

# A tasty treat for the senses

An entertaining show about Australian gastronomy has more variety than depth, but still provides food for thought.

## VISUAL ART JOHN McDONALD

### Cuisine and Country: A Gastronomic Venture in Australian Art

Orange Regional Gallery, until May 20 (touring throughout 2007-2008 to Lake Macquarie, Mornington Peninsula, Wagga Wagga, Mt Gambier, Broken Hill, Manly, Cairns and Mackay)

*CUISINE AND COUNTRY* is the latest exhibition put together by the independent curator Gavin Wilson, who has previously brought us shows devoted to the old gold-mining town of Hill End, the tropics, the Murrumbidgee River and fire. Superficially, there may be few similarities between these topics but each exhibition has had an oddly similar feel. If artists, authors or film directors may be said to have a signature style, perhaps the same holds true for curators.

There is certainly a familiar cast, with artists such as Fred Williams, Arthur Streeton, Cressida Campbell, Euan Macleod, Tim Storrier and Wendy Sharpe backing up from the previous show, *Fireworks*. It may suggest a lack of adventure or a willingness to continue with tried-and-true performers but that hint of déjà vu doesn't detract from *Cuisine and Country*, which explores the subject of food in Australian art.

The show, initiated by the enterprising Orange Regional Gallery, is basically an anthology, with all the qualities and pitfalls of that form. It provides an opportunity to display almost 100 works, making for a diverse and entertaining collection. On the other hand, it has the same



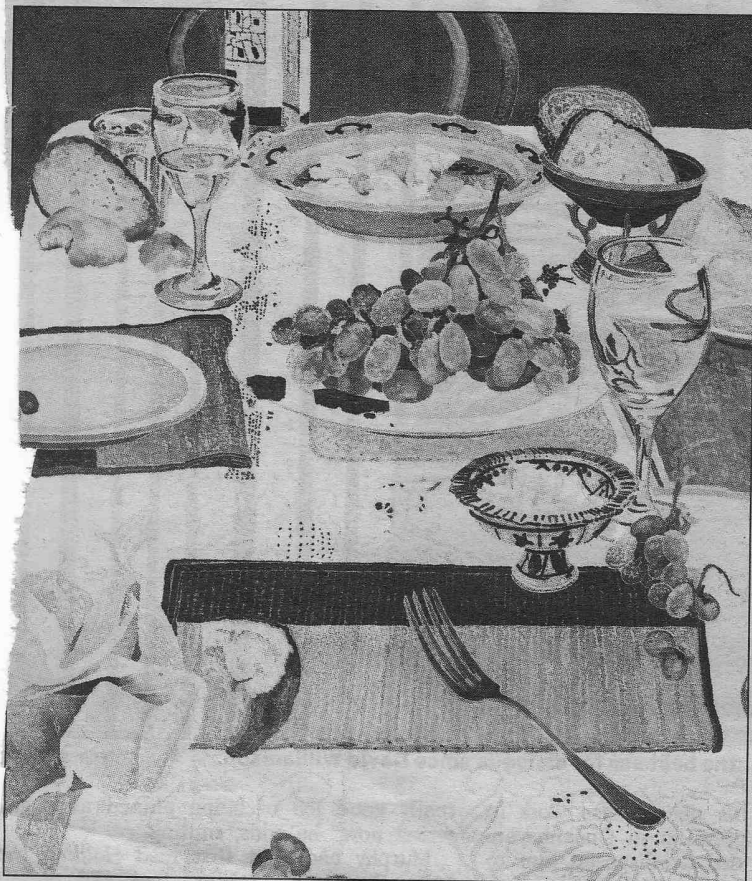
Pile it on ... Ben Quilty's *The Lot* recalls the pre-fast-food days.

problem that used to be associated with a Chinese meal: when you've finished, you still feel hungry. Perhaps this need not be the case. In Sydney nowadays one can experience many different kinds of Chinese cuisine and walk away thoroughly sated.

Yet an exhibition such as *Cuisine and Country* is a kind of yum cha, where some selections are more satisfying than others. One could make an entire show out of its subsections: a show about ingredients such as fruit, vegetables and meat; or kitchens and kitchen implements; or restaurants and chefs; or different forms of dining, from a Bellevue Hill breakfast to a bush picnic. Like an undiscerning gourmand, Wilson likes a bit of everything, making *Cuisine and Country* a smorgasbord of closely

related themes where depth is cheerfully sacrificed for variety.

The show begins with a well-chosen image by David Keeling, *Early Morning* (2003), which shows a table covered with a crisp, white piece of linen, standing in the middle of bushland. The painting is about anticipation, about a sense of limitless possibility. It is also about our efforts to impose our will on the unruly charms of nature, to bring a concept of civilisation to a wilderness. To Aboriginal eyes, the table may represent the intrusive forces of colonisation but most of us would only find it reassuring to come across a table in such a setting. Wilson has been conscientious in the way he has represented indigenous approaches to the subject. Food – or tucker – is such a ubiquitous theme in Aboriginal



Virtuosity and anticipation ... Cressida Campbell's *After Lunch* (left) and David Keeling's *Early Morning*.

art that this forms a show-within-a-show, incorporating paintings on bark and canvas, a woven fish trap, prints and photographs. There is also an elegant catalogue essay by Craig San Roque that blends a reminiscence of the bush tucker he enjoyed as a child with a touch of botany and anthropology.

This essay is perfectly in tune with a show that is permeated by nostalgia. There are Jeff Carter's photographs of primitive bush cook-ups around the campfire, Effy Alexakis's pictures of Greek cafes in Australian country towns and Laurence Tan's tribute to the Mar's Cafe in Thirroul, which has the honour of representing many hundreds of small-town Chinese restaurants all over Australia. The food served in these restaurants was often so assiduously adapted to the local palate that it was unrecognisable to Chinese diners. The Greek cafes and milk bars took cultural crossovers a step further, by modelling themselves on American "drug stores" – a term not much in vogue any more.

Russell Drysdale's *The Rabbit and His Family* (1938) harks back to a decade scarred by the Great Depression, when rabbit was the only affordable meat for many families. We tend to think of Australia as a land of abundance yet the number of frugal meals represented in this exhibition reminds us that

our prosperity is a recent development, as is our taste for fine dining. It all began badly when the colonists of the First Fleet almost starved to death waiting for a new shipment of supplies from England, which basically meant flour and salt beef.

One hundred and fifty years later, when Walter Magnus opened his Sydney restaurant, it was a rare delight in a city given over to the banalities of Anglo-Saxon cuisine. The spherical Magnus, subject of William Dobell's portrait, *Chez Walter* (1945), was apparently a great advertisement for his own cooking. A more stereotypical Australian meal is depicted in Carter's photo *Anything Vegetarian?* (1996), where a group of grumpy-looking blokes stand around a gargantuan barbecue laden with sausages, chops and hunks of steak.

**Perhaps the  
sensuous qualities  
of oil paint exert a  
similar attraction  
to the glistenings  
of grease and fat.**

And then there are Macleod's paintings of family meals that are anything but convivial, featuring grey, bleak figures hunched over tables furnished with smouldering volcanoes. It seems that everyone will receive his or her portion of misery. Such images are comparatively rare in works devoted to food and to meals, which are usually treated as celebrations.

One further exception is Storrier's photograph, *Black Dog Dilemma #3* (2005), which plays on Churchill's famous term for his depression: the black dog. Storrier's black dog is chained to a huge carcass, suggesting the burdensome nature of existence, the unwieldy flesh we are condemned to lug around. Yet from the dog's point of view the only dilemma might be indigestion.

Many of the outstanding works in this show are exercises in still-life painting, a genre that has long been an excuse for artists to demonstrate their virtuosity. Pieces by Cressida Campbell, David Strachan, Margaret Olley, Kevin Lincoln and Peter Godwin will almost certainly be the ones that linger in most visitors' minds.

Godwin's small studies of squid and fish and Lincoln's kitchen implements are painted with the most exquisite skill and sensitivity. They have a presence that makes them more than a match for the

larger, more spectacular works of big-name artists such as John Olsen and Brett Whiteley.

Another stand-out is Ben Quilty's *The Lot* (2006), a close-up of a hamburger, painted with broad, luscious swathes of oil paint. Quilty captures that tantalising mix of attraction and repulsion that typified a good burger in the days before fast-food chains reduced everything to processed units of salt, starch and cardboard. Perhaps, in some dark corner of our organism, the sensuous qualities of oil paint exert a similar attraction to the forbidden glistenings of grease and fat.

Food and meals are such fundamental parts of everyday life that they allow artists the scope to explore an infinite variety of moods. Bernard Ollis's diners glance uneasily over their shoulders as "the visitor" returns. The diners in Fred Cress's painting *Summer* appear only as disembodied hands but as we zoom in for a close-focus view of the table we see faces and bodies in every dish. A tiny pink morsel cowers alongside a knife, while a bottle of red wine contains the ghostly image of a man and woman locked in an embrace. Cress might agree with the proverb, in vino veritas, but the grotesque pageant of parties and dinners he has portrayed in recent years



dwells obsessively on the dark side of human nature. His work is one long refutation of the idea that truth and beauty are synonymous.

Art and cooking have more in common than many artists would like to admit. It used to be a supreme insult to compare someone's painting to cake decoration but Lucy Culliton has proved, in her recent show with Ray Hughes, that cakes and biscuits can provide an excellent subject for a skilful painter. As in cooking, art has its fads and fashions, its sensuous pleasures and overindulgences. There are even a few strange crossovers, as with Richard Larter, who once told me that a certain kind of white paint smelled so nice that he was always worried he'd give way to temptation and eat it.

Many artists are also excellent cooks, especially with dishes that require a flair for composition such as curries or, in John Olsen's case, paella. Olsen is one artist who is just as proud of his cooking as his painting - both activities serve as an outlet for his natural exuberance and both find a ready audience. I suppose it is possible to be charmed by an artist's cooking but turned off by his or her painting, but I suspect that it doesn't work the other way around. There are not many who are so devoted to art that they would mortify their stomachs to gratify their aesthetic urges.