



Jemma Egan interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 4 January 2016

Paul Luckraft: In recent work, including for this Invites show, you've chosen to focus on food – its production, packaging, presentation and promotion. Can you talk a little about the particular aspects of this broad topic?

Jemma Egan: I don't try to seek out food as a theme within my work, but it always comes up. I'm drawn to things that for me sit somewhere between real and fake, things that seem over-styled or unnecessary, or outlandish in a really banal or unspectacular way. And food as a broad topic just always seems to fit this description. Fast food companies especially fall over themselves to assure you that their food is 'real'.

For this reason I'm drawn to mainstream food advertising, particularly fast food brands. The production value present in the advertisements, the level of detail that's used to describe the contents of a cheap burger, the weird grammar that finds its way down from expensive 'farm-to-table' restaurants to the most corporate of fast food franchises – glazed, caramelised, free range, handmade, hand-roasted, hand-scooped. I just find that there is so much to work with in this area that speaks to larger questions of taste and ethics and aesthetics. I love the 'laboratory' aspect of fast food, the idea of people in white coats working in the crust innovation team at Pizza Hut.

Design seems to be present within all levels of fast food production – from conception in some boardroom to prototyping in a lab, through to marketing and presentation in the restaurant. I think it's really interesting when this concept of design is applied to food, particularly when the priority is to design the food to look great, or maybe even look gross, or be novel in some way rather than to necessarily taste good.

PL: You've mentioned elsewhere Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* as an influence, in which he offers essays identifying and analysing

cultural phenomena of the modern era, often seemingly banal or base things. Do you see your role as a visual artist as responding to our contemporary 'myths'?

JE: I do try to look at the more 'everyday' stuff of life with that level of detail, and to highlight or investigate objects and products and practices that I view as really telling of our moment. And the things to which I'm most drawn are usually banal on the one hand but then I also find them to be spectacular and illuminating on the other. These things are superficial in appearance, but then if you scratch beneath the surface they have a real depth to them. I feel that they are significant to right now and they might not exist in 5–10 years' time.

Mythologies is really concerned with class, and its relationship to taste. There's a section called 'Ornamental Cookery' which is about the food photography in *Elle* magazine. The basic idea is that the food pages in the magazine are for the eye alone, they are recipes that would not be feasible for the magazine's readers to actually cook, too good for them if you will. This makes me think of an earlier work that I made last year [*Don't get fresh with me*, 2015] where I used a supermarket vegetable misting machine.

My initial interest in these misting machines – 'dry ice theatre' as they were described in the *Yorkshire Post* – was based entirely on their aesthetic. I gasped when I saw them in my local Morrisons in Peckham, pushing mist out onto lettuces. And then a few weeks later they were gone. I looked into what happened, and I learnt that supposedly Morrisons got rid of them because they were seen to alienate the company's 'northern core customer' – in other words, they were perceived as simply too good for their customers, too 'upmarket'. They aroused suspicion in people. This was especially resonant with me because I'm from the north, and

I do think that informs the way I look at things. The misters alienated people just like me, apparently.

Eventually I was in touch with the company that made these machines, and it introduced this whole other aspect of the matter to think about. These were skilled and highly trained professional people who ran a family business in London that made these machines. And in this particular case their products were unsuitable because they worked too well. I ended up learning all this from what initially was a chance encounter with something that I thought was shiny and new. It's hard to explain, which is why I like to make work about things that spark this kind of interest for me.

PL: It sounds like you feel both part of the context you are drawing from and an observer and researcher. Although there is satire present there is emotional investment and connection too.

JE: I feel very part of the context. That's certainly my roots and very familiar to me. But I feel I can be critical too. The exhibition title *It means more to me than most people* is a line from one of the Dominos employees featured in the documentary *A Slice of Life*. He's talking about Dominos and about his job being important to him, life-saving almost. I do really connect with this type of attitude, and I also just identify with it in terms of my own ethic. I often feel that things in my life, and certainly the subjects within my own work, mean more to me than they would to others. I definitely don't ever mean to just poke fun at something or someone from a distance.

PL: Although humorous, your work also nods to complex questions around taste and class. What we consume is of course structured by our social position and expectations. Yet there is so much information out there these days about the correct way to live, or the lifestyle choices we should

pursue. And alongside this a huge part of our culture is also about personal pleasure, about 'treating yourself'.

JE: I think we live in a funny time with real polar opposites. So many gluten-free, lactose-free, organic, seasonal, vegan, raw food options, there's fine dining in many different forms – some healthy and some not. Alongside all this there is a whole other category of fast food or so-called 'frankenfoods' that exist too. Class and taste really do play a huge role in this ... and you're right that the information is out there in terms of healthy choices. But I think perhaps there's just a whole other set of information too with the internet and advertising. I've been taking photos of back-lit displays at stations for a while now, they're usually McDonald's or KFC and I love getting up close and seeing my own reflection which really throws out the scale. They kind of hover somewhere between tasty and gross when up close like that. I'm yet to experience images of salad like that.

PL: You use a variety of materials and processes in your pieces. Can you talk a bit about your approach to the formal questions of sculpture or video? Are there certain structures you utilise and repeat?

JE: My work has always been pretty diverse and I enjoy working like that. I do have recurring structures though. I'm particularly attracted to ersatz objects or products, things that are fake or inferior in some way. It makes material selection interesting and important. Like when the rubber I've used to make a sausage doesn't look unnaturally pink enough to look sufficiently 'fake', even though the colour of a 'real' hot dog is itself manufactured to meet consumer expectations.

I enjoy making work based on something that could be deemed ridiculous or irrelevant, where the end result can be presented in a very formal way. Part of the reason why I use different media and processes to make work relates

to this idea of the 'chance encounter' that I mentioned previously, where I'll set out to reproduce or represent the aesthetic or feeling that I get from something I've seen or consumed, be it a Dominos documentary or a hypnotic advertisement or some strangely positioned or proportioned object. Different encounters naturally lend themselves to different types of representation.

PL: Is stylistic coherence a question that interests you? I'm thinking about this in relation to both how you have continued aspects of recent projects for Invites, but adapted them, and how your research focus is a lot to do with packaging and brand identification.

JE: I feel that the elements within my work are all connected in some way, which certainly creates coherence. They're almost like chapters of a book or perhaps more like characters. They exist together and work off of each other but they are also important in their own right and able to stand alone. I treat objects in a way that isolates and emphasises their weird or spectacular or subliminal properties, or even just highlights the amount of work that goes into the stuff of everyday that often exists in the background.

For this reason I think there is a dream-like aura about many of my works, where the viewer's attention is focused on a new thing that is based on an object or experience that usually goes unnoticed in its 'natural' setting.

Reverse: Jemma Egan, *Porkies*, 2015, silicone rubber



It means more to me than most people

Artist's presentation
Sunday 6 March, 3pm

Jemma Egan (b. 1982, Liverpool, UK) completed an MA in Sculpture at The Royal College of Art in 2015 and BA in Fine Art in Liverpool in 2005. Solo projects include: *One I made Earlier*, Half A Dozen Projects, London, 2014; *Suh-peer-ee-er*, *Queenspecific, Toronto, 2013; *The Space Between Here and There*, VSVSVS, Toronto, 2011. Group shows include: *It was a dark and stormy night*, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester and 2 Queens, Leicester; *Finals*, Raw Art, Tel Aviv, curated by Nogah Davidson; *Faux Sho*, Assembly House, Leeds, all 2015. Upcoming projects include group show *Is it Heavy or Is it Light?*, Assembly Point, London, January 2016.

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