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An artist at my table

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Tracey Moffat's *First jobs, pineapple cannery 1978*.

When they were presented with dessert at last week's dine-in opening of a new exhibition called Harvest, guests to Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art hesitated before dipping their spoons into the custard beneath a chocolate crust.

Set majestically in a shallow, wide bowl, and referencing indigenous "dot" paintings, the dessert looked too gorgeous for consumption, almost like some precious art work.

Even so, the diners soon hoed in delightedly while chef Josue Lopez stood and talked about the creation, as he did for each course during the lunch, at a long table inside the gallery spaces filled with Harvest artworks.

Articulate and thoughtful, he explained how his dishes reflected key ideas explored in the exhibition itself: provenance, sustainability, organic farming and – in a grander sense – our complicated relationship with food in 21st-century Australia.

His listeners ate with mindfulness, the way one doesn't with fast food in front of the telly.

Harvest: Art, Film & Food is the latest event in Australia tapping into a growing connection between the arts and the world of food.

Melbourne has two other shows on the topic – painter Stieg Persson's new paintings at Anna Schwartz Gallery deal with "the contemporary preoccupation with food and its role in urban culture", while the clever theatre piece *Acrobat: A Dining Room Tale* involves audiences sharing an intimate meal with songwriter, psychologist and cook David Chong as he prepares a communal meal and tells culinary tales from his "personal cultural mosaic".

These follow an exhibition earlier this year, coinciding with the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, at which art (and food) lovers learnt about dining and tableware at the National Gallery of Victoria's *Art of the Table* exhibition.

While cynics might think all this is just the art world cashing in on our commerce-driven MasterChef and celebrity cook obsessions, that is to underestimate the importance of culinary themes to culture and philosophy – and food's well-established presence in the history of art.

“The hope of the exhibition is that while there are philosophical ideas and complex art-historical arguments we are trying to make, there is also the fact that food is something everyone can relate to on some level,” says Ellie Buttrose, the curator of the visual arts component of Harvest. “The idea of labour and land are now becoming more important subjects for contemporary artists. Looking at those things in the context of food means that people can access those ideas through something they are familiar with.”

From glorious Dutch still-life paintings abundant with ripe pomegranates, peaches, artichokes, poppies and grapes, to the fluorescent-lit supermarket replica, its shelves lined with packaged, processed groceries, the Harvest artworks unpack several themes centred on our food fascinations. Buttrose has delivered three groupings, “land and labour”, “objects in circulation”, and “imagining another future”. When visitors arrived last weekend to look at the works and hear several floor talks, there was a lot of discussion about where our food comes from, the labour involved in its production, and how art can help us understand and appreciate the items that end up on our tables. There was also a lot of thought given to the future of food, in a world challenged with unstable climate scenarios.

As many people struggle to consume even the fundamentals for survival, Buttrose says the art in Harvest lets us examine how farming, food, food products and their distribution “have been central to the formation of world views and their artistic expression”.

Apart from the replica corner-store convenience supermarket packed with goods, one of the more arresting works is a table set for four – at which gallery visitors, chosen at random, are invited to sit for a traditional Thai lunch as part of a “social sculpture”, an untitled work by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. More directly political is Simryn Gill’s gorgeous floorwork *Forking Tongues* (1992) – an enormous spiral of silverware (knives, spoons and forks) intermixed with curving trails of chillies. Buttrose says this work draws attention to the history of trade when European powers (the silver cutlery) relied so heavily on the labour and produce in the Asian colonies (the chillies).

Persson’s exhibition in Melbourne also examines dichotomies in the world of food. His paintings mix lusciously depicted foods in challenging contexts: a monkey eating quinoa, or macaroons infused with graffiti. “I am a foodie and if you live in Melbourne you can’t avoid it,” he says. “I am also a reasonably good amateur cook, so I have this conflicted view of all the food fads. I am taking the piss out of upper middle-class bourgeois behaviour, but I’m one of them and so are all my friends. It is a strange position to be in.”

One of his recent paintings was called *Philosophy of individualism with goji berries* and he says it upset a lot of people. Who can say what one of his new paintings, *Signature dishes* (2014), might provoke? Depicting celebrity chefs’ most famous menu items, he says he is both paying homage to them, while also covering them with graffiti. “Graffiti tagging is one of the greatest narcissistic acts of the globe,” he says. “And when you watch those cooking shows about young chefs having to find a signature dish, it is also driven by a cultural narcissism. Even if they don’t want to go there, they have to.”

Persson says his paintings also explore class in Australia. “It is almost taboo, we don’t have them according to the foundation myths of this country,” he says. “But they do exist, that’s blindingly obvious. People talk about the inner city latte- and chardonnay-sipping set – it is a common definer against suburban attitudes. Class and food have a very strong relationship with something else that is endemic – the rise of the luxury item.”

At Harvest, Buttrose says Brisbanites have clearly made the place their own. “GOMA has a very diverse audience,” she says. “It is not this rarefied object and that is, in part, because of the children’s art centre.” Many families turned up for last weekend’s opening, including the pineapple collage-making with Los Angeles-based group *Fallen Fruit* and two video works – one zany piece by Mika Rottenberg about a group

of women labourers turning their red fingernails into maraschino cherries, and another by Brisbane's Tracey Moffatt, in which she and Gary Hillberg splice together scenes of black maids giving lip to their white female employers (Lip, 1999).

Visitors would relate to Moffatt's photograph from her First Jobs series (2008): rows of workers in a pineapple cannery (very Queensland). All that labour to produce tinned pineapples is not something we'd think about when opening a can: art, as Buttrose emphasises, can help us go there.