

# Elizabeth Willing

## The shelf life of food

Andrew Stephens

Elizabeth Willing  
Serviette Shirt dinner held at  
Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, 2015.  
Photo courtesy the artist

Opposite:  
Elizabeth Willing  
Untitled (toasted marshmallows), 2015  
Toasted marshmallow skins  
Photo: Greg Senu

In the story of *Hansel and Gretel* food is strategically deployed to invoke fears of abandonment and anxiety occasioned by the ultimate food-related terrors: starvation and cannibalism. Within the dark woods lurks the witch who devours juicy children, while at the forest's edge the father and stepmother trade parental responsibilities for better food security. At the centre of all this is the exquisite cottage made of bread, with a roof of cake and windows of sparkling sugar, which the desperate children hungrily tear off and devour in great chunks.

The carb-rich delights of the witch's cottage prefigure the seductions of Elizabeth Willing's work—but in her hands that charming, sugary enticement supports a more structural investigation into the materiality of industrially produced and manufactured food from the standpoint of more current urgencies around limitless consumption, obesity as a form of malnutrition in the reliance on nutrition-poor, synthetic foods and the implications that this has for the global food bowl. Her impressive oeuvre, across

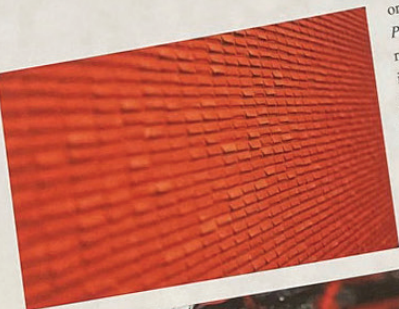
sculpture, installation and performance, gives viewers agency to observe and analyse their own indoctrination and consequent contribution to this industrial machine. Willing certainly has the qualification to do this, as she has been variously described as a cook, designer, engineer and scientist, driven by her curiosity to find the point at which food transforms from a fruit of nature into an industrial product. Like the ingredients of the infamous cottage, her work with marshmallows, chocolates, biscuits, royal icing and other snack foods—most notably, the more mass-produced varieties of cheese—is often used in bulk quantities. Her evidentiary and often multi-sensory research extends to the materiality of sound, colour, smell and texture.

Through residencies and placements with food-oriented scientists and other practitioners, Willing has also taken to the field of data science and the more techno-scientific fields of research to support her formal experiments. In her recent twelve-week residency at Adelaide's Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI) in partnership with the Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) she has, for instance, investigated yeast qualities, working with millipede "taint" absorbed during the winemaking process, and the "experience" of grapevines. From another point on the food-studies spectrum, pop-culture contributes to Willing's armoury (Nigella, celebrity chefs, food channels and TV shows, cookbooks and other dietary fads). All this is happening in a world currently beset by post-scarcity for many, food shortages for many more and anxiety around social disruption as the climate emergency is predicted to unfold and wreak havoc on us all.

With these urgencies in mind, nostalgia gives way to contemporary delusions of limitless consumption and availability, as I keep returning to the way Hansel and Gretel are carried away by their uncontrolled craving to the point where, as Bruno Bettelheim states in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975) they "think nothing of destroying what







should give shelter and safety." This is the double-spell that delights and repels us both in response to the story and Willing's own investigations into the shifting relationship between herself as the host and provider, and the audience as the guest or participant, brought on through sensory and as the psychological manipulation to fulfil but also destroy the work to invoke the logic of consumption.

Her works that employ food and food-related activities include shirts made from serviettes and patterned wallpapers featuring strawberries and macarons. The gallery wall as an invitation to on-the-spot consumption is featured in works presenting serial rows of biscuits, marshmallows

or chocolates (in *Goosebump* 2010, *Untitled*, 2017, and *Pick-me-up*, 2016). Like those torn-off chunks of the cottage reached with comparative ease or difficulty, these particular installations as well-established crowd favourites provide an immediate alert to consumption patterns. In a recent iteration of *Pick-me-up* (*Kinder*), at Melbourne's Bayside Gallery, as might be expected, children took chocolates from the bottom, adults from the top. Those removed were evenly spaced rather than clustered, as a strategy perhaps to avoid cross-contamination. The opened wrappers (still adhered to the wall) also left their mark as insatiable open mouths.

In similar "savory" constructions, the *Cheeto* snacks dangling on fairy-lights in *Cheeseburn* (2019) were also available to munch, while the non-interactive *Licks* (2019) consisted of "corn-worm" treats notably cemented together with Willing's own binding saliva. *Cheese Sunset* (2015) was made from unwrapped cheese slices—three varieties producing three colour tones—to form sheets that dried, curled and leaked oils, as they became hard and brittle.

As these formal experiments demonstrate, the industrially produced nature of many of Willing's materials further highlights how normalised we are to pre-packaged, ultra-sugared, ultra-salted, ultra-artificial ingredients that also support their disturbingly long shelf life, like the decade-old McDonald's hamburger which apparently remains in perfect condition in an Icelandic museum.

Willing's latest work, *Through the Mother*, on exhibition at the University of Queensland Art Museum, also supports the desire for refuge, on this occasion serving to honour the parents (not just supporting the maternal signifier but also the memory of the drying upside-down plants in her father's backyard shed). Comprised of a glowing golden corridor infused with the aroma of patchouli oil, it leads into a room (like the womb) with handmade timber stools and a carved table from which herbal tea is served to visitors. Either side of the entrance-corridor are framed voids, reminiscent of



this dark garden shed. For Willing, this installation honours memories of childhood and parental relationships, and of being nurtured with calming tea, soft colours and warm furniture. While it puts me into a comfortable state, I look back at those dark, empty spaces behind me to reflect upon the fact that all enchantments leave a disturbing shadow.

Andrew Stephens is an independent visual arts writer and editor of Imprint magazine for the Print Council of Australia.

Above:  
Elizabeth Willing  
*Cheeseburn*, 2019  
Cheetos and fairy lights  
MCA ARTBAR curated by Lara Merrett  
Photo: Liam Cameron

Opposite:  
Elizabeth Willing  
*Pick-me-up*, 2016  
Kinder chocolates in wrappers, glue  
Photos courtesy the artist