

## A Taste of Home

Walls plastered with slices of cooked meats and floors carpeted with sliced bread! The interiors in Sian Bonnell's photographs confuse our concepts of what a home, food and interior design is by (literally) mixing the categories. To some extent her images can be seen to imitate the appearance of lifestyle magazines, magazines primarily aimed at the female consumer displaying beautiful homes in tasteful materials - homes full of designer furniture in an atmosphere of comfort and happiness. But Bonnell's interiors are a humorous deconstruction of that glossy world.

As well as being the title of one of Bonnell's photographic series, *house beautiful* is also the name of a British decorating magazine (which, true to the format, also deals with design and food). At the time of writing (February 2006) there is a web poll on *House Beautiful's* website, asking readers "Are you planning to improve your kitchen this year?" Thirty percent of respondents answered yes, but as many as 69% were planning to renovate their kitchen in one way or another. Imagine if they drew their inspiration from Bonnell. What a statement of social and gender politics that would be! Because Bonnell's images of homes, food and landscapes are more than absurd pieces of fun. They represent critical reflections on the spaces we inhabit, from the domesticity of home to the natural landscape.

With Bonnell as your interior designer you'll get slices of sweating salami stuck to the tiles of your bathroom – a direct clash with our expectations of a clean, pleasant-smelling room for personal care and hygiene. But the occasionally repulsive combinations are neither coincidental nor solely motivated by the desire to shock. Bonnell is highly conscious of the texture, shape and consistence of the materials she employs. For example, the uniform stickiness of cooked meats is emphasised by her marching it up the stairs and in the placement of slices of bread on the floor she reminds us of bread's spongy softness - we imagine the unsteady walk across it. In another image from the same series (but not in this exhibition) Bonnell has made mats for under the washbasin and around the toilet out of fried eggs. This

juxtaposition of the lavatory bowl and eggs – with the immediate association of treading on the eggs and breaking their yolks - is almost perverse.

A clear sense of materiality is something Sian Bonnell started to develop during her original training as a sculptor. She initially used photography to document her sculptures, but over time the use of photography became a means of expression in itself. Another artist who has worked with both photography and sculpture is Helen Chadwick, and one can perhaps sense her influence on Bonnell's work. Like Bonnell, Chadwick has also produced several works featuring food in unexpected contexts<sup>1</sup>. But whereas Chadwick used large quantities of raw meat Bonnell uses processed sliced meats, which can perhaps be seen as more 'domesticated'. Yet no matter how artificial sliced meats look they can still generate associations with the body and skin. When the walls of a room are covered with meat it is given a kind of skin or membrane, emphasising the fact that we are *inside* the house, in more ways than one. There is a reversal here: what is usually eaten by us has now swallowed us. This can also give the photographs a sense of unease or claustrophobia – the home as the worn-out housewife's nightmare?

Similarly the series *servicing suggestion* reminds us of home and food magazines – of the familiar cookbook aesthetic or tips on the packet on how to serve food: 'Serve with a garnish of fresh chopped herbs, a slice of freshly baked bread and a glass of chilled white wine.' But what do Bonnell's pictures tell us about food when it is served in a stapler or hung on a wall like a dishcloth? Is the food inedible? Underlined perhaps, by the fact that some of it has moved beyond the confines of the home to the pavement outside where a metonymic link exists between the tyres of the car in the background and the rubbery slices of meat. This is processed chicken roll and black pudding of the cheapest kind: the type of discount food that sells in shamelessly large quantities, given the relative affluence in our part of the world. But it is also the sort of food most readily available to those sections of the population who do

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<sup>1</sup> For example the series *Meat Abstract* (1989)

not have the resources to seek out or buy the fresh, healthy produce featured in cookbooks.

The images in *servicing suggestion* can also be seen as profane versions of the still life genre of art history, with Bonnell employing simple means to render the arrangements absurd. Her serving suggestions bring to mind the works by the art duo Fischli & Weiss, who around 1980 constructed small creatures, which they placed in narrative tableaux, out of sausages and cigarette stubs<sup>2</sup>. But whereas Fischli & Weiss generate a narrative, Bonnell's images seem more devoid of meaning - a more distanced registration. Here meaning is generated through the suggestive juxtaposition of apparently incompatible objects. Here one could also think of the famous works of the surrealist Meret Oppenheim: the fur-coated cup and the women's shoes with chicken frills<sup>3</sup>. Oppenheim transfers some of the codes of the table to items of clothing. Her works are powerful because they disrupt and confuse the usual categories of objects and their meanings. Bonnell emphasises this confusion and disruption of conventional codes by giving this body of work the overall title, *everyday dada*.

There is a sense of the fairy tale in plastering a house with food – just think of the witch's gingerbread house in Grimm's fairytale Hansel and Gretel. But in Bonnell's work the delicious gingerbread has been exchanged for unappetising cut meats.

Many of the foods used repeatedly in Bonnell's work reflect her nationality: toast, eggs, bacon, black pudding, etc. Such food can be seen to be as typically British as Stonehenge, and the ancient monument itself is one of the subjects in Bonnell's *scenic cookery* sequence, although here it is constructed from pieces of corned beef. Her other landscape images similarly mimic real places. The coast of Dorset, for example, is made of mashed potato and peas. Like her other works these images testify to Bonnell's sense of scale and perspective; through the act of photography, she evokes a sense of monumentality.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wurstserie* (1979)

<sup>3</sup> *Déjeuner en fourrure* and *Ma gouvernante* (both 1936)

Her small food sculptures are a humorous variation on the epic romantic landscape genre, but they can also be read as a gently subversive comment on the conversion of famous landmarks to virtual museums. Bonnell's *scenic cookery* is a personal take on sites that are often used as the locus of national sentiment and as symbols of shared national identity. Both Stonehenge and Durdle Door are magnets for tourists; the irony being that Durdle Door is copyright and forbidden to be photographed by the general public, Stonehenge is surrounded by wire fencing, for its own protection. Both are icons and are two of the most officially photographed sites in Britain. Bonnell, by choosing to construct and photograph her own versions of them, reveals this absurdity. In reconstructing the heritage sites that are claimed to represent traditional and eternal values, in materials as mundane and perishable as mashed potato and corned beef, she also brings the grandeur of history into a more social and humanistic perspective.

Even though Sian Bonnell's works refer in this way to British culture and nature they also have a transnational perspective. How does YOUR home taste? Are you happy with the flavour of Denmark today? Or would you like to improve your kitchen this year?

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