

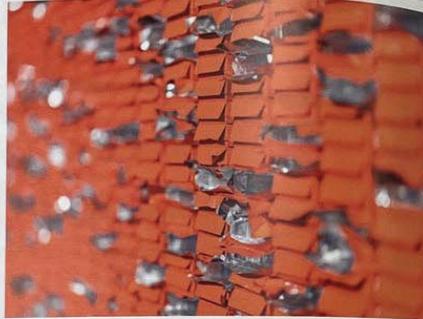
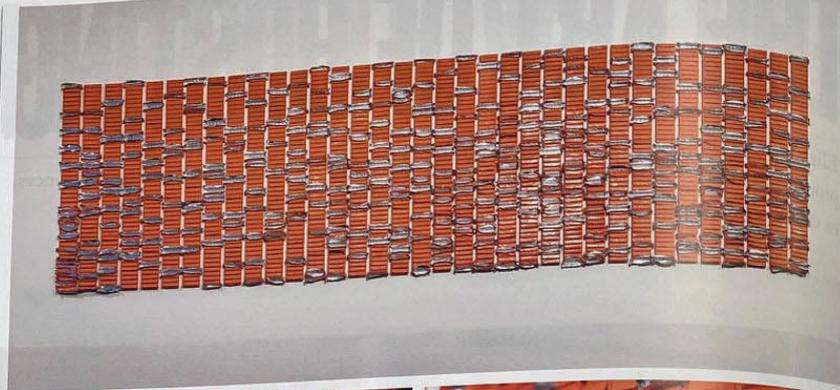
ELIZABETH WILLING

THE ART OF HOSTING

Elizabeth Willing uses food as both the material and subject for her objects and performances, prompting viewers to think about the experiences surrounding food.

FEATURE *by* HAMISH SAWYER





Elizabeth Willing's participatory artwork *Pick-me-up* (2019) does just that. On first glance the work appears to be a minimal painting with a metallic red surface; closer inspection reveals the painting is in fact a grid of individually wrapped Kinder chocolates. The audience is invited to open one of the wrappers and eat its contents. The work is consumed over the duration of the exhibition (although it rarely lasts that long), leaving only the torn foil wrappers.

There is a long and rich relationship between contemporary art and food, from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's notorious 1930 *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking* to Janine Antoni's gnawed chocolate and lard sculptures of the early 1990s, and even *Comedian*, Maurizio Cattelan's banana-and-duct-tape readymade that caused a sensation at Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2019.

Few artists, however, have demonstrated a sustained and meaningful engagement with food as Elizabeth Willing has. Since graduating from the Queensland University of Technology in 2009, the Brisbane-based artist has consistently used food as both material and subject for her interdisciplinary practice encompassing sculpture, drawing, collage, video and performance.

Willing describes her interest in food as being "through the mother, chef and

machine": drawing upon stories of her grandmother's cooking, reflecting the traditional, maternal role of nurturer and feeder within families. Conversely, the artist is fascinated by haute cuisine, still largely the domain of male chefs, which allows her to consider food trends and the performance of dining. As *Pick-me-up* demonstrates, Willing also works with the highly processed, artificial products of industrial food manufacture.

Research forms the backbone of Willing's practice. During 2019, the artist undertook a three-month residency at the Australian Wine Research Institute in Adelaide, facilitated by the Australian Network for Art & Technology; there she conducted a series of tests about the different colours that people associate with the aroma and flavour of six Australian shiraz wines. Willing translated the results into a series of abstract paintings, with concentric bands of colour of varying widths and intensities representing the data. The supports for the paintings are oak tables, a material traditionally used to make wine barrels. The tabletops can be detached from their legs and hung on the wall as paintings. The tables were designed to be collapsible, like an IKEA flat pack, reinforcing the functionality of many of Willing's objects.

Several recent projects extend Willing's ongoing investigation of food by

Top
Installation view
ELIZABETH WILLING
Pick-me-up, 2019
Bayside Gallery
Photo: Mark Ashkanasy

Top left and right
Installation views
ELIZABETH WILLING
Pick-me-up, 2019
The Block QUT

Previous page
ELIZABETH WILLING
Pick-me-up
(detail), 2019
Kinder chocolates
in wrappers
320 x 85 x 5 cm
Photo: Mark Ashkanasy

Opposite
Left to right, top to bottom
ELIZABETH WILLING
Through the Mother, 2019
hand-carved spotted
gum table featuring
eucalyptus, yarrow,
straw flower, lavender,
hydrangea and marijuana
120 x 120 x 70cm
Photos: Simon Woods

ELIZABETH WILLING
Untitled (undisclosed)
shiraz, 2019
size variable
Installation view
ELIZABETH WILLING
Through the Mother, 2019
UQ Art Museum
Photo: Simon Woods
Courtesy the artist
and Tolarno Galleries,
Melbourne

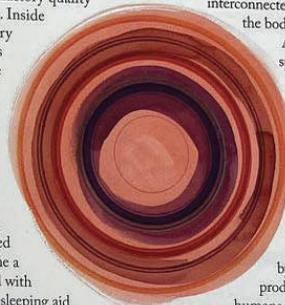


incorporating aspects of the artist's own biography. *Through the Mother*, Willing's 2019 exhibition at the University of Queensland (UQ) Art Museum, allowed the artist to reflect on her mother's use of herbs to treat anxiety. Visitors entered the exhibition through a narrow corridor, the walls covered in white patchouli-infused wax. Bouquets of herbs were suspended from the ceiling, contributing an olfactory quality to the installation. Inside the dimly lit gallery space, one wall was decorated with the pressed flowers of the St John's wort plant, commonly used as a mild antidepressant. Visitors were encouraged to sit at a wooden table, engraved with dried flowers, to consume a cup of tea blended with valerian, a natural sleeping aid.

As the recipient of the museum's inaugural window commission, Willing also covered the glass facade of the building with a large line drawing depicting medicinal plants including eucalyptus and marijuana. *Through the Mother* is difficult to describe in words or capture in images; in an age of Instagram art, Willing engages all of the senses, transforming the traditionally passive

relationship between artist, object and viewer.

Another project, *Pith*, presented at Caloundra Regional Gallery in late 2019, considered Willing's memories and experiences of food and agricultural production as a child growing up in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. For this exhibition, Willing produced a new series of objects and images that focused on the interconnected relationship between the body, land and food.



A floral wallpaper spanning the length of the gallery space, *Golden Lily (After William Morris)* (2019) depicted flowers of various agricultural plants grown within the Sunshine Coast region. These flowers have to be pollinated by bees in order to produce the fruit that

humans consume. Referencing the current decline of bee populations worldwide, Willing's wallpaper highlights the fragile interdependence of the human body, its food sources and the landscape.

Endless Host (2019) comprises a series of three tables crafted from the timber of mango, pecan and lily pilly trees, sourced and milled within the Sunshine Coast region. Their minimalist, cubic forms reference the work of artists such as



Bottom
 ELIZABETH WILLING
 Beeswax bowls (before
 lighting), served in UQ Art
 Museum concept dinner in
 collaboration with chef Josue
 Lopez, 2019
 beeswax and wick

ELIZABETH WILLING
 A Full Quarter, served in UQ
 Art Museum concept dinner
 in collaboration with chef
 Josue Lopez, 2019
 Photos: Simon Woods

Opposite
 Top to bottom
 Installation view
 ELIZABETH WILLING
 Endless host (no. 1, 2, and 3),
 2019 as part of *Pith*,
 Caloundra Regional Gallery

ELIZABETH WILLING
 Collections cast, 2019
 framed dark and milk
 chocolate casts
 60 x 60 x 3 cm
 Photos: Carl Warner
 Courtesy the artist
 and Tolarno Galleries,
 Melbourne

*“To activate something,
 make it alive, useful, edible,
 ephemeral, functional is for
 me a feminist act.”*



Sol LeWitt, although *Willing* also made a series of incisions on the inside of the table legs, based on traditional shortbread moulds. *Willing* has likened her carved impressions to hieroglyphs or archaeological finds that must be sought out, hidden from view on the inside of the table legs.

As well as being sculptures in their own right, the tables served as the setting for a performance, in the form of a concept dinner presented by *Willing* in collaboration with local chef Chris Hagan from The Long Apron restaurant at Spicers Clovelly Estate, Montville. *Willing's* concept meals are multisensory experiences, connecting the audience with artworks on display. Each course is conceived as a unique experience; the artist designs tableware, cutlery and napery, prompting participants to think about the ritual of dining.

Viewed together, the concept dinner and *Pith* exhibition encourage the audience to contemplate their own relationship with the food they eat, where it comes from and how their own eating habits impact on the land which produces it. *Willing* has adopted the term ‘hosting’ to articulate the way in which her objects are transformed through artist or audience intervention; and her concept meal performances, which are a form of hospitality.

Although informed by the aesthetic of male sculptors like LeWitt, *Willing's* work subverts their pure forms through interventions like the carvings in *Endless Host*, or the torn-foil remnants of *Pick-me-up*, compared to the neat candy stacks of the late Cuban artist Félix González-Torres, which are continually replenished. For *Willing*, the performative nature of her work makes it consciously, if not overtly, feminist. In December, she told *VULT*; “To activate something, make it alive, useful, edible, ephemeral, functional is for me a feminist act.”

In February 2020, *Willing* will exhibit work alongside artists including Janine Antoni and Andy Warhol at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland as part of *Amuse-bouche: The Taste of Art*, an acknowledgement of the artist's rising prominence and her singular commitment to exploring the intersection of food and visual art. **V**

Amuse Bouche. The Taste of Art opens at the Museum Tinguely, Basel, on February 19, 2020. Throughout February 2020 *Willing* will be Artist in Residence at the Museum of Brisbane.

Elizabeth *Willing* is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

tinguely.ch

museumofbrisbane.com.au

tolarnogalleries.com

