

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

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By

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ABSTRACT

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We Are What We Eat uses processed food to comment on society's desire for instant gratification. Twinkies, Cheetos, and various manifestations of chicken function as symbols that reflect this desire as well as the food industry's approach to satisfying it.

Using food as the medium, the three works that comprise my thesis exhibition employ minimalist structures and industrial building materials that suggest and comment on the futuristic technology used by the food industry. The sometimes disturbing visual and olfactory results of my constructions convey a sense of futility by rendering the food inedible. I investigate consumer culture and its impact on the food industry by researching retail and advertising practices as well as factory development, leading me to an understanding of "plastic foods" and the role society plays in their development.

Introduction

I am an avid consumer, and I have established an intimate, firsthand relationship with the processed foods that comprise my thesis, *We Are What We Eat*. As an informed consumer, I observe food commerce from the inside, using minimalist and primitive forms and creating structures that consider a rapidly evolving world that yields odd confections. The structures include a towering, geometric wedge of Cheetos, a temple-like facade comprised of Twinkie bricks, and a set of children's blocks imbued with chicken parts.

Using food as the medium in unlikely constructions, I question the contemporary food industry and the "promise" of technology. Each piece is made from numerous elements that suggest the mass consumerism that informs the work. I observe extreme consumerism in the Costco store where I work, and Twinkies, Cheetos and chicken are the medium; the manufacture and consumption of these "snack foods" are the outcome of large-scale, rapid, and overly processed production. In addition, food advertising and packaging influence my aesthetic choices, and I replicate the shiny and artificial veneer of these commercial applications by infusing the Twinkies, Cheetos and chicken with plastic resin. The constructions I make function as satiric symbols of the future that are emblematic of an era. The title *We Are What We Eat* calls attention to the concept that what people consume reflects the kind of society in which they live.

Materials

Cheetos, Twinkies, and chicken are the primary resources used in this series. Each of these snack foods represent different aspects of the food industry and its place in consumer culture. The production of Cheetos offers an interesting and accurate account of a food item at the pinnacle of process; the product is so far removed from its original main ingredient, corn, that it hardly seems edible. A depression era snack, the production of Twinkies snack cakes uses cutting-edge factory technology to cheaply produce a uniform food item in mass quantities. The production of chicken changes with each technological innovation; one of the most highly processed meats, chicken is used in a vast array of food products. Lastly, resin is a key ingredient in my work and functions not only as a bonding agent, but also as a literal embodiment of the term “plastic.”

Created in 1948 by Charles Elmer Doolin, Cheetos have since expanded into one of the top selling products of Frito-Lay [1]. The process involved in making this food is kept vague at best, but Cheetos are made from a corn meal mixture extruded through a die using high heat and pressure [2]. The signature Cheetos flavor applied after the initial creation is closely guarded, and the end product is odd, rough, and artificially flavored (refer to figure 1). Cheetos products are available in flavors from “crunchy” to “flaming hot”, the latter being an unlikely product and the one I use in my work. “Flaming hot” Cheetos have negative cultural associations. An NPR story identified them as posing major health issues for grade school-age children; they are considered by some as an ethnic snack; and they have a notable reputation for being addictive [3].

Taking this information into consideration, I have developed a symbolic visual language using this seemingly innocuous snack food. Cheetos are “food” produced entirely by machinery, yielding both support and criticism from mainstream society. Although individual Cheetos resemble shriveled Styrofoam packing material, the desire for its burst of spice and MSG-enhanced flavor overshadows any sober consideration of Cheetos’ nutritional composition. The product’s success demonstrates society’s morbid demand for instant gratification through food and the food industry’s motivation for profit despite human health.

Much like Cheetos, Twinkies popularity stems from a technologically expanding food industry; the product has a rich history as a “model” industrial food. Created in 1930 by James Alexander Dewar, Twinkies were a depression era snack that were produced quickly and cheaply, setting the tone for the future of the food industry [4]. They have an elongated, eclair-like shape and an unnatural yellow color on top with a browned bottom. Twinkies contain 39 ingredients, most of which are chemically derived [9](refer to image 2), are produced in industrially large quantities, and have negative cultural associations (“Twinkies never go bad”: not true).

The company currently producing Twinkies, Hostess, filed for bankruptcy this year, attributing declining sales to a supposedly more health-conscious society [5]. However, I believe the company’s failing is a result of its inability to compete in the market it helped to create; the Hostess Twinkie is an icon of unbridled American consumerism. It has a machine-made finish and symbolizes the flaws inherent in an expanding industry.

While it differs from Cheetos and Twinkies because it begins as a natural, living entity, chicken is also in constant, high demand and is processed into a multitude of products. Consumption of fowl, including chicken and turkey, has increased dramatically since the 1970's. Chicken consumption rose from 40.2 pounds per person in 1970 to 86.5 pounds per person in 2007[6]. New technologies developed for the food industry yield new and more chicken products, including chicken nuggets (refer to image 3). Like most patty- or mush-based products, chicken nuggets come from what is left after most of the chicken's prime cuts have been removed, this remainder being crushed and squeezed through a series of sieves [7] (refer to image 4). The consequent mush is then subjugated to an unconfirmed and mysterious process, flavored, and then pressed into proprietary nugget forms[7]. Chicken nuggets are another product in which technology trivializes substance and integrity in this industrialized morbid cycle.

The resin I use to bind these "foods" into forms is comprised of a compound of synthetic chemicals that harden and create a durable plastic. Using resin in my work acknowledges Post Modernism and the industrialization of food production. I establish a connection to Post Modernism by using this contemporary material. Furthermore the resin functions as a reference to the excessive use of plastic to package processed foods. My application of resin yields impractical and artificial objects that suggest industrial processes and re-processes an already processed element.

Consumerism

I openly acknowledge that I am an avid consumer, and my thesis functions as a comment on my behaviors as much as considers those of society. The consumer is only one part of a cycle that results in rapidly mass-produced foods for profit and unprecedented industrial growth that has global impact and uses odd but effective advertising. Consumer culture in the United States is well established, Americans consuming an exorbitant amount of the world's resources. In 2011 the United States spent 2.314 trillion dollars on imports alone, making it the top importer of goods in the world [8]. In addition, a large amount of processed food developed in America is sold in foreign markets and has a noteworthy impact on global eating habits. Cheetos takes pride in the fact that it is sold in almost every nation and serves as a prime example of effective advertising to encourage consumerism. Rather than merely describe the shape and texture, Cheetos has created Chester Cheetah, a cartoon animal wearing sunglasses whose only relation to Cheetos is that he eats them and encourages others to do the same. The current website for Cheetos contains media from popular culture, serving as an entertaining distraction from the composition and nutritional value of a Cheeto.

Twinkies also has a mascot and uses nostalgia to entice consumers; advertisements for highly processed chicken products, including nuggets, use words like “golden” and “crispy” to convey sensory and savory glamour.

As an appreciated employee at Costco, I have seen first-hand the interaction between consumer and product. Costco Wholesale is a warehouse store that sells a variety of items in bulk that range from fruit, meat, frozen food, canned food, chips and

candy, to liquor, books, and electronics; each Costco store has a food court, pharmacy, photo lab, optical center, as well as other services and products. Costco sells the products I use in my work, and I witness people's savage appetite for these products while reading the hypocritical claims made by competing food companies. Both processed foods and "organic" foods sell equally well, and consumers buy into both ideologies that represent the same mass-produced institution: profit.

Primitive Forms and Post Modern Art

Primitive forms and Post Modern artists inspire *We Are What We Eat*. Early architecture and children's blocks as well as the work of artists Donald Judd and Richard Serra affect the structure of my work. Structure unifies these disparate influences: the social, economic, and architectural structures that society builds and the materials used to construct them.

I borrow from the Post Modern forms and highly processed materials of Richard Serra and Donald Judd. Like their work, mine uses these materials to create seemingly simple forms. However, instead of milled steel I used heavily processed foods and refine them into simple forms that pay homage to other artworks. My work serves as a literal link between food and industry.

My use of primitive forms refers to history and heritage (Temples and Skyscrapers) and draws from elementary shapes associated with innocence and naiveté. Not only is *Goliath* informed by Serra's work, but also it draws on monumental structures and Modernist architecture (refer to images 5 and 6). *The Golden Temple* looks to the ancient architecture of early Aztec temples (refer to image 7). Basic geometric forms inform *Utopia* which faithfully replicates children's wooden blocks. Each reference to structure is purposeful; by emulating basic and recognized structures, I connect the materials used to construct the work with my critique of consumerism. Creating monuments with Cheetos illustrates the culture of food production and its impact on society; stacked Twinkie bricks create a temple-like structure that conveys the iconic nature of this product as well as its fading power in the realm of industry.

Children's blocks made with chicken bring to mind the seeming ease with which the food industry transforms organic matter. Each manifestation of these foods and forms reveals structures that mirror those of society.

Process

The complex process I use yields forms that seem visually simple, yet it emphasizes the building materials' significance. All of the work uses resin and food. *Goliath* was cast in a silicone mold into which Flaming Hot Cheetos and industrial strength resin were poured. I fused the resulting stained glass-like, plastic panels with more resin, then polished and sealed the panels into the final structure (refer to image 8).

Using a similar process for *The Golden Temple*, I made a silicone mold of a brick. I packed Twinkies and poured industrial resin into the brick mold, but the resin reacted with the Twinkies' chemistry and created a frothy, white foam. I cut the hardened foam Twinkies into bricks and assembled them to build a structure (refer to image 9). For *Utopia*, I used resin that cures crystal clear. After making silicone molds of children's building blocks, I sealed the chicken products with clear acrylic spray paint in order to retard an adverse reaction to the resin. Afterwards, I packed the chicken products in crystal clear resin and used the blocks to build a fortress-like structure (refer to image 10).

Conclusion

My work functions as a marker of the time and hints at a possible future. I use minimal forms to suggest both a period in art history when a positive future through technology seemed possible and the consequent industrialization and mass production that same technology yielded. My thesis investigates the morbid beauty of a system that produces the materials from which I construct the work. While the history and process of Cheetos, Twinkies, and chicken informs my work, I view them as symbols of today's food industry. The resulting work uses the raw materials of industry to exaggerate their monumental effect on society and expose the gluttonous cycle that birthed them.

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Appendix

(Images)

Figure 1.



Photograph. *Spicysnackz.blogspot.com*. 07 Aug. 2011. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.

<<http://spicysnackz.blogspot.com/2011/08/snack-178-cheetos-flamin-hot-limon.html>>.



Figure 2

Photograph. *Http://buzzaurus.com*. 29 June 2011. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.

<<http://buzzaurus.com/food/twinkies-are-not-sold-in-the-uk/>>.



Figure 3

Photograph. -*Lifestyle*. -Lifestyle, 6 Oct. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.

<<http://www.good.is/post/chicken-nuggets-is-that-how-they-re-made-a-good-fact-check/>>.



Figure 4

Mechanically Separated Chicken. Photograph. *Huff Post Food.* Huffington Post, 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/04/mechanically-separated-meat-chicken-mcnugget-photo_n_749893.html>.



Figure 5

White, Joshua. *Richard Serra- Gegsoian London*. Photograph. Gegsoian London, London. *Joshua White Photography*. Joshua White Photography. Web. 17 Apr. 2012.

<<http://www.jwpictures.com/collections/current/>>.



Figure 6

Calgary Skyscrapers by RCH1@istockphoto.com. *Calgary Skyscrapers*. Photograph.

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<http://www.britsattheirbest.com/ingenious/ii_19th_century_1855.htm>.



Figure 7

The Temple of Kukulcán. Photograph. Chichén Itzá. *Travel Addicts.* Chris & Lina - “The Traveladdicts”. Web. 17 Apr. 2012.

<http://www.traveladdicts.connectfree.co.uk/Mexico/Mexico_ruins.htm>.



Figure 8

Goliath, California State University Northridge. Personal photograph by author. 2012.

(Example)



Figure 9

The Golden Temple, California State University Northridge. Personal photograph by author. 2012.



Figure 10

Utopia, California State University Northridge. Personal photograph by author. 2012.