Food for Thought

A frank appraisal of the use of food as an art material in the work of The Art Guys

Robb Walsh, Food Critic, Houston Press

When they break for lunch at their studio, do The Art Guys ever eat their art materials? I mean, with all those Kraft Singles just lying around, surely they make a grilled cheese sandwich now and then, right? And how could anybody possibly make a sculpture out of Pringles potato chips without snacking on a few? So are the Art Guys paying homage to Andy Warhol, who must have ate a few cans of Campbell’s Cream of Tomato soup down at the Factory?

The fact that we aren’t sure exactly how much cream of tomato soup Warhol actually ate is a sad commentary on the state of American art writing. We know way too much about Warhol’s nitwit entourage and his wigs. But the connection between him and canned soup, his most famous subject matter, has gone completely unexplored.

Alas, foodstuff as it relates to art is a matter beyond the ken of America’s eating disorder-afflicted art press. That’s why somebody (I’m not sure who, but bless their heart whoever they are) was wise enough to hire me, a food critic, to write about The Art Guys’ new show, “Food for Thought.”

And what a show it is! Buffalo wings, hot dogs, potato chips, cheese slices, Corona beer—I can barely describe it without salivating. But don’t mistake my enthusiasm for naiveté. I like junk food, but I know that a lot of people make fun of it, especially your scrawny arty types. And it has not escaped my notice that the Art Guys are suspiciously skinny.
The possibility that there might be some Pop Art/Pop Tart irony going on here has certainly occurred to me. That’s why I traveled to the Art Guys’ studio and grilled them mercilessly about the use of food in their art.

How do the Art Guys really feel about Froot Loops, Kraft Singles, and Pringles? Do they actually eat these things? Or are they trying to make cruel jokes about mass-produced foods and the masses of fat-assed Americans who love them? What is the deeper meaning of art made out of convenience food?

It turns out—as it usually does when you ponder anything about the Art Guys—that the whole thing is a lot simpler than you thought it was. They started using Kraft Singles in their work because the Art Guys are cheap and lazy. And convenience foods are, well, convenient.

Before they discovered individually wrapped American cheese slices, they were making sculptures out of pencils and pennies and all sorts of inexpensive identical objects. But Kraft singles were so cheap, geometrical and such an alluring shade of cheddar yellow that The Art Guys hit on the idea of making a Pop Art grid out of them on a museum floor. (I hear some other art guy named Carl André did something like this before, but he wasn’t smart enough to use cheese.)

The brilliance of the Kraft Single concept reverberated around the globe, and it wasn’t lost on the Scottsdale Museum of Art either. When the museum, which actually owns the Art Guys composition Cheese Grid (1993), wants to display the piece, all they have to do is send somebody down to the grocery store to pick up a couple of packages of Kraft Singles. Using the drawing that the Art Guys left behind as a model, the museum workers then painstakingly recreate the exact placement of the cheese slices, and bingo! They are back in the Cheese Grid business.

Not surprisingly, everybody wasn’t quite as happy as the Scottsdale Museum about the food-as-art idea. Seeing a stack of perfectly good Pringles glued into the shape of a flower, or nearly stepping on some tasty cheese lying on the floor, made some people grumpy. “A morally offensive and infantile display,” a Houston Press art critic wrote about The Art Guys’ “Good and Plenty” show in 1994. “Do these ‘bad boys’ have food in such abundance that they can play with it…?”
Everybody knows you aren’t supposed to play with your food. And you aren’t supposed to waste it, either, because there are people starving in Fillintheblankistan. For Americans raised in the morality of the “clean-plate club,” wasting food is sacrilegious.

And yet The Art Guys continue to use food as an art material. Why? Why did Warhol’s soup can become famous? Why do modern chefs paint their plates with sauces and create sculptures out of vegetables? What’s the difference between Scott Tycer’s asparagus sculptures and The Art Guys Carrot Circle? Does art imitate food or… Never mind, this is making my head hurt.

“Food has no more or less meaning than any other material,” state The Art Guys in their official propaganda. Yeah, right.

In “Food for Thought,” which is nothing less than a “Greatest Hits” display of The Art Guys food-filled artworks, the two of them remind me of my younger siblings at the dinner table launching peas at me from teaspoons when mom and dad weren’t looking.

From my unique perspective as a food critic, I think I can put The Art Guys and their relationship to the pop cultural symbolism of mass-market comestibles in a new light. In a nutshell, these bratty boys are just itching for a food fight.