

The Sweet Life

Chandra DeBuse, Jana Evans
Jenny Gawronski and Courtney Murphy



A Review by Blair Schulman



Facing page: Chandra DeBuse. *Green Treat Server with Gold Spoon*. 2011. White stoneware. 6.5 x 9 x 7 in.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Above: Courtney Murphy. *Sugar and Creamer*. 2011. Earthenware. 6 x 4.5 x 4.5 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

LINEN NAPKINS, GOOD TABLE MANNERS AND PRETTY confectionary treats are all that is needed to complete the tableau found in *The Sweet Life*, an exhibition at Red Star Gallery in the Belger Art Center, Kansas City, Missouri, US. Featuring Chandra DeBuse, Jana Evans, Jenny Gawronski and Courtney Murphy; their elegant and simple designs present a surface imagery that is reminiscent of a polite society seemingly long gone. Aesthetic accomplishments achieved, these delicate objects also construe deeper social mores that are both subliminal and textural.

To get a further understanding of the meanings behind their works it is important to take a look back. One of the more notable transitional periods of design is the 1851 *Great Exhibition of London* when Britain was at peace and Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, wanted to put on display the wonders of industry and manufacturing from around the modern world. The Crystal Palace was erected, a vast multi-story building of cast iron and glass that epitomised the Industrial Revolution; the Exhibition presented more than 100,000 objects by more than 10,000 contributors that covered more than 10 miles of exhibition space and was viewed by more than six million visitors.

It was this moment in history that marked a departure from the handmade object to the mass-produced. In opposition to this tidal wave of modernisation, a small unnamed, but vocal group opposed the effects of industry on design and artistry. This group believed that mass production would eliminate the need and desire for hand-crafted items in daily life.

The livelihood of an apprentice and craftsmanship through years of study was threatened. And they were right. Over the decades, however, as modern design became the norm and industrialisation made everyday items readily available and more affordable to a greater number of people, a return to one-of-a-kind objects became the zeitgeist.

The attitudes associated with mass production, coupled with more leisure time stemming from the ease of industrialisation, became an unforeseen problem and were somewhat linked together. Dovetailed perfectly with the ease of food preparation over the decades, these attitudes presented a tertiary conundrum that fed directly into this culture. There are multiple medical and psychological studies that reconcile the balance between obesity and the items used to serve food.

A 2008 article in *Preventing Chronic Disease*, a periodical published by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), "Eating as an Automatic Behavior" by Deborah A Cohen, MD, MPH and Thomas Farley, MD, MPH, cite this concept as contributing to the growth of an obesity epidemic in Western culture. Automatic behaviours are those that "occur without awareness, are initiated without intention, tend to continue without control and operate efficiently or with little effort". The response



Jana Evans. *Teapot*. 2011. Porcelain. 10 x 7 x 6 in.
Image courtesy of the artist.

to this suggests the focus should revolve around reshaping the food environment. Hence, the importance of presentation is imperative in the behaviours of adults and the way that they consume. Factors such as visibility, salience and the ease of obtaining food, combined with a small, but impeccable diversity, tend to extract better behaviours than being handed food items in a paper sack or a Styrofoam container. By creating an ambience, one is reassured that every bite or sip counts. Artisans such as DeBuse, Evans, Gawronski and Murphy forge an understanding of this theory. An intimacy is created for the user.

A handling of their works adds to our understanding of the questions that each piece infers. A sensual physical pleasure is awakened within us, highlighting an awareness of proper etiquette that might be lost, but introduced to us again. We bring ourselves closer to its maker when utilising these objects. Desserts, teas, fruits and the like, along with the amounts we serve ourselves and the way they are consumed from these vessels are dictated by an elevation of experience.

Gawronski's pieces focus on the ritualistic acts of eating desserts that speak to this heightened

experience in consumption. Her filigree-style serving tray references some of Sevres' simpler porcelain creations from an era that speaks to more elaborate adornments. Its florid shape and clean design could easily be used as the basis for an inlay of an insanely elaborate 18th century ice cream cooler or some other beautiful, but useless, accoutrement. In another era, the lichen green colour and delicate presence would cry out for elaborate gold leafing. But in its present form, the pattern is derived from the shape itself and to decorate it further would remove the understated elegance and distract users from its composure. To quote an unknown artist from the Le Corbusier era "Modern decorative art is not decorated." As mentioned earlier, this primal connectivity between user and object imparts a behavioural compass on the amount of food one takes and the way it is eaten.

In the series that Murphy creates she also examines rituals involving collaborative cooking and sharing of food that posits collective memories. Murphy scratches into her clay to draw the images that have a feel of the 1930s when home life, by design and often circumstance, was more streamlined. Any hangover of Art Deco or Art Moderne is not observed here but,



Jenny Gawronski. *Double Saucer Cup and Dome Setting for Two*. 2011. Cone 6 stoneware. 34 x 10 x 8 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

instead, appears to be replaced by the simplicity of daily routine. The originality of each piece is accomplished with variation and its difference, however slight, becomes unique to the new owner when it leaves her studio. Familial values, with their mores and rituals, are incorporated once the pieces begin its life in a new environment.

DeBuse and Evans find similar linear compositions in the work of Josef Hoffmann, the 19th–20th century Austrian architect and designer of furniture and consumer goods. DeBuse naturally integrates her lines with more naturalistically realised shapes. Tree rings come to mind and the implied natural essence of the form imparts texture. Her functional pottery incorporates narrative imagery, pattern and form to elicit a sense of play. Its functionality reflects a pattern of make-believe as well. One can see elements that might reference story-telling; imagining 18th century romanticism of deep forests with unending mossy pathways leading to thatched-roofed cottages. Bouncing lines, candy-like colours and low-relief contribute to this sense of fantasy.

Jana Evans' works here are reminiscent of Jutta Sika, another Viennese artist similar to Hoffmann, who is remembered for stencilled decorations of *avant-garde* shapes. Her spare decoration presages the reductive trends of later modernist designs. Evans' tactile objects, on the other hand, lend themselves to some of these same values; easily discerned patterning that make themselves known right away, but appear hand-drawn. If Sika's decoration is bold and direct, Evans' designs are a reductive examination with their gentler, softer decoration.

The work discussed here has relationships to Western European ideas and American medical theories; however, it holds a relationship to Asian practices as well. In Japanese culture, the *Kaiseki* is a traditional meal consisting of several

courses and literally means 'stone in the bosom' at a time when Zen monks would ward off hunger by placing warm stones in the folds of their robes. Evolutionarily, the term has come to mean part of a tasting menu and refers to certain plates and servers that allow the diner to, almost subliminally, recognise tastes and flavours.

With these four artists, the works impart a condition to which one must react which is something that comes to the surface once we view or handle a piece as it is intended. There will come with this observation and handling an anticipation of a pleasant experience with how comforting or tasty a food will be even before it reaches our mouths. In that sense, the work from these four ceramists, in whatever small role they might nourish the larger eating habits of a culture, serves as a bridge to our senses and tastes. They bring their work to a modern age, acknowledging the tastes of our past in a meaningful way.

By prosaically showing us all facets, they provide an updated respect of how meaningful the simplicity of a service vessel can be to the user. The way it is placed in the home or set on the table provides everyone who encounters these pieces with a rich understanding of historical meaning, standing side by side with contemporary desires that are effective, useful and beautiful.

Based in Kansas City, Missouri, US, Blair Schulman is an art writer / critic and Editor of *Cupcakes in Regalia* (www.cupcakesinregalia.com). His writing has appeared in *Art Focus Oklahoma*, *Art Practical*, *Juxtapoz* and *The Kansas City Star*. Schulman also completed the 2012 Oklahoma Art Writing & Curatorial Fellowship, presented by the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition (OVAC) (www.blairschulman.com). The exhibition *The Sweet Life* was held from 3 February to 24 March, 2012.