

HYPERALLERGIC

In LA, Artists Serve Up a Diverse Take on Food Culture

Offal, a show named after innards, ought to have some messy moments and blunt edges, and it luckily does.



Catherine G. Wagley September 18, 2019



Sydney Mills, “Soft Tissue #6” (2018), archival pigment print (image courtesy the artist)

LOS ANGELES — Artists Heisue Chung-Matheu, Grace Hwang, and SoYun Cho made a bright red menu that could, at first glance, be mistaken for any trendy menu, in any stylish gastropub, in any gentrifying neighborhood. But its black, all-caps sans serif lettering unambiguously pillories foodie culture, and the insensitive tourism that often comes with it:

I-AM-NOT-YOUR-KOREAN-FOOD-AMBASSADOR'S GUIDE TO THE KOREAN DINING EXPERIENCE THAT YOU WILL NEVER FIND IN K-TOWN (OR ANTHONY BOURDAIN'S SHOW, OR JONATHAN GOLD'S LIST, THRILLIST, ZAGAT, OR EVEN YELP)

And, elsewhere on the menu:

KOREAN BBQ PERFUME WILL BE SPRAYED INTERMITTENTLY TO LIVEN UP THE DINER'S SENSES

The menus, behind glass in thick, white frames, hang in the group exhibition *Offal*, up now at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park. The word “offal” refers to the viscera, or intestines and internal organs, of animals (Wikipedia illustrates “viscera” with a photo of pâté), and the exhibition’s press release makes a pun of the word, saying that in exploring Los Angeles’s diverse food culture, the exhibition is “ultimately speaking to the offal in all of us.” A show named after innards ought to have some messy moments and blunt edges, and this one luckily does. Hanging nearby Chung-Matheu, Hwang, and Cho’s collaborative menu project are Jeannine Shinoda’s *Dog Day*’s photographs: bologna sausages, wrapped in clear casings and styled to look like balloon dogs, sit on slices of white bread against a clean white background. The dogs recall Jeff Koons’s much bigger, shinier balloon dogs, if only because Koons’s art world prominence has made balloon animal appropriation seem his territory. But Shinoda’s prints suggest a comically sad school lunch, depicted with the polish and cleanliness of a fashion ad.



Jeannine Shinoda, installation view of “Dog Days” (image courtesy the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, photo by Jeff McLane)



Jeannine Shinoda's "Dog Days" prints (image courtesy the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, photo by Jeff McLane)

No one work in *Offal* oversimplifies food culture's complexities, but as with many large group shows, the content can get a bit diffuse. The exhibition consists of works by 36 artists selected by a jury after an open call, in addition to work by nine invited artists — for instance, Chung-Matheu, Hwang, and Cho were juried into the show, while Shinoda was invited. This gives the exhibition the odd quality of being simultaneously wide-open and selective. The Los Angeles Municipal Gallery, run by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), hosts one juried exhibition at least every other year, and has done so since 1978 (the city opened the gallery in 1954), but this particular exhibition also plays a role as the precursor to the second-ever Los Angeles triennial, *Current:LA Food*, organized by the DCA and largely curated by the private nonprofit, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), with contributions from independent curators Lauren Mackler and Diana Nawi. In 2016 the debut city triennial purported to bring artists and local community members together around the subject of water; this one focuses on the equally vast and elemental subject of what we eat. According to the DCA's press release, *Offal* "complements" the triennial by exploring "the cultural interior of food" while *CURRENT:LA Food* will "present a multiplicity of participatory food experiences." The juried show, in other words, is the quieter, more traditional preamble to the more immersive event to come.

There are structural problems with juried shows in general, one of them being the entry fee, and the Municipal Gallery charged artists \$10 to submit work for *Offal* (when the gallery posted the call for artists

on Facebook, one artist commented, “I never pay to play and I especially do not want to participate in a show that glorifies people consuming animal products”). Among the other issues are cohesion and inclusion, on which opinions have long varied. In 1989, when *New York Times* critic Helen Harrison praised a juried show at the Heckscher Museum in Huntington, New York — one of a small handful of juried exhibitions reviewed by the *Times* in the last half-century — for its aesthetic consistency, mostly expressionistic abstraction, a series of letters to the editor followed. One reader considered this consistency itself problematic, since an “open juried show and should, therefore, have reflected many styles and media.” Another cited the “uneven levels, crowded hangings and shifting judges with wildly changing standards” of juried shows, questioning whether museums should host them at all. These two engaged readers summed up the criticisms still most often leveled at such shows. More recently, in 2016, *Phoenix New Times* critic Lynn Trimble noted how, in a Phoenix juried show with cash prizes, the jurors “rewarded caution rather than risk-taking.”



Installation view of *Offal* at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery (image courtesy the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, photo by Jeff McLane)

In *Offal*, where works vary from acerbically conceptual to formally poetic, there is indeed aesthetic diversity and some risk. But the show mainly includes artists with formal art educations and the majority of the juried-in artists are young, recent BFA or MFA graduates. In fact, 22 artists were born after 1980 (and 12 of these after 1985), and 22 have MFAs, while eight of those without MFAs have undergraduate degrees in

Fine Art. Perhaps this represents the pool of open call entries, but it doesn't represent artists in a city the size of Los Angeles, where many work at the community level and do not have art school degrees. Other, often less well-funded organizations do a better job of embracing these community artists, such as the William Grant Still Art Center in West Adams or the grassroots group South Central Arts — which, noteworthy, petitioned the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) to offer classes to help local artists navigate the mainstream art world after the museum announced its South Los Angeles satellite. But at higher levels, the city often falters when it comes to embracing artists working outside museum and gallery worlds. For instance, in announcing *Current:LA Food*, Mayor Eric Garcetti said that this venture “makes art accessible by bringing world-class exhibits to the public spaces that touch the lives of all Angelenos.” His comment conjured a trickle down dynamic, uncomfortable in a city in which each neighborhood already has its own storied, layered food culture.



Bonnie Huang, “Six Months at Work” (2019) (image courtesy Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, photo by Jeff McLane)

But if *Offal*, like so many such shows, privileges artists with a certain kind of pedigree, it is heterogeneous in other ways. Dakota Noot’s pencil and pen drawing “Learn to Smile” (2017) depicts a torso with pig hooves emerging from the nipples. An intestinal ribbon of pig parts, including a very-much-alive pig’s head with heavily lashed eyes and sharp teeth, arcs across the picture plane, covering the figure’s groin. Sharp and small, the drawing blurs boundaries between man and a potentially edible animal. For her installation “Six Months at Work” (2019), Bonnie Huang recorded a dream about her mother on the backs and fronts of the kind of neutrally colored, familiar shirts that hospice workers often wear. Her mother is ill and dying in the dream, and her work conjures a human body’s inner workings, rather than an animal’s.



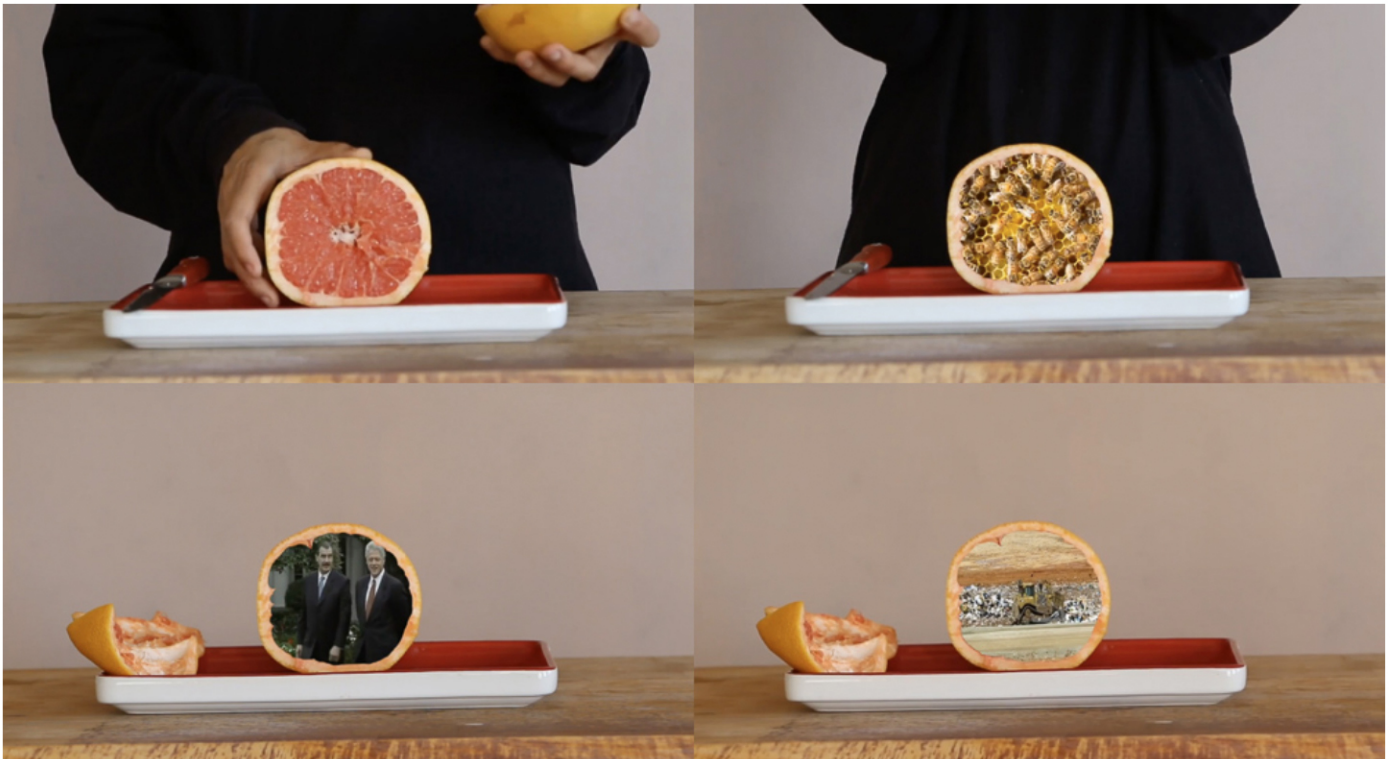
Danial Nord, "Sleeper" (2017), computer, LEDs, mixed electronics, polycarbonates, aluminum, steel, water pump, media footage (courtesy the artist, photo by Gene Ogami)

Certain works reference the country's current political situation, sometimes in crass ways, such as with Jeffery Vallance's *Trump Pareidolia* (2019), a two-channel video of slabs of meat and other substances that uncannily resemble Donald Trump — Vallance, an invited artist, sourced his imagery from the archives of a Facebook group established in 2016 to record Trump simulacra. Danial Nord, also invited to contribute to *Offal*, takes a less overt but more immersive approach to connecting entrails and politics. Installed in a dark room, "Sleeper" (2017) resembles a tall, upside-down figure, with stringy LED limbs encased in plastic — one leg loops over the top of the metal armature helping to hold "Sleeper" up; the LED tubes and cords resemble veins, and a paranoid audio loops: "We don't know what's happening, and it's gotta stop. We will make America safe again, we will make America strong again," and "They're bringing in drugs," "serious drugs." The rhetoric recalls anti-immigration sentiment, and the uncomfortably wired-up figure begins to seem drugged and disabled by its own misplaced fear.



Elisa Ortega, "Viscera" (2017), reclaimed fabric and fiber sculpture (courtesy the artist)

Clearly, for the artists in this show, “offal” connoted a wide variety of guts and entrails, not just the edible, animal kind. Elisa Ortega Montilla used discarded and recycled material to weave the ropes that hang from the ceiling, gathering in a womb-like knot on the floor, while gloria galvez gutted a grapefruit for her film, “i ate the grapefruit’s pulp memory” (2019). We watch her cut the grapefruit down the middle, and slurp the juice from one half while the other half faces us, a sequence of video imagery playing out inside its skin: buzzing bees, a genetic engineering lab, sprouting plants, travel in shipping containers, a glimpse of Mexican federal police and Mexican president Vicente Fox and Bill Clinton strolling. The pulp recalls a stream of global politics and interventions, and we remember that food is complicated by so many factors invisible in market aisles.



gloria galvez, “I Ate The Grapefruit’s Pulp Memory” (2016), video, HD color and sound (courtesy the artist)

Offal continues at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery (4800 Hollywood Blvd, East Hollywood, Los Angeles) through September 29.