



Essay, News, Voices

## CATHERINE FLOOD ON SERVING GLUTTONY

*“Food is the point where our bodies merge with the vast universe outside, and that’s scary.”*

- Ruby Tandoh, *Eat Up!* (2018)

Eating blurs the boundaries between us and the world. It is where politics converge with pleasure and social ideas are inscribed on bodies; where ecologies intermingle with our biology, and our appetites shape landscapes. What we eat and how is an intimate matter of personal habits, memories and gut reactions, but also a subject deeply implicated now in concerns over environmental crises and social inequalities. These intersections make food a compelling lens for contemporary art. *Serving Gluttony* brings together seven artists who all explore aspects of our modern industrial food lives, and the complex histories they represent, in ways that are at once profoundly personal and urgently global.

Placed at the centre of the show, the concept of “gluttony” might seem like a strangely antiquated hook for thinking through current issues of consumption (something we would more readily expect to find in medieval moral satires or 18th-century caricatures of gouty aristocrats). But, as the artists here vividly demonstrate, the themes of greed, pleasure, death and disgust that the idea of gluttony enfolds are more than ripe for discussion.

### **A Social Sin**

In the early middle ages, gluttony (eating and drinking more than necessary, or more luxuriously than necessary) was ranked as one of the Catholic Church’s seven deadly sins: transgressions that left your soul particularly susceptible to the devil. This was a matter of personal morals, but in societies where scarcity was a present threat, the idea of gluttony also served a social purpose in promoting fair distribution. If one person took more, others got less.

In modern consumer societies, however, excessive consumption has been celebrated rather than censured. The promise, backed up by industrial production, has been that everyone can have more, of everything. “Buy more”, we have been told, and the economy will grow faster. Accumulate wealth and it will trickle down to benefit everyone. Nature is limitless, so have it all and develop technologies to extract even more. Today, faced with an ecological disaster fuelled by overconsumption of the planet’s resources and the rise of both billionaires and food banks in some of the richest countries of the world, these narratives are no longer tenable.



*Katie Butler, Three Martini Lunch, 2024. Oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist*

Katie Butler can pinpoint the moment her work turned to food. It was while she was listening to the radio in her studio in December 2020 and heard the announcement of the US government's COVID-19 rescue package. To the amazement of many it included reinstating the "three martini tax break": a tax law allowing lavish business lunches and corporate schmoozing to be fully written off as expenses. Proposed ostensibly as a measure to provide a stimulus for the restaurant sector, it felt more like a deliberate re-entrenchment of social inequalities at a time when many ordinary people were worried about putting food on the table. "Let them eat cake" started to trend on Twitter. The question of gluttony - who eats what and at whose expense - was back on the menu.

### **Art Historical Appetites**

Butler's paintings serve us the kinds of showy "surf and turf" fare associated with the expense account lifestyles of mostly white male lawyers, executives and politicians. Focusing on the presentation of the food itself, her compositions evoke the luxury-laden Dutch still life paintings of the 17th century, which form a subtext to her concerns with corporate greed.

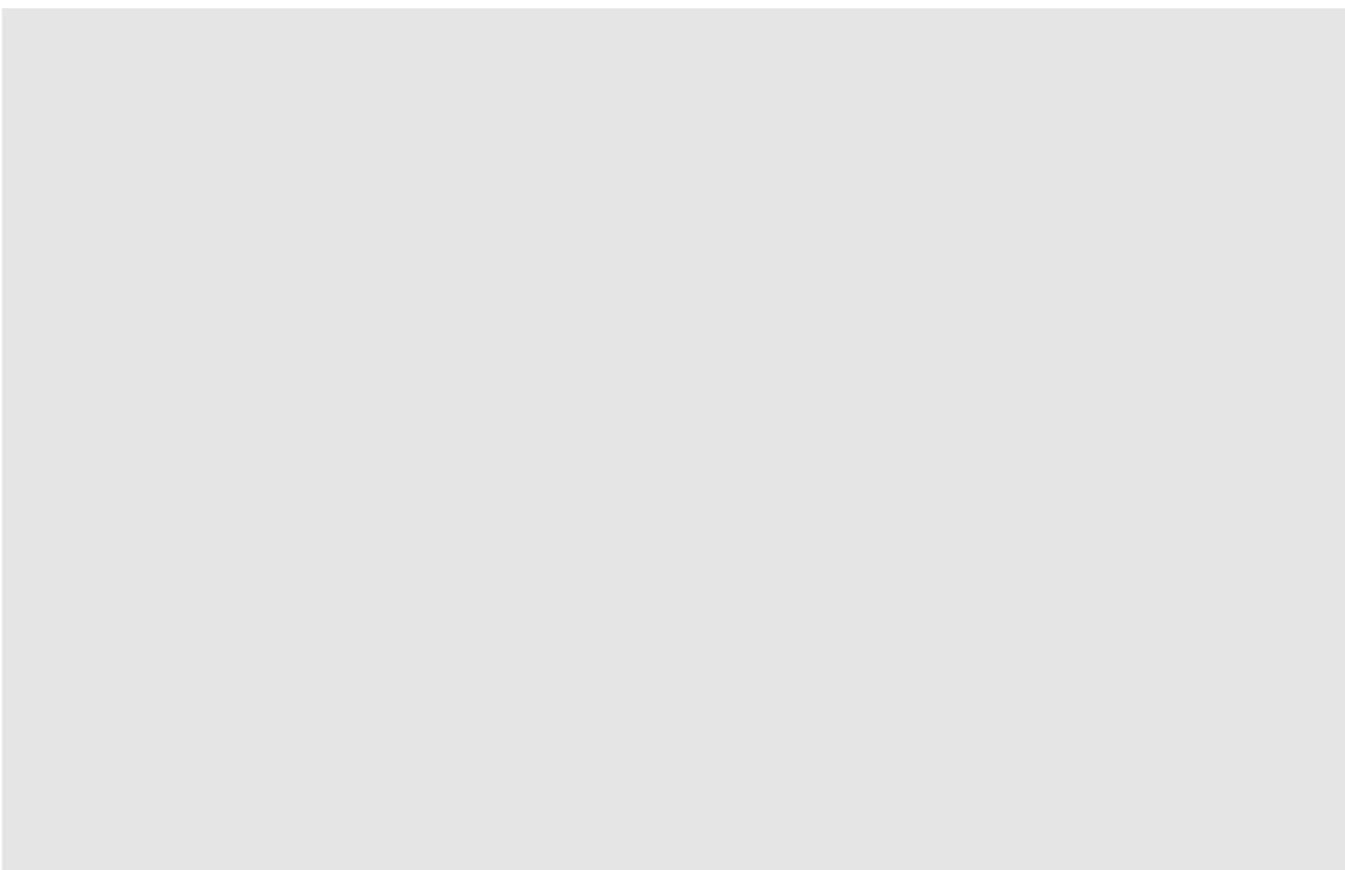
"Pronkstilleven" (meaning ostentatious still life) were painted for a new class of merchants and bankers in the Dutch Republic: pioneers of market capitalism eager to display their wealth. Artists obliged with astoundingly detailed paintings of the exotic foods and objects flowing into Dutch ports from expanding overseas trade and colonial plunder. In the process, they reframed natural resources as private luxuries, disconnected from the landscapes and labour that produced them. In still life, like the three martini lunch, everything is a commodity and everything is there for the taking.



*Abraham van Beyere, Banquet Still Life, 1655. Oil on canvas, 99.5 x 120.5 cm. Image courtesy of Mauritshuis, The Hague*

It wasn't only the food that was fetishised. Dutch still life paintings have been highly prized within the Western canon for their virtuosic naturalism and scientific observation: qualities assumed to demonstrate the superiority of European culture. Melissa Furness challenges this reverence through a body of work that dismembers the genre. Her method involves extracting a particular food motif from multiple originals and heaping them together in a single canvas: a sort of clearing out of art history's leftovers. The aura is broken and the still life disintegrates into a collection of clichés.

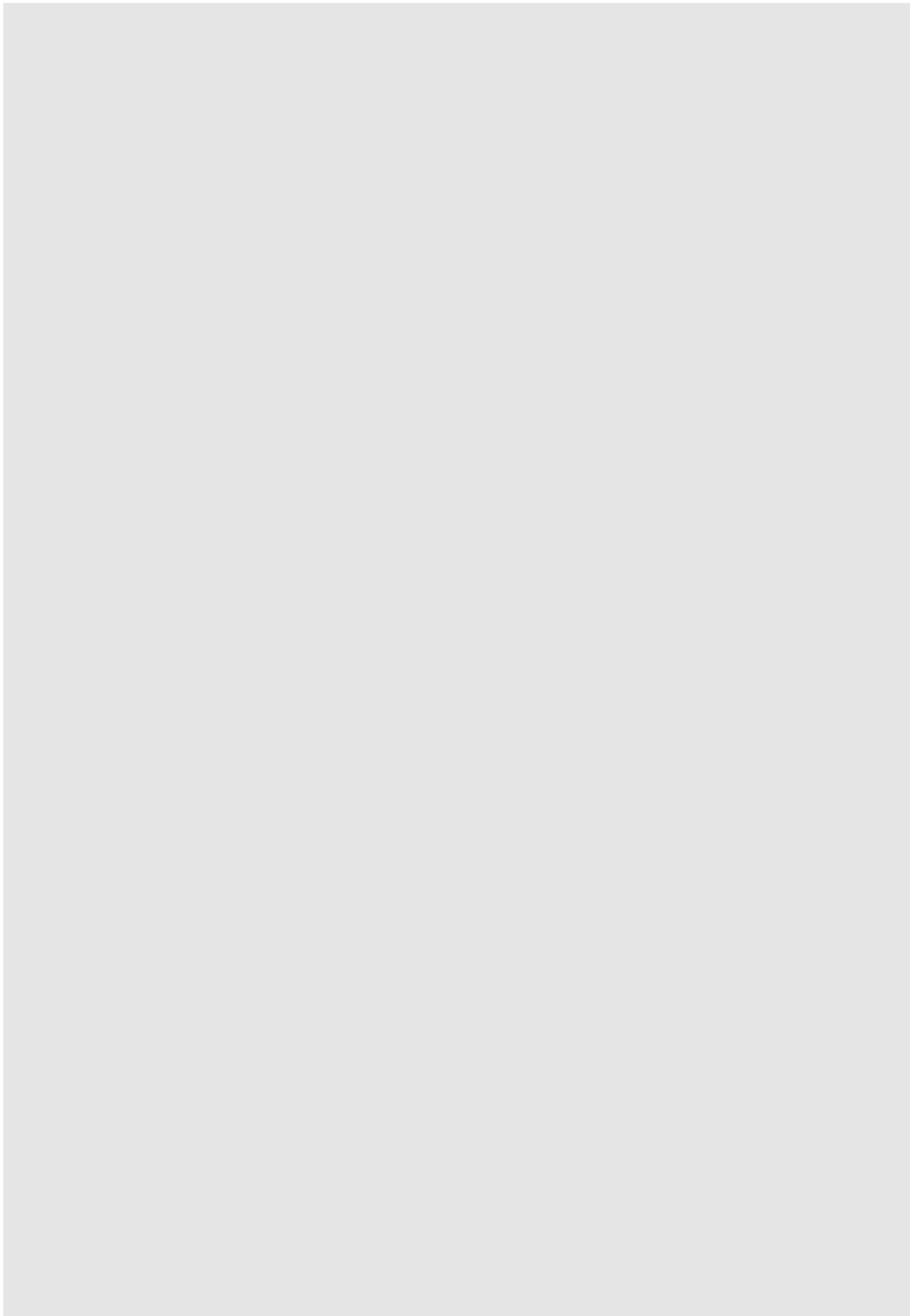
While art historians have tended to linger over the exquisite craft of these paintings, Furness's "piles of stuff" shift our attention towards the systems within which they operated, through which resources and wealth accumulated. Reconfigured en masse, the delicacies become grotesque. Mince pies spill their guts. Sliced fruits are a mass of fleshy wounds. There are hints here of the multiple and interconnected forms of violence that capitalism visits on bodies and the environment.



Melissa Furness, *thick as mince*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 124 x 184 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist

## Industrial Surfaces

Alongside Dutch still life paintings, probably the most celebrated artworks on the theme of food and consumerism are Andy Warhol's paintings of Campbell's soup and Coca-Cola which spoke to a more democratic dream of industrial prosperity. These are the inspiration for Alicja Kozłowska's 3D embroidered sculptures of branded food products which pay homage to Warhol and his attention to everyday commodities, while addressing the environmental problems represented by mass production today.

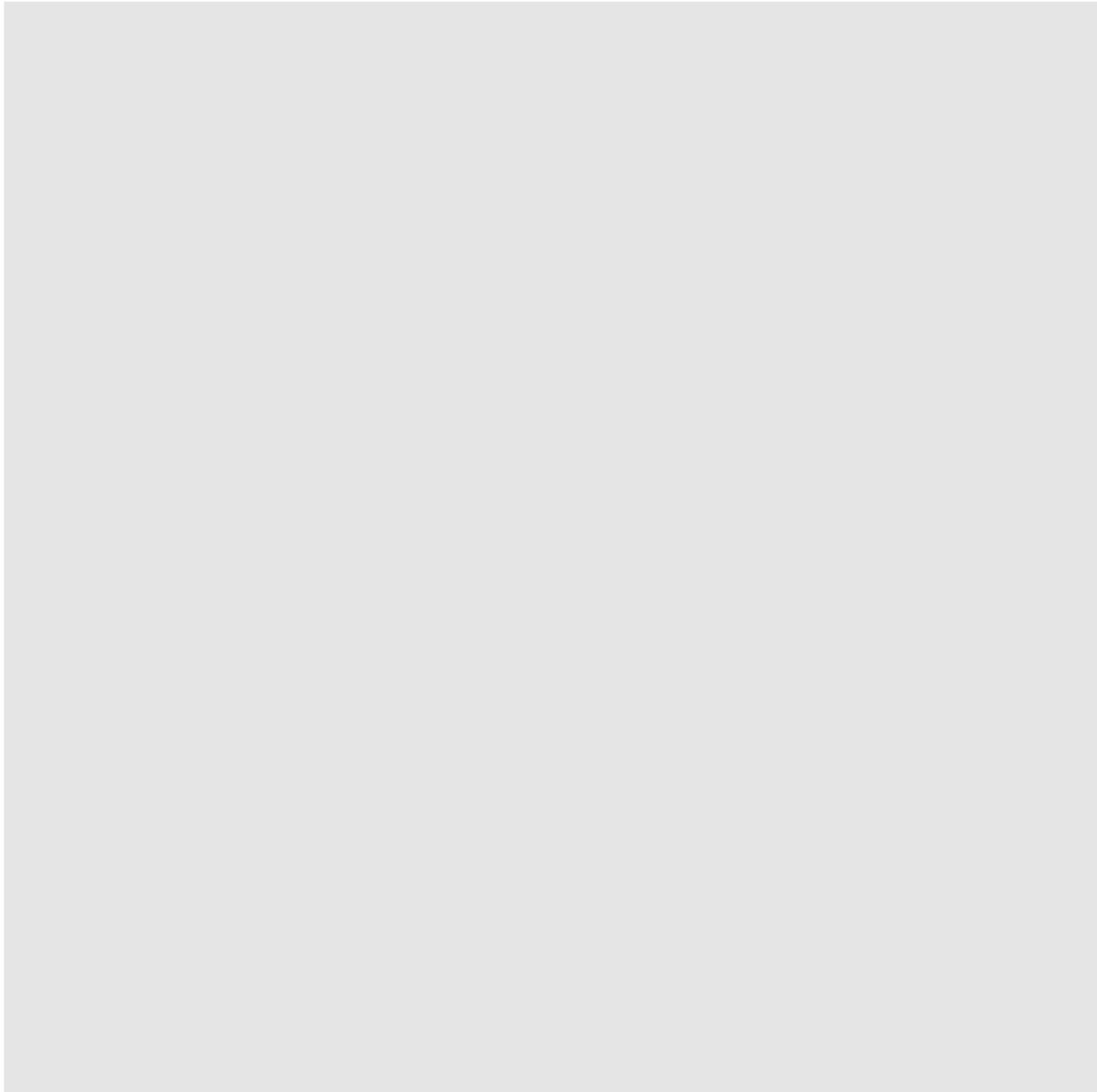


Andy Warhol, *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, 1962. Acrylic, screenprint, and graphite pencil on canvas, 210 x 145 cm. Image courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Specifically, she tackles the deep indifference to the impacts of our consumption that results from the abstract and opaque nature of processed and packaged foods. Whereas Warhol's

paintings replicated the uniform, frictionless surfaces of industrial production and commercial printing, Kozłowska translates them into craft objects, through complex layers of stitching over a felt base. Their accuracy is startling. At first glance, our eyes skim over the familiar forms and branding, but the intricately textured surfaces require us to stop and look closer. They absorb rather than deflect our scrutiny.

The evident time and care embodied in this hand-making serves to highlight the carelessness with which we habitually consume the mass produced. In the same moment, we are reminded just how carefully crafted these products are to lodge in our subconscious and keep us buying more. The iconic Coca-Cola bottle is a good example. The design brief written in 1915 stated that the form needed to be so distinctive that a person could identify it by feel in the dark, or recognise it at a glance if it lay broken in the street.



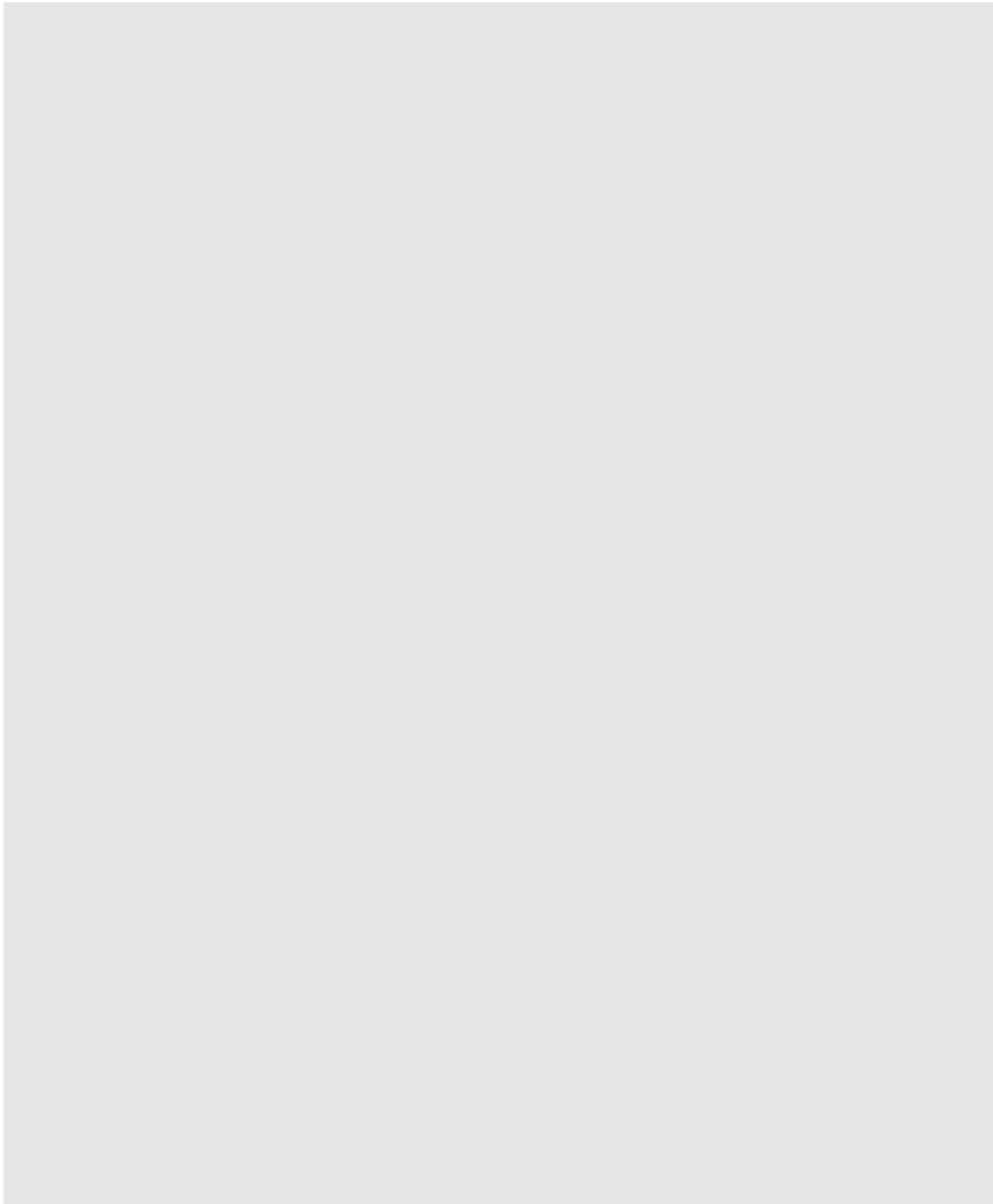
*Alicja Kozłowska, COCA COLA BOX (detail), 2024. Textile embroidery and artquilt, 22 x 21 x 16 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist*

## **Consuming Bodies**

It is not only food companies and advertisers who seek to manipulate, and profit from, our appetites. Alongside all the voices clamouring for us to consume, there is a constant chorus of food writers, celebrity chefs, clean eating influencers and a whole multi-billion dollar diet industry ready to condemn our choices and warn us of the terrible outcomes of overeating or consuming the wrong things.

Samah Rafiq shows how all this noise can turn the simple act of eating, which should be a source of enjoyment and nourishment, into a process fraught with anxiety. Her painting *Empty Calories* subverts the advertising trope of a woman's perfectly poised lips being seductively fed. In Rafiq's version, the food itself (spaghetti...carbs!) is blacked out and "censored" in reference to the diet that speaks of "good calories" and "empty calories". The stretched and

contorted mouth is modelled on Goya's mural of Saturn devouring his children, a monstrous image of panic, shame and self disgust.



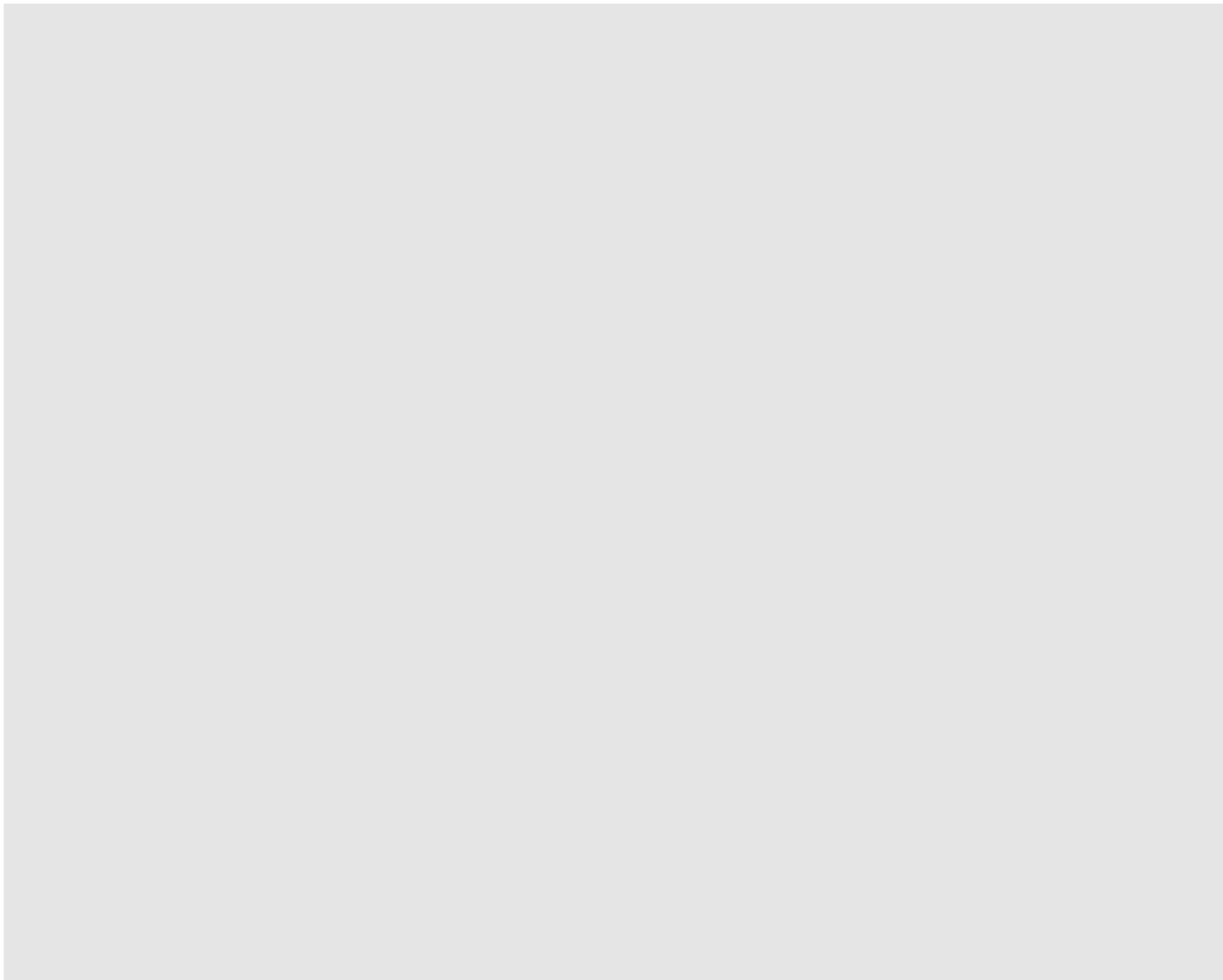
Samah Rafiq, *Empty Calories*, 2023. Gouache and coloured pencil on paper, 25 x 19 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist

In this judgemental food culture, gluttony is thriving as a “sin”. Perhaps most insidiously in the discourse surrounding obesity which commonly associates being overweight with personal moral failings and lack of self discipline. While gluttony might be a useful concept for thinking about global problems of overconsumption and exploitation, when it is pointed at individuals it quickly descends into prejudices thinly disguised as health concerns, fat-shaming, and the policing of bodies.

Women's bodies bear the brunt of this. Eating is one of many ways society tells us to be less, curb our appetites and feel ashamed of our messy, fleshy functions. To be the object of gluttonous desires, not the protagonist. Back in 1896, Elizabeth Robins Pennell in the *Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman* counselled women to stop restricting what they ate to fit the beauty ideal, and to embrace gluttony so that pleasure did not become a “deep mystery into which only men could be initiated”. In this respect taking ownership of gluttony can represent something transgressive and liberating.

Izzie Beirne's work addresses the abuse of women's bodies through sexual violence and trauma, but also the process of recovery and the reclamation of pleasure. Her canvases are a visceral blur of food pulled apart, crushed and pulped by frenzied hands. In the slippery,

abstracted forms and bloody, luxuriant colours, we read both the violence perpetrated, and the victim's defiant rediscovery of physical joy and sensuality.

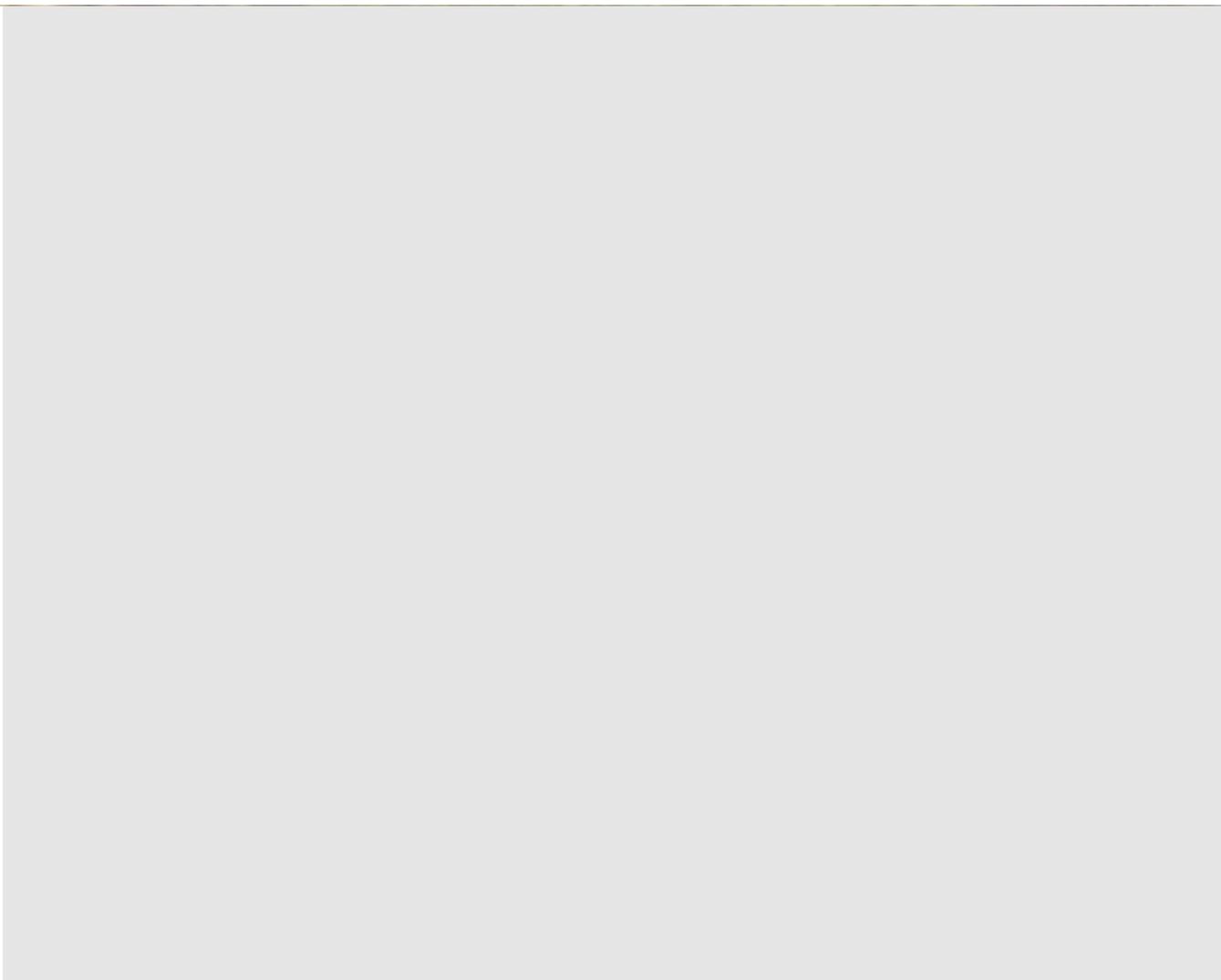


*Izzie Beirne, No, you don't eat it like that! Let me show you, 2024. Oil on canvas, 65 x 80 x 5 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist*

### **Death and Abundance**

In modern society, fear of food and flesh is, at least in part, also a fear of death. We are constantly told that certain foods will kill us, while eating “better” means living longer. Avoiding the sin of gluttony was once a matter of attaining life after death, but has become about dodging death itself. Michelle Nguyen, on the other hand, sees death as something reassuring and hopeful (something certain) and uses food to engage with death as part of life.

Several of her paintings explore themes of personal grief and familial connection through the setting of altars on which families in Vietnam offer food and paper money to ancestors in the afterlife during the Lunar New Year festival. The centrepiece in one is a traditional boiled chicken that is both meat (its flesh plucked and cooked) and animal (it retains a head and feet that are distinctly bird). On many levels, it is a scene that blurs boundaries between life and death, reminding us how separate many of us have become from the deaths of the animals we consume. And from our own mortality (as Francis Bacon put it more bluntly “we are meat, we are potential carcasses”).

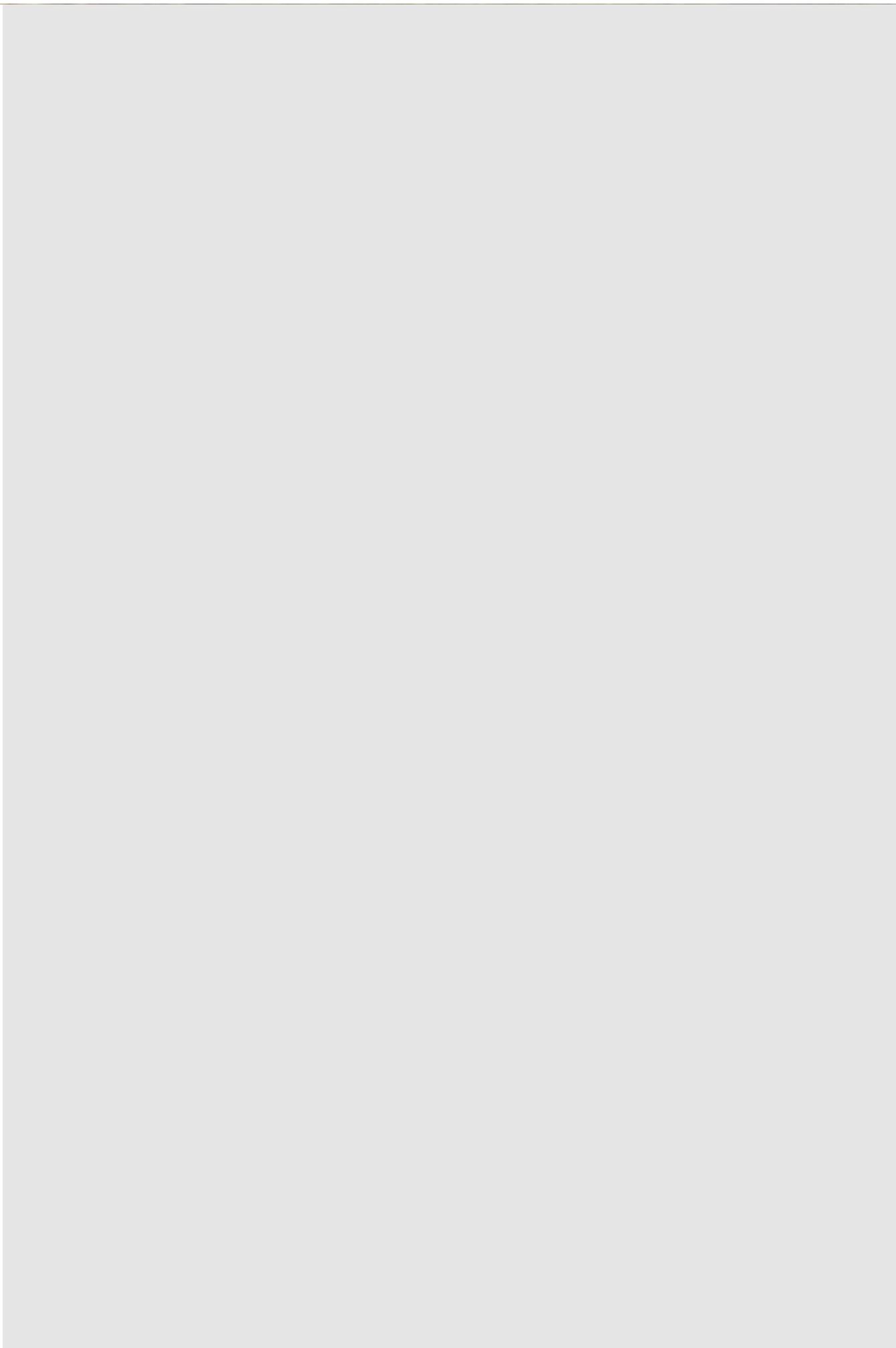


*Michelle Nguyen, Seance (Dinner Theatre) (detail), 2024. Oil on canvas, 61 x 45.75 cm. Image courtesy and © the artist*

There are other lives and deaths alluded to here. In Nguyen's paintings it isn't only the humans who feast. Snails (once a symbol of resurrection) slime over ripe fruit. A mouse partakes of the offerings and is eyed by a hungry cat. A piece of fish is swarmed by ants and butterflies who gorge on the fishy decay. These elements are inspired by the details of decomposition and spoiling hidden amidst the gluttony of Dutch still life paintings, which hinted at the transience of earthly existence. In an era of mass extinction and loss of biodiversity, however, they point to a different truth: that human exploitation now threatens the survival of countless species of life on earth, perhaps even our own.

Yet even as Nguyen looks to global crises of consumption, her work springs from a deep love of food and the many kinds of appetite and abundance it encompasses. In her own words: "Hunger is a very human thing that keeps me driven, hopeful and in love with the world despite all its faults." As this exhibition shows us, gluttony is as rich and slippery an idea as its subject matter. It can be used to bring some of the worst kinds of human excess into focus. But also to remind us of the multiple and vital ways that food brings joy.

Emilia Symis captures these different aspects of gluttony in two gorgeously realised cakes that serve a fitting dessert to the exhibition. The first, immaculately iced in gold, would look at home in the Palace of Versailles (there is more than a hint of Marie Antoinette's sticky end in the flashing blade) or Donald Trump's gilded Manhattan penthouse. The second is the kind of over-ambitious homemade creation you pour your heart into for your best friend's birthday. It sags and dribbles rivulets of food colouring: the dubious result of a triumphant baking orgy. Both are over the top, and gluttonous. But while one projects a brittle luxury, the other oozes love.



*Emilia Symis, All That Glitters is Not Gold, 2023. Acrylic on canvas with gold leaf edges, 90 x 60 x 4 cm.  
Image courtesy and © the artist*





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