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# Pondering Pleasure

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PONDERING PLEASURE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Visual Arts

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by  
Nicole Morita  
May 2007

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Accepted by:  
David Detrich, Committee Chair  
Sydney Cross  
Dr. Andrea Feeser

## ABSTRACT

Food is a central component of our daily lives. The highly charged, fast-paced world of today is a place we all move quickly through, often stopping just in time to eat and then continue on our way. The significance of food in rituals helps us recognize and remember this pleasure.

My sculptural practice explores aspects of food in regards to pleasure, giving, and reception. Time, labor, and ritual are reflected in the techniques and processes used to manipulate various temporal and permanent materials. Senses of taste, touch and smell are incorporated the following sculptural works with the in an attempt to evoke an alternate sensory response from the viewer that challenges and questions everyday perceptions associated with food and culture.



## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. This thesis exists because of their love and support.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to my thesis committee, David Detrich, Sydney Cross, and Andrea Feeser for their patience and assistance. I would also like to thank my mom, Layne, Kalani, and Ryan for their encouragement, love and support.



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## PONDERING PLEASURE

Food is a central component of our daily lives. The highly charged, fast-paced world of today is a place we all move quickly through, often stopping just in time to eat and then continue on our way. The Slow Food movement, founded in 1989, was established in response to this change seen in society. At the foundation of the Slow Food philosophy is the notion of “giving the act of nourishing oneself the importance it deserves, (and) learning to take pleasure in the diversity of recipes and flavors” (Petrini xvii). The significance of food in rituals helps us recognize and remember this pleasure.

My sculptural practice explores aspects of food in regards to pleasure, giving, and reception. Time, labor, and ritual are reflected in the techniques and processes used to manipulate various temporal and permanent materials. Aesthetic and conceptual aspects of pleasure and giving, relating to food, manifest through the representations of labor and repetition in these installations. The use of multiple rather than singular objects references the fetishistic and compulsive act of production: making, giving, and receiving. Senses of taste, touch and smell are incorporated into this body of work with the hope of evoking an alternate sensory response from the viewer that challenges and questions everyday perceptions associated with food and culture.



## EXPERIENCING PLEASURE

The function of the work as installations rather than singular objects creates an engaging space for the viewer to consider aspects of pleasure and giving, relating to food. The repetition of elements that make up the works reference the act of the everyday ritual, a marking of time also seen in the daily act of preparing a meal. Folding boxes, sealing bags, or tying knots can be compared to the everyday acts of chopping, mixing, or frying. These actions of labor culminate in a larger work; whether it is an art object or a complete meal, the process is similar. Senses of taste, touch and smell are incorporated into this body of work with the hope of evoking an alternate sensory response from the viewer that will challenge everyday perceptions associated with food and culture.

In developing the theoretical basis of my work, I respond to critic Nicolas Bourriaud's methodology of *relational art* and *aesthetics*. In this context, the resulting work produced attempts to address how food is considered in everyday life, associations with the act of giving, and the experiencing of art on a multi-sensory level. I am asking the viewer to participate physically in the completion of the work, rather than only mentally and emotionally. An opportunity is presented to the viewer to interpret the work through his/her own experience and ultimately question the relationships between pleasure, the act of giving, and food.

Bourriaud defines relational art as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (113). In this context, the resulting work produced asks the following questions: How do we think about food in our everyday lives? What are our associations with the acts of giving and receiving? Can we consume a work of art on a multi-sensory level? Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as a “theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt” (112). My goal is to encourage the viewer to consider and perhaps take part in the participatory aspect which exists in the work: where the viewer may choose to physically complete a piece by literally taking something away, eating, or baking something with provided ingredients.

Although Bourriaud posits that ultimately relational art is about the experience created by an object or installation, I feel that my work begins to divert from this philosophy slightly. In essence, I would not define my mode of operation specifically as a relational artist because the objects produced in these installations are significant as objects. In this vein, my approach to producing art differs from artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija. Where Tiravanija creates a situation or experience in which a dialogue between artist and viewer may take place; my work emphasizes the significance of the object (food), and the labor surrounding this object as a catalyst for dialogue.

## PLEASURE IN RITUAL

Anthropologist Satsuki Kawano discusses modern Japanese ritual practices involving “the strategic creation of contexts by playing on relationships common in daily life” (115). In contemporary society, celebrations are connected to various traditions, where oftentimes the original reasons for those particular traditions are forgotten. Much of my work begins with direct references from Asian American cultural traditions. In deconstructing rituals relating to gift giving, holiday traditions and religious practices, I also deconstruct the elements used in those rituals and incorporate them into the work. Simplifying and abstracting those elements enable me to create work that is transformed from its original context. This transformation provides an opportunity for the viewer to interpret the work through his/her own innate experience of food and memory.

Critic/curator Mary Jane Jacob discusses the relationship between spirituality and art as “powerful manifestations of interconnectedness, a (specifically key Buddhist) concept that we find an everyday expression of in popular knowledge of ecology” (*Buddha* 168). *Making Wishes* is an installation based on labor and cultural traditions found in Japanese Shintoism, a religion that emphasizes a spiritual connection to the natural world through rituals of construction and contemplation. This work seeks for a realization of interconnections by addressing the notions of labor and repetition relating to the symbolic use of food in a historical and contemporary context in ceremonial traditions throughout the world.

Foods that were incorporated into this piece were cayenne pepper, chocolate, green tea, kalamata olives, mandarin oranges, pomegranate juice, and taro root. All of these foods have been utilized in ceremonial rituals in various cultures throughout the world. The food materials were printed onto the paper and dried, then torn into strips and folded in knots. The monofilament nets were constructed via traditional knotted netting techniques and dyed with synthetic dyes. The process of combining the materials of food, paper and monofilament reflects the significance of labor and repetition in food and ritual. As the repeated element of the knot can be seen in the nets and the paper, the emphasis on multiple units create an overwhelming sense of volume. The repetitive act of labor reflected in the knots of the paper and the nets can also be connected to the repetitive act of food: the gathering and preparing of ingredients and the act of cooking a meal. Through the installation, a “meditative path” is created for the viewer, encouraging an intimate, contemplative, pleasurable experience of visual texture, color and scent.

## PLEASURE OF GIVING

The relevance of gift-giving in Japanese American culture is an important custom, usually associated with various religious and cultural practices, such as New Year celebrations, birthdays, weddings, and funerals. The act of giving and receiving within the culture sometimes may be seen as obligatory and overwhelming. The act of gift-giving is passed down from generation to generation, oftentimes becoming a burden to younger generations (Johnson 296).

In an interview with John Miller, artist Mike Kelley discusses his ideas about handcrafted gifts and gift-giving, as the gift itself is a ritualized object that commodifies emotion, since actually what is being bought and sold is emotion. Handcrafted objects are more efficient in some ways since their making is infused with an intense, ritual energy (Barnes 116). By utilizing the handcrafted object as a gift it intensifies the act of giving it away. The amount of labor and the time it took to make the object empowers the object and increases its preciousness and value. *Pono Fruitlets* is a piece that deals with these acts of giving and receiving. In this work, the notion of the handcrafted gift is combined with the weight of the heavy burden of generational gift-giving.

*Pono Fruitlets* consists of one-thousand folded origami paper boxes, with each box containing a treat of pineapple candy. Viewers are invited to take a box away with them as they leave the gallery. The box, or symbol of the gift, is then broken up and the burden associated with the gift, or the emotional aspect of the

gift, is dissipated. As the viewer takes a box, he/she then physically completes the work. The boxes initially were arranged on a low, black table to reference an abstracted figure-like form. As the audience gradually removes boxes, the figure begins to visually break down.

The personal family narrative within this piece reflects the history of land originally belonging to my father's family. A tract of land originally owned by my father's family was sold to Hawaiian Canneries Company in 1913. During the plantation era in Hawaii both sides of my family worked for this cannery until its closing in 1960. Symbolism within the work references my Japanese and Hawaiian heritage: cultural values and the relationships of giving and receiving between the land, the body, and consumption.

The participatory aspect of this work speaks to other contemporary sculptural works including Gonzalez-Torres' candy spills and prints, as well as Kelley's knitted soft sculpture gifts. However, as the candy spills of Gonzalez Torres were entirely mass-produced, the boxes in *Pono Fruitlets* are handmade, like Kelley's objects, reflecting on the notion of the handcrafted object, and the labor infused in that object.

## PLEASURES OF COOKING AND EATING

“The most successful seasoning for what we eat is a good pinch of nostalgia. Ask anyone about the foods they grew up with and you will unleash a torrent of (mostly) happy memories.”

-Nigel Slater, *toast, the Story of a Boy's Hunger*

The installation titled *Cousins* is unique as it is the only work in the exhibition that does not include an edible (food) element. However, the construction of this work does incorporate material that shares food's temporal nature: latex and hair. Furthermore, this piece represents an edible, the potsticker, and references a personal narrative of food during a time of festive celebration in Japanese American culture in Hawaii.

Although the shape of the potsticker is Chinese in nature, called won ton, the hair embedded in the won ton skins is from myself and a first cousin, recording a ritual of making won ton for an annual New Year celebration. The won ton has a broader association relating to religious and cultural aspects of consumption of the body and an absorption of identities within Chinese and Japanese culture in Hawaii. This melding of ethnicities is reflected in the history and evolution of local food in Hawaii and can be traced back to the early 1800s, with the effects of Hawaiian colonization and immigration (Smith 591).

The won ton is arranged in a vertical format, referencing a spinal column, with the density of hair toward the middle of the piece, at about 5 feet and 2 inches. The area of density is placed within the height range of both myself and

my cousin. In operating on a more personal narrative, I have responded to the work of Lynne Yamamoto, who works in the vein of personal family narrative and experience as the inspiration for her installations. This personal narrative stems from a memory of working in the kitchen while we were in grade school: making won ton for New Years festivities began in the early morning. Won ton skins were filled with pork filling and sealed with water, folded, and set aside for frying. My mother and aunt prepared the hot oil and begin cooking the won ton in batches. The labor seemed endless as we continued to fill and fold the won ton.

This piece speaks about the labor of making food, the consumption of food, and a larger consumption of the body. During times of celebration, there is also sacrifice. Through the repetition of the won ton form and the physicality of the hair and latex, this piece attempts to reference a physicality of labor in the act of making food: reflecting the sacrifice of creation in order to achieve the pleasure of consumption.

## GUILTY PLEASURE

In *Lots Wants More*, two hundred fifty seersucker bags of sugar are installed as if they are rolling off of a conveyor belt, onto the floor. Enclosed in each one-pound bag of sugar is a letter and recipe for the viewer to create in his/her own home. The inspiration for this piece began after researching the average American consumption of sugar, and a brief history of processed packaged foods, convenience mixes, and textiles of the 1950s.

This piece functions on a broader level, referencing the consumption of sugar. This work also questions the notion of giving, and the pleasure involved in consuming. The sugar is packaged in a way that reflects a different kind of labor, where the mark of the hand is not immediately apparent as it is in the other works. The package contains a recipe and a little information about fix: what fix is, and sells the product to the viewer. This piece involved research of the recent history of processed foods and packaging, production, marketing, and the larger cultural context of the 1940s and 50s. The conceptual inspiration came from a broader historical and contemporary reference of food, rather than a more personal experience that the other works in this show originate from. Ultimately with this work, I am attempting to question notions of pleasure and consumption and what that means. *Pono Fruitlets* is a feel-good, sharing pleasure, while *Lots Wants More* is a darker, guilty pleasure.

When asked about his candy spills, artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres responded, “if I am trying to alter the system of distribution of an idea through an art practice, it seems imperative for me to go all the way with a piece and investigate new notions of placement, production, and originality” (Barnes 93). Both *Pono Fruitlets* and *Lots Wants More* attempts to question similar ways of investigating by offering the viewer to make a choice regarding the work and providing he/she with opportunities to actively participate in the work. This experiential aspect of the work enables the viewer to consider his/her own experiences with food.

## REFLECTING ON PLEASURE

We often take food for granted in our daily routines. With the hectic pace of daily living, eating for pleasure becomes a rare and perhaps more treasured moment. With my sculptural work, I aim to present aspects of food in regards to pleasure, giving, and reception. Although the modes in which I filter my ideas stem from Asian American references, my manipulation of materials and techniques employed opens the accessibility of the work to the viewer.

What I am attempting to capture can be expressed by a quote from the artist Mingwei Lee, who has also worked with both the concept and media of food. Lee asks if art be the manipulation of attention itself (*Buddha* 229). Through this manipulation of attention the hope is to bring a greater awareness to things that may transform our perceptions of experiencing everyday life. I believe that art has the potential to convey a greater awareness to the viewer, ultimately leading to this transformation in their perception. It is my hope that the work presented here may speak to this question regarding aspects of pleasure, giving, and reception that are associated with food, as well as create new experiences for the viewer.



IMAGES



1. *Making Wishes*, installation view.



2. *Making Wishes*, detail view.



3. *Pono Fruitlets*, installation view.



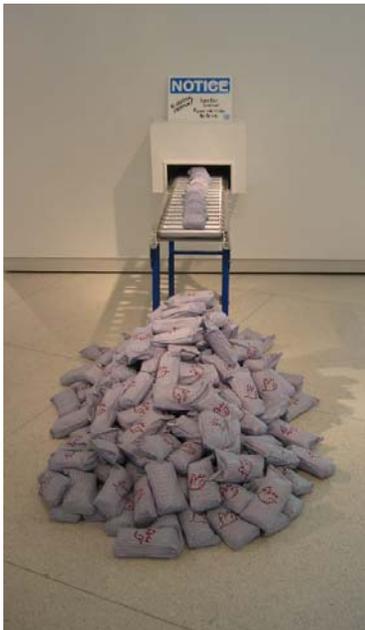
4. *Pono Fruitlets*, detail view.



5. *Cousins*, installation view.



6. *Cousins*, detail view.



7. *Lots Wants More*, installation view.



7. *Lots Wants More*, detail view.

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