

Capturing the flavour of art

May 26 2009 (<http://www.birminghampost.net/life-leisure-birmingham-guide/birmingham-culture/birmingham-art/2009/05/26/>) By **Terry Grimley** (<http://www.birminghampost.net/authors/terry-grimley/>)

The links between art and food go back centuries – Terry Grimley looks at some recent examples.

Art and food go back a long way together. Think of Leonardo's Last Supper, Cezanne's apples or all those succulent grapes in 17th century Dutch still lifes.

So it seems a pretty likely theme on which to rustle up the smorgasbord of work by 18 international artists, Pot Luck: Food and Art, which opened this weekend at the New Art Gallery, Walsall.



The artists include some well known British names like Damien Hirst, Antony Gormley and the late Helen Chadwick.

Chadwick's Cacao from 1994 is famous and arguably the star of the show. It's basically a bubbling fountain or geyser made of 800 kilogrammes – that's three quarters of a tonne – of chocolate in a circular steel container measuring 2.3 metres in diameter. When setting up it takes three days to melt the chocolate, and the fountain has to be switched on an hour before opening time each day to get it bubbling nicely. You are greeted by its seductive aroma as soon as you step out of the lift.

If Cacao is self-evidently too much of a good thing – not to mention its possible sly reference to excrement – it seems to be entirely true to Chadwick's interest in the close relationship of the desirable and the repulsive. It has been shown all over the world, but is only gracing Walsall on the tour of this show, independently curated by Art Circuit, which is going on to galleries in Aberystwyth and London.

I've sometimes wondered whether Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery would be able to reconstruct the installation, inspired by a painting by the little-known Austrian baroque painter Johann Georg Platzer, which Chadwick made during a residency there in 1986.

One work which does have to be recreated each time it is shown is Antony Gormley's Bread Line, which coincidentally dates from the same year as Cacao and consists of a straight line of small, partially-eaten fragments of bread. It's a slight and whimsical work from the creator of Angel of the North whose more ambitious work using bread, Bed (1980-81) is in the Tate collection.

Here Gormley shares a room with Mona Hatoum's screen in the form of a giant cheese grater and a set of Warholian prints by Damien Hirst which labour a joke about food being represented in the form of medicine labels.

Several of the exhibits seem to go in pairs. For example, a portable Mexican kitchen complete with a festooned utensils, by Lucy and Jorge Orta, recalls the Indian kitchen by Subodh Gupta, the most ubiquitous representative of the current Indian art scene, currently showing at Initial Access in Wolverhampton. And near by is another work by Gupta, a rickshaw smothered in welded brass rice pots which continues his imagery of basic foodstuffs.

Another obvious pairing is Jana Sterbak's Cake Stool, in which a sponge cake is substituted for the seat of a stool, with Aaron Head's red cake bricks.

The worldwide image of Chinese catering is reflected in two installations. Karen Tam's Chinese restaurant is a distillation of a familiar international environment using material dating back to the 1930s, while Anthony Key's China Garden is a spartan reproduction of his local take-away in Streatham, clad with flattened-out foil food containers.

The video contributions include a record of Han Bing's journeys through various cities in the company of a humble Chinese cabbage, but the most beguiling is Manuel Saiz's Parallel Paradises Ecuador, in which a lama is introduced to an empty supermarket and can't quite seem to get the hang of it. As part of the programme Artist Rooms on Tour with the Art Fund, which is touring works from the vast Anthony d'Offay collection jointly acquired by the Tate and National Galleries of Scotland last year, the New Art Gallery is also showing a rare exhibition of Andy Warhol's early work as a commercial artist.

This early phase of Warhol's career has been so effectively eclipsed that it is very easy to overlook how successful it was.

In the 1950s his linear style of drawing kept him busy with prestigious commissions from the likes of Harper's Baazaar and The New York Times Sunday Supplement. There's a programme design for Samuel Barber's short opera A Hand of Bridge, book jackets and fashion drawings, as well as some stabs at pure art works that few would associate with the later screenprinted images.

Don't miss the case of Warhol memorabilia on the mezzanine floor, which includes an egg decorated by his mother and postcards he sent to her on his travels. Best of all though, is a 1956 letter from the great Albert H Barr Jr, director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, politely turning down Warhol's offer of a drawing. It ends with the PS: "The drawing may be picked up at the museum at your convenience."

* Pot Luck is on view until July 19, Andy Warhol: Early Drawings until July 5 (Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 11am-4pm; admission free).