

The banquet begins
Photo: Kitty Wursthorn

A BEGGARS BANQUET: A REFLECTION AFTER ATTENDING BUT FIRST WE EAT



by Robyn Phelan

To attend *But First We Eat*, I venture into the dimly-lit industrial back streets of Collingwood to an artist-run space. Not a pop-up restaurant or food van in sight but there is a distinct barbeque smell and a cooker full of brown pods, earthy and warm. This is what I had come for – food cooked in raw clay and I was enthralled. The pods were compelling, calling to be touched but slightly repellent in a scatological way. I loved this dialectic set-up around the act of eating.

But First We Eat was a sold-out event for Melbourne Design Week 2019 (which is an initiative of the Victorian Government in collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria) and combined the talents of the two artist directors, Jia Jia Chen and Claire Lehmann. Chen is an RMIT University Ceramics graduate and 2011 *Fresh!* Finalist. She has been making and exhibiting ceramic installations and homewares in parallel with catering and curating ‘feasting’ events. Chen often works collaboratively, and her ceramic ‘drums’ were part of the sound performance, *Assembly Operation* at Melbourne’s Arts House in 2017. She also worked with Danielle Brustman for *Art of Dining* at NGV 2019 creating a bespoke set of textural tableware in homage to Yves Klein Blue.

Claire Lehmann has an Arts Degree from the University of Melbourne, with a major in art history and cinema studies, and a Multimedia qualification from Victoria University. She came to ceramics via the Carlton Arts Centre and then studied a Diploma of Ceramics at Holmesglen TAFE. In 2017, Claire undertook a three-month residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre, The Netherlands. Her aesthetic concerns focus on opacity, weight, structure and material tolerance. She specialises in ceramic lighting in her business Studio Lehmann and says that problem solving keeps her practice ‘interesting’. Lehmann is also a *Fresh!* finalist (in 2017) and met Chen while sharing a studio at the longstanding North Melbourne-based Elm Place Ceramics Studios. She is currently working on various commissions for her ceramic lighting.

But First We Eat was staged in two rooms, evocatively lit with candles. Schoolhouse Studio was the arrival space, where we mingled, chose a handmade cup to drink from and nibbled from a range of handmade platters and bowls. The term ‘designers’ was used to tick the festival category box, however the tableware was made by some of Melbourne’s most well-known young potters:

Andrei Davidoff, Alison Frith, Kate Jones, Tessa King and Claudia Lau. Specialised seating was made by Tobias Bolton, and Jia Jia and Claire together created tabletops that used a stucco finish suggesting rammed earth – whilst also being food safe! Chen made many of the vases and candleholders for the meal and Lehmann's thrown ceramic lighting glowed from above our heads.

Once our group of twenty-six diners had arrived, Chen gently described how her interest in food and communal eating developed. She believes that food is an essential ingredient for social connectivity and plays an important role in shaping personal and cultural expression and identity. An ancient story told by her father, who was a passionate home cook, is the 'Beggars Chicken'. The key narrative arch is that a chicken is stolen by a starving person who encases it in clay and hides it under his campfire to avoid detection while it cooks. This act of deception and thievery results in a Chinese legend about a succulent chicken worthy of an Emperor's dinner table.

The kernel of this story – raw clay being used as a cooking agent – provided the spark of an idea that was to become *But First We Eat*. Lehmann described how the preparation and sharing of food has always necessitated design, given ceramic qualities of heat safe, hygienic, endless functionality, immense tactility and visual beauty. Lehmann then gave a brief demonstration on how to 'crack' into the contents of the earthy, warm pods that awaited us in the Long Division Gallery space. A handmade chisel was used to tap at the casing and banana and vine leaves were separated to reveal glistening cooked flesh and steaming vegetables. Of the technique, Chen and Lehmann describe:

We trialled lots of standard clay types, from white reclaim to terracotta and then starting mixing clay bodies with combinations of sand and salt. We were simultaneously testing cooking times, how heat moved in the BBQ, fuel type and flavours from the leaves. The leaves we settled on were banana and lotus, and fig leaves that we picked every day from a tree behind our studio. So, it was a month and a half of dedicated testing, lots of night BBQs and feeding small groups of friends and seeing what they thought.

Then came the big reveal of the 'dining room'. It was a cinematic experience worthy of a Paul Greenway film (if he were to use an earthy palette of colours). The banquet table was laden with ceramic vases, plates, condiment holders, even cutlery handles were encased in a malleable material. Chen and Lehman continued to curate and host the experience. A new friend, volunteers to crack the ceramic pods, and the food was opened and ready to eat. There were no serving utensils. We hesitated and Lehmann declared that we must use our hands. Initially, this felt awkward but was far more sensuous than I expected. Fingers are usually used for dry, crisp things and dipping. *But First We Eat* vegetables and meats were accompanied by sauces, dressings and butters in glorious ceramic pourers. These liquids coated the fingers and dribbled on the chin.

There was a dual alchemy at play in the meal. The transition of food from raw to edible was with the magical element of heat. Ingredients were authentic and retained their full form. Chicken and salmon were served whole, as were the sweet potatoes, carrots, zucchini and corn, therefore no foams, raising agents, thickeners or chemicals.



1 Baked, clay-covered vegetables ready to be served; photo: Kitty Wursthorn 2 Banquet table featuring the centerpiece by Jia Jia Chen 3 'Beggars Chicken' wrapped in banana leaves and baked in clay 4 Steaming hot vegetables ready to be cracked open; photos 2, 3 & 4: Robyn Phelan



View into the banquet room from the Long Division Gallery, with lighting by Claire Lehmann and Jia Jia Chen
Photo: Kitty Wursthorn

Late in the evening, conviviality ensued and Chen asked us to 'feel the difference' between a curated banquet and eating in a restaurant. I asked: when does the art happen in an event occurring in a gallery? We can look to other examples of eating within the gallery or curated context. In 1992, Rirkrit Tiravanija created a landmark exhibition entitled *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in New York. Tiravanija converted a gallery into a kitchen where he served rice and Thai curry for free. This simple gesture broke down the power exchange between art and gallery. It was an 'experiential' relationship between the public and a work of art. Visitors were not 'looking at something' but were 'within it'. Tiravanija blurred the lines between artist, artwork and audience. From the visual documentation, Tiravanija was not interested in well-designed and crafted tableware!

Closer to home, Vipoo Srivilasa's *Roop-Rote-Ruang (Taste-Touch-Tell)* project, 2008 was a series of dinner parties, hosted by the artist, at various private residences in Sydney. The project consisted of a handmade, ceramic dinner set of 105 pieces with the theme of the coral reef in Srivilasa's unique blue and white handpainted decoration. *Roop-Rote-Ruang* emphasised the role of ceramics as an important part of the sensory experience, presenting an unfolding story during a four-course, home-cooked Thai meal. As with *But First We Eat*, the artist was host, cook, potter and curator. Srivilasa described the dinner as communicating the Buddhist six channels of awareness: sight, taste, smell, hearing, touch and mindfulness.



Whole salmon uncovered from its wrapping of vine leaves and clay; photo: Kitty Wursthorn

This model of performative and relational experiences with ceramics and eating is an ongoing theme for Srivilasa and is part of a continuum of participatory and socially engaged art since Judy Chicago's epic *Dinner Party* in 1974. Chicago combined 'domestic' crafts of textiles and ceramics with a powerful feminist message. However, this 'banquet' is hands-off as it resides within the canon of the white cube. More recently, Kirsha Kaechele's *Eat the Problem*, 2019, at MONA was a no-expense-spared, fabulous folly on how to rid our vulnerable land of imported pests.

On each of the six *But First We Eat* encounters, Chen and Lehmann brought a group of strangers to design, traditional culture, food and ceramics by immersing them in space where clay was the menu highlight in all its earthy and charismatic splendour. Where was the art? It crept up on us, in the satiated moments of conversation, reflection and handling of handmade ceramics in all its many forms.

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But First We Eat

Curated by Jia Jia Chen and Claire Lehmann
15 March – 4 April 2019 for Melbourne Design Week
Long Division Gallery at Schoolhouse Studios
81 Rupert Street, Collingwood, Victoria