

LET THINGS TASTE OF WHAT THEY ARE

by

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APPROVAL

LET THINGS TASTE OF WHAT THEY ARE

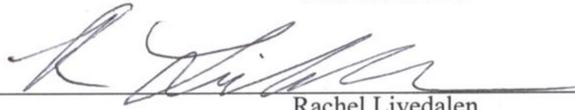
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Aperitivo

Let things taste of what they are began with Saint Agatha's breasts—an unlikely subject of a violent event that inspired dainty Italian pastries beloved by Sicilians. Thus the exploration and examination of food, its relationship to the body, particularly women's bodies, and their lack of control over them developed.

Agatha's story is a disturbing one. Of noble birth and often described as very beautiful, she devoted her life and body to God at a young age, at a time in third-century Sicily when Christianity's consecration to God was in tension with the Roman Empire's demand for allegiance and power. Like other powerless women, Agatha was relentlessly pursued by men. One governor, Quintianus, fell in love with young Agatha and violently attempted to rape and force her to marry him for her wealth. When she refused his advances, he called for her brutal torture and sent her to a brothel. Remaining faithful through this abuse, the barbaric removal of her breasts and imprisonment were ordered. While in prison, Agatha was visited by Saint Peter and healed, as the story goes. Quintianus was spiteful and ordered further punishment with burning coals and fire, after which Agatha was again imprisoned once more. In 251 AD, she finally died in prison, a virgin and a martyr at the age of twenty. She was venerated as a saint in the sixth century.

Throughout the history of western painting, Saint Agatha is most often depicted holding a platter of her own breasts, almost as if offering them as a sacrifice (Fig. 1). Because of this, and as a way to honor Agatha's resilience and martyrdom, pastry chefs in Sicily created the *Minne di Sant'Agata* (Saint Agatha's Breasts), half-dome pastries filled with ricotta, chocolate, and candied orange, glazed, and topped with a cherry—served in pairs and made to look like breasts. Every February, the month of Agatha's death, Sicilians take to the streets for a three-day festival in her honor, including processions, ceremonies, and many *Minne di Sant'Agata* pastries. I was

both fascinated and disturbed by Agatha's story and the subsequent rituals of her commemoration. It seemed bizarre to honor Saint Agatha by memorializing such a horrific event (Fig. 2) through the consumption of her breasts as cute little pastries, which led me to consider the metaphorical consumption of women's bodies historically and into the present, similar to the metaphorical consumption of Christ's body in *The Last Supper*— his body as sustenance, Agatha's body as a delight.



Figure 1. *Saint Agatha*, 1630-33, Francisco de Zurbarán



Figure 2. *Martirio de Santa Águeda*, Sebastiano del Piombo

The Tablescape

Let things taste of what they are presents as a magnificently oversized dinner table primed for guests to gather around and take their seats. From a distance, the cream-colored ceramic place settings are elegantly set on a pastel tablecloth scattered with an array of glossy objects, small foods, and indiscernible details, drawing the viewer closer. Upon further inspection, the expansive tablecloth reveals itself as a patchwork of men's button-down shirts adorned by whimsical candelabras, cake stands with Minne di Sant' Agata and gelatin dome cakes with hotdog tips that act as nipples visible beneath the surface, small dishes with sculpted floral butter, and salt cups with tiny spoons dotted amongst the place settings. Sleeves from the business shirts decoratively folded to resemble napkins lay in the center of each dinner plate (Fig. 3). Pears wearing crocheted aprons sit inside the collars of the shirts. Eggs tucked into beds made of sliced bread take naps between iceberg lettuce blankets and Swiss cheese sheets. Three

bread loaves stacked vertically each conceal a mini projector nestled between the slices that project their images onto cake stands and trays leaning against pitchers filled with “magician’s milk”—the same prop milk filling the asymmetrical wine glasses at each place setting. The more time spent in observation, the more evident it becomes that this meal is not for the viewer to physically consume. Eight pine benches line the table’s perimeter but are tucked underneath, signaling to the viewer that there is no invitation to sit after all. Each bench accommodates an equal amount of place settings and thus dismantles the traditional hierarchy of heads of the table, therefore signaling a challenge to societal norms.



Figure 3. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*



Figure 4. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*

Three Sandwiches

Upon entering the gallery and approaching the table, the first video the viewer encounters begins with a shot of a kitchen counter where ingredients and tools are collected and placed in preparation for making a sandwich. I enter the frame wearing an apron and gather my tools, a cutting board, a knife, a plate. Then I choose the ingredients: bread, pickles, turkey, Swiss cheese, lettuce, and mayonnaise. Nothing seems out of the ordinary until I turn toward the sink and expose my bare butt—an unexpected and comical revelation that raises questions. *Why is she naked? Is she alone? Who is the sandwich for?* Making a sandwich is a mundane task that prompts the viewer to pay attention to the sounds and activities around me, a cat on the counter, the clanking of utensils, barking dogs in the background. While it's not abnormal to perform tasks nude in the privacy of one's home, perhaps the addition of the apron—and only the apron—invites interrogation. Women are often sexualized in domestic roles, particularly while

cooking and cleaning, and especially in pornography, a male-dominated industry. (Imagine the stereotypical black and white French maid uniform.) While this video certainly is not sexy, it calls into question the sexualization of women through the inclusion of a single garment. My naked body is joined on the tablescape by pears also baring their ample butts while wearing delicately crocheted aprons encircled by the collars of men's business shirts or nuzzling up to one another on ceramic trays (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*

The second video takes place in an office breakroom. Gray cabinets line the background, and a small circular table occupies the foreground. I enter the frame and begin to prepare a bologna sandwich, casually topless. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the bologna never makes it onto the bread. Instead, it's playfully folded into quarters, a bite taken from its center, then placed delicately on my breasts, initially exposing my nipples which are then covered with crinkle-cut pickle chips to create a strapless bologna bra. The bra and bare breasts trace a resemblance back

to Saint Agatha, the removal of her breasts and the cakes made in her memory, in a humorously absurd way. Such a silly yet relatable act—who hasn't played with their food?—entices the viewer before challenging them to consider a deeper meaning and reflect on the direct correlation to the Minne di Sant'Agata and gelatin breasts immediately surrounding the video.

The contents of the third video direct attention to the phallic symbols on the table—the overwhelming number of candlesticks as well as the hotdog tips visible beneath the surface of the rounded gelatin breast cakes. In this video, I make a 3-foot-long salami sandwich while enjoying a bubble bath. I enter the scene with a baguette in one hand, salami and a meat cleaver in the other. After disrobing and entering the bath, I cut the baguette lengthwise in half and slice the salami on a soap dish, placing the salami rounds on the baguette one by one. A few slices fall into the water, but they are simply shaken dry and added to the bread with little fanfare. Once the entire salami has been cut, I indulge in the sandwich rather clumsily. Unable to consume the entirety of the sandwich, I leave the bath and take it with me, along with my cleaver.

The videos act as stopping points throughout the installation—rest stops on the roadmap that lead the viewer winding through the tablescape and allow for moments of reflection. These moments juxtapose and subvert expected definitions of intimacy: nudity assumes sexual intimacy versus interior spaces and sandwiches which denote intimate, feminine domesticity. This progression of the pseudo-sexy and unanticipated undress to ridiculous and absurd is all meant as a veil of comedy to nudge the viewer along in their thought process, to think beyond the sandwich, and to ask themselves why. *Why is this so funny? Why do I feel uncomfortable? What does food really have to do with the body?*



Figure 6. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*

Food and the Body

Human bodies have long been compared to food. From apples and pears to describe body types, to symbols—eggs and fertility, milk and motherhood, cherries and virginity—to body parts: peach butts and melon breasts, and of course, the wildly phallic hotdogs, sausages, baguettes, bananas, cucumbers, and eggplants, to name a few. I wanted to bring some of these associations into this installation as an entry point for the viewer to relate— despite which body they inhabit.

I approached this work from a personal perspective, through a queer female lens, a femme lesbian who relates to Agatha and her experiences of sexual assault.¹ I embrace my feelings of vulnerability by presenting my nude body to the viewer, masking it through the act of

¹ Femme lesbian is used to describe a female-identifying lesbian who presents feminine gender expression.

play while locating myself in uncharacteristic environments or expectations of food interactions. Though the video works attend to foods directly associated with phallic symbols, the associations of the foods present on the tablescape itself are with stereotypical female tropes and symbolism. This decision was especially significant because I want the viewer to notice *me*, a queer female artist, and my own physical labor.



Figure 7. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*

Labor

The main focal point of my thesis exhibition is a 20 x 8-foot table, its steel and wood framework concealed beneath the patchwork tablecloth neatly draped overtop. A combination of typical place settings and atypical vignettes decorate the table, all speaking to the relationship between food and the body. The sheer size of the table speaks to the labor involved in its creation as well as in the detailed arrangement of the tablescape. First, the patchwork tablecloth, a grand

feat in itself, reminds the viewer of the traditionally female task of sewing—of women gathering together for domestic work. But subsequently, the scale and evident labor present in this effort resist the notion of women’s work as easy and confined to the purely domiciliary. Secondly, twenty-four place settings consisting of ceramic plates, napkins, forks, knives, spoons, and glasses are placed around the outer edge of the table, my hand present in the construction of each object, made rather unpretentiously, one by one. This also calls the viewer’s attention to the humble care inherent in my process of making and arranging the table setting as if preparing to host a quaint and demure dinner party. *But is such hospitality gendered? Can it be tied to one’s sex or even sexuality?*



Figure 8. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*

Compulsory Heterosexuality

We live in a society where, despite the progress and continual fight for equality of LGBTQIA+ people over the years, a woman's sexual preference is expected to be for men, whether conscious or unconscious. This is evident to me every day as I navigate the world, through daily acts of "coming out" by correcting strangers when they refer to my husband instead of my wife or when the grocery store clerk or hotel desk attendant assumes incorrectly she is my mother/sister/aunt/cousin because it is inconceivable she is my romantic or life partner. In her 1981 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience," Adrienne Rich challenges the notion of feminism that assumes heterosexuality is the norm, or what she calls "compulsory heterosexuality." Simply put, women are expected to look and behave a certain way. It's no secret, she writes, that women have historically been expected to be the "emotional and sexual property of men, and the autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion, and state."² One effect of compulsory heterosexuality is women's eroticism and reproduction with men, creating the idea that women's sexuality is dependent on a man and expands to control over women's bodies and how their sexuality transpires. Rich introduces other feminist authors and confronts their perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality, ultimately demanding an investigation into what it means to be a true feminist. Like Rich, *Let things taste of what they are* interrogates compulsory heterosexuality. The physical deconstruction of men's pastel button-down business shirts and their reconstruction into a quilt top that functions as a tablecloth for an uncharacteristically large table is a metaphor for the deconstruction of the male body by a woman, subverting the heteronormative expectations of men and women through this intense process of traditionally female labor.

² Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (London: Virago Press, 1987), pp. 23-75.



Figure 9. Detail of *Let things taste of what they are*



Figure 10. *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979, Judy Chicago

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*

Judy Chicago is of the same wave of feminism impaired by compulsory heteronormativity.³ In her 1974–79 installation *The Dinner Party*, she concerns herself with ritualized domesticity and the celebration of female liberation, with its Christian iconography of the Last Supper:

The Dinner Party comprises a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman from history. The settings consist of embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils, and china-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms and rendered in styles appropriate to the individual women being honored. The names of another 999 women are inscribed in gold on the white tile floor below the triangular table.⁴

An iconic artwork that continues to be revered as one of the most controversial and important feminist artworks of our time, *The Dinner Party* has been criticized for reasons ranging from vulgarity due to the portrayal of vulvas on the dinner plates to the lack of representation of BIPOC women.⁵ While Chicago's work aims to celebrate women's achievements and mourn women's constraints, my installation focuses on women's bodies, their perception, and their lack of autonomy through a queer lens. Another notable difference between Chicago's work and *Let things taste of what they are* is my use of humor and absurdity. Whereas Chicago addresses these topics with more serious overtones—it's crisp and clean, almost clinical, angular, and even cold, somber in its celebration of mostly white women—my visual language is playful, almost lighthearted at first glance, colorful, and even cute. Unlike *The Dinner Party*, my guests remain

³ Second-wave feminism began in the 1960's through the 1980's and focused on sexuality and reproductive rights. It includes feminists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. It has been criticized for not taking into account the experiences of women of color and LGBTQ women.

⁴ *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago," Brooklyn Museum, accessed April 2, 2023, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/.

⁵ Black, Indigenous, people of color

nameless, and by refusing to identify invitees, all women can be welcomed. I take Chicago's vaginas and raise her two severed breasts, but the handmade aesthetic of *Let things taste of what they are* makes my message all the more palatable.



Figure 11. Installation view of *Let things taste of what they are*

Digestif

Let things taste of what they are draws attention to the lack of control women have over their own bodies and the myriad institutions involved in maintaining such a social order. It urges the audience to come together and consider the unfair treatment of wo/men and queer people in our society but to also laugh a little in the process—creating a balance between seriousness,

humor, and surprise as a way to address these topics in a less confrontational way.⁶ Forty-four years after Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, women are still fighting for autonomy. Agatha's story reminds me that even women as strong and resilient as she was are unable to fight off male desires without the risk of punishment or death, and I continue to question who is really in control of women and at what cost. Like Christ, her blood covered a multitude of sins, and like Christ whose body is the bread, Agatha's breasts are the pastries, consumed in remembrance of her.

⁶ This project also takes from Schüssler Fiorenza the term "wo/men," which she uses to represent the differences among women, including age, race, social class, sexuality, and their relation to power. Jimmy Hoke summarizes it well: "Visually representing these multiple, often complex divisions and power relations, wo/men captures some of the gender's complexity and fractures any simplistic assertion of unity that could be presumed under the category of women." For further reading, see Jimmy Hoke, *Feminism, Queerness, Affect, and Romans: Under God?* Atlanta: SBS Press, 2021 and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

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VITA

Sheryl Anaya was born in Santurce, San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1988. She was raised in Puerto Rico and Texas. In 2013 she graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art in Studio Art from Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. In 2023 Anaya earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. She received a graduate fellowship from TCU, where she also served as a gallery technician, a teaching assistant, and an instructor of record in Three-Dimensional Design. Anaya is a former member and president of 500X Gallery in Dallas, Texas and Community Art Educator at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. She has exhibited regionally, nationally, and internationally.

ABSTRACT

LET THINGS TASTE OF WHAT THEY ARE

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Cameron Schoepp, Professor of Art

Let Things Taste of What They Are distorts the norms of a typical dining experience. Considering the deconstruction and consumption of the body, absurd actions surprise and set the tone for the examination of roles within gendered labor, sexuality, and domestic space. Humor tempers the seriousness of these topics to avoid confrontation at the dinner table. From handbuilt candelabras, cake stands, plates, goblets, and utensils to apron-adorned pears and beds made of bread, lettuce, and Swiss cheese for sleepy eggs, the viewer is invited to dine at a grand tablescape topped with a tablecloth sewn from deconstructed men's business shirts. Except dinner is the last thing on their minds. Three videos of the artist making sandwiches in unsuspecting ways become centerpieces as comparisons are made to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and inspiration taken from the tragic story of Saint Agatha and her disembodied breasts.