of social standing, such as having good wealth, beauty, class etc people strive for the ideal social status. Food is not absent from this competition, and Woolley draws a startling connection between the role of food in this system and the role of women. With many grand food advertising campaigns, juxtaposed with advertising for ideal bodily image, our consumerist behaviour becomes exchangeable in the race for social status. Thinness is seen as the bodily ideal in much of Western culture, and this visual aspect of our bodies is used to inform our social status to others. What we eat is part of our social identity. Women are used similarly in this dynamic, presented as desirable objects and part of a better social standing to possess, they can be seen as commodities just like food products. Woolley presents her food items in this way, decorative, extravagant and beautiful, as a reflection of the conditioned desires arising from this kind of subliminal influence, the reinforcement of consumerism. Her constructed items scratch the surface of a profound phenomenon, with deceptive visual appeal concealing a huge tome of cultural

conditioning. 'Celebrate' gruesomely symbolizes a cycle of consumption as the toothed cake of desire consumes you as you consume it.

Alongside her three photographs, Woolley also arranged a large grid of small Polaroid-like photos featuring small, vibrant and suggestive food items such as love heart sweets, lips sweets and other bright, alluring confectionery. She has also made several sculptures, cast models of bowls of love heart sweets or hula-hoops, and large, surreal tongues. All are cast in pure white, creating a sense of purity or perhaps sterility about them, they reflect the foods they model, but lacking the illustrious colours and impact, they have lost their appeal. Woolley exposes the empty and trained responses to such superficial aesthetics.

Miina Hujala's film 'Illallinen (The Dinner)', displayed on a small portable television, faces into the centre of the room, away from the entrance, it might be the last work you see but is equally strong. Around three minutes long, it follows two un-identified characters, one male, and one female as they prepare for dinner. Dressing and composing themselves sophisticatedly they head to the dinner table, sit and wait. The film examines the rituals of dining, coldly acted out by two automatons, looking at each longingly, seemingly longing for release, imprisoned by traditions. Ominously scored and dramatically shot, but remaining very simple, its large panning shots over furniture and dining rooms, cutlery and attire establish the theme and setting powerfully. The characters act out their choreographed roles, now purely for face value, keeping up appearances, not eating any food. After their ritual they leave promptly and appear startlingly in the next shot, sat staring at the camera covered in live snails. Impractical and bizarre, they now no longer understand their rituals and continue through habit, focused on visuals and visage. Snails being a popular delicacy of food around the world, they inform us of their social status, supported by their posh, wealthy surroundings, these are two successful socialites, but no longer sentient, feeling or rational. The film strongly reflects Woolley's themes of social status, form and emancipation and is highly thought provoking.



The show has also been accompanied by several informal gatherings; the opening night featured a selection of 'food sculptures' created by Dawn Woolley and Ellen Sampson, similar in appearance and nature to Woolley's Photographs- vibrant, decadent and suggestive. Woolley has also held a talk about her work appropriately titled 'Food is Love', enlightening people about her artistic position, and two tea and cake socials to discuss the exhibition with the public in a more casual manner, all of which reiterate the social aspects of eating examined in the show.

Set in Milkwood's cosy exhibition space, the show has a level of intimacy to it, complementing several of the works' group-dining themes. Viewing the work you inevitably encroach others viewing space, and quickly learn to share the space respectfully, slotting in amongst each other as you might a table at a restaurant. The show plays with the rituals and experiences of eating and dining, and dissects your understanding of them expertly. *Wild Oats* is both a personal experience and cultural one.