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Book as Art XIV: Temptations

by Krystyna Wasserman

Book as Art XIV: Temptations, as its name suggests, sets out to explore those appetites, instincts, and desires which drive individuals to indulge in passions both fundamental and forbidden. Any number of inclinations or situations can compel us to succumb to temptation's siren call -- curiosity, weakness, inexperience, greed -- but I will not attempt an analysis of the complex nature of temptation from religious, philosophical and psychological perspectives. Taking a personal approach (for what temptation is not personal?), I will discuss temptation as seen through the artists' eyes, and my own. The seventy-three visual and literary works presented here focus on the enticements of food, love, escape, and self-destruction. The exhibition includes artists' books, paintings, drawings, prints, sketchbooks, and poetry by thirty-seven artists from the United States, France, Poland, Belgium, and Russia.

Food, the Primal Temptation

As with many people, the memories of my first temptations are related to food. They take me back to my childhood in Poland and to the time when my sister Elizabeth was born. In the 1950s it was very difficult to buy bananas in Poland -- their cost was exorbitant and they were considered a great luxury. Because, unlike me, my little sister was a sickly child and a poor eater, my mother would occasionally pay outrageous prices for bananas, knowing that Elizabeth adored them. Locking them away in the cupboard, she would warn me that the coveted fruits were for "Elzunia" (Elizabeth's nickname) only. I found this extremely unfair, and when everybody was out I would find the key to the cupboard and devour all the bananas. They were a temptation I could not resist!

Memories of food temptations also inspired painter Ellen Lanyon and poet Diane Wakoski to create the book *Making a Sacher Torte*. The title refers to the unforgettable cake baked by Wakoski's piano teacher, who had escaped from Vienna during World War II and who celebrated her new life in the United States with this decadent dessert. Wakoski's poems poignantly juxtapose human dramas, loneliness, disappointments, and the bitter taste of aging with the beauty and sensual appeal of food. Ellen Lanyon's whimsically surreal illustrations portray Sacher torte flying over Niagara Falls, flowers growing in teacups, tomatoes jumping out of a green tomato pie, and birds descending upon a Lebanese crock of olives.

Food as primordial temptation is the focus of Lorraine Grace's *Three Apples*. For centuries since the succulent apple proved irresistible to Adam and Eve, artists have portrayed this innocent fruit as culprit -- the quintessential symbol of temptation. Grace continues this tradition in her painting, as does Wewer Keohane in her artist's book, *It Wasn't the Apple*, coyly shaped like the fruit itself. Keohane includes the image of Adam and Eve on the pages of her book, and her text, in defense of the much-maligned fruit, declares that the "problem was not the apple in the tree. It was...the pair on the ground!"

Food as temptation is also the theme of Molly Van Nice's book installation *Dinner with Mr. Dewey*. The artist presents a fabulous feast of altered books, all classified according to the Dewey Decimal System. The meal includes, among other eclectic "specialités de la maison," a bottle of wine, the skeleton of a fish, corn on the cob, and chocolate cake. Giving in to temptation here is a good thing, for the books provide an unending source of intellectual nourishment.

Julie Chen's *Bon Bon Mots* is an artist's book in the form of an exquisite box of chocolates. Though we might be tempted to find sweet centers within, Chen surprises us with a bitter aftertaste. Unwrapping the confections, one discovers that they are actually tiny books containing words and poems relating to the artist's innermost feelings, anxieties and doubts.

Like a bon vivant whose wit hides many wounds, Chen seems to tell us that the euphoria of her chocolates is only fleeting.

The universal allure of food -- its fundamental appeal to our senses -- is palpably demonstrated in the still life paintings by Patricia Tobacco Forrester, Elena Vidotto, and Arika Madeyska. The joyful vibrancy of Forrester's *Hot Peppers*, the poetic simplicity of Vidotto's *Turnips*, and the "fruitful" abundance of Madeyska's *Vitamines* affirm George Mauner's observation that still life, more than any other genre, "tests the painter's ability to render convincingly and in the purest form the appearance of things of this world."^[1] Compare these works to Sally Agee's *Oh Pasta!*, a wink to Edouard Manet's (1832-1883) figural still life *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, depicting an al fresco family picnic. Recalling another famous picture, Pieter Bruegel's (c. 1525-1569) *The Peasant Wedding*, Anne Buguet's *Pumpkin Feast in the Village*, an illustration from her children's book *La Nuit des Courges Ensorcelées* portrays dining as an integral form of social interaction and communal celebration.

Susan Due Percy's drawing, *Thanksgiving Sweet Potatoes*, demonstrates a different way of seeing these humble vegetables. The large elongated bulbs of sweet potatoes evoke the passion of entangled human bodies united in the act of love.

Deborah Deichler's *Breakfast for a Small Giantess* is a whimsical depiction of three butterflies, lured to the artist's studio by the sweet aroma of her still life subjects -- sugar, raspberries and roses. "One butterfly was unusually large, a giantess as butterflies go in the state of Vermont," explained the artist; "A small giantess," she added, more accurately describing the inspiration for the title of her work.

Susan Joy Share endeavors to tempt viewers with healthy snacks in her work *Carrots Anyone?*, a box of baby carrots, which she offers to the public. This artist's book is part of a performance piece inspired by the "cigarette girl," who sold Camel cigarettes and chewing gum in movie houses during the early part of the 20th century. While carrots may not be as tempting to moviegoers as popcorn, Share's work appeals to today's increasingly health-conscious society.

On a darker note, Ann Starr's painted book of prayers explores the guilt associated with the enjoyment of food, which is often coupled with the obsession of dieting. On one page the artist thanks God for the beauty and abundance of food depicted with great gusto, while on another page she cowers beneath a table, beseeching forgiveness and fearing divine punishment for succumbing to food's seduction.

"I Love You, I Love You Not..."

For my own part, I never stopped being tempted by food, but when I became a teenager, this passion was supplanted by a keen interest in the opposite sex. Rather than relating to boys my own age, however, I usually developed crushes on impossible targets, such as famous foreign movie stars. My mother kept a postcard of the young Gary Cooper in her drawer, and I considered him seriously, but he was my mother's age and far too old for me. Instead, I set my sights on French actor Gérard Philippe, whose films *Fanfan La Tulipe*, *La Chartreuse de Parme*, and *Le Diable au Corps* were big hits in Poland in the 1950s. I believe it was 1953 when Philippe visited Warsaw, and as a reporter for my school newspaper, *The School Echo*, I somehow convinced his entourage to grant me an interview with him. In his debonair presence my meager French failed me, but I did get his autographed photo, which I cherish to this day.

The spirit of sexual awakening is the subject of Peregrine Honig's *Ovubet*. The title refers to the book's oval-shaped dolly pages, on which artist has drawn the images of twenty-six adolescent girls, and the word "alphabet," with each girl's name being presented in alphabetical order. Here temptation is of the mind as well as the body, as the heroines experience the revelation of erotic fantasy. "My art," says Honig, "captures the awkward beauty of girlhood, the residue of shameless sensuality."

Kris Waldherr's painting *Cupid and Psyche* portrays the lovely maiden asleep, her sweetness made seductive by a temptingly transparent gown. Cupid, the god of love, is besotted by her beauty and cannot take his eyes off her. Defying his mother Venus's orders to make Psyche fall in love with an ugly, old man, Cupid falls in love with her himself. He visits her every night, but since he is a god and she a mortal, he instructs her never to attempt to look upon him. Psyche cannot resist the temptation to see her beloved, but when she violates his command, he leaves her. Punished for their transgressions, Cupid and Psyche endure many trials, but eventually Jupiter bestows immortality on Psyche, and the lovers are forever reunited.

The connection between food and love, both sexual and maternal, is the subject of Katherine A. Glover's book *Green Salad*. When the artist's lover prepared a special salad for her enjoyment, "passion won over appetite, and the salad was left, uneaten." Yet, explains Glover, "the fact that the following day my son found this salad notably delicious inspired me to write a poem and create a book shaped like a head of lettuce served in a bowl. As I watched my son eating the salad, I

thought of his coming into manhood, and his emerging sexuality. My maternal feelings merged with my very physical temptations of mature love."^[2]

Inspired by Erica Jong's poem *The Eggplant Epithalamion*, Terry Braunstein conceived an artist's book *Egg-plant* to articulate her feelings about human manifestations of creativity such as fertility, conception and birth. Braunstein goes beyond Jong's perception of eggplant as "love's dark purple boat," and demonstrates how the creative process parallels growth in the natural world.

"...To Take Flight, Far Off!"^[3]

When I was in college in Poland, the longing to leave overtook all other temptations. For as long as I could remember, I had a great desire to travel and live in America, that enormous country where cowboys fought their battles, and the moon shone over Miami. My imagination had been fed on Westerns, postcards of Niagara Falls, the Maxwell House Coffee I drank with my mother in the kitchen, the *Chattanooga Choo Choo* song, and the second-hand American clothing we all acquired at the *ciuchy* (flea market) in Warsaw. My move to the United States in 1971 and my subsequent marriage to an American were the fulfillment of all my "escape" dreams. Not only could I now eat as many bananas as I wished, but I also found love. I felt very fortunate indeed.

Escape of a more transcendental nature is the theme of Donna Thomas's book of poetry and paintings. *Escape* reveals the artist's temptation to "slip out of responsibility, worry only about small things," as she plans her flight to the mountains. Shireen Holman's escape is her art. In the midst of her household duties of cooking and cleaning, the artist is overwhelmed by the urge to flee to the sanctuary of her studio to make something lasting. As an act of defiance she quits her chores, fills her coffee mugs with pencils and brushes, and proceeds to her studio to create *The Artist at Home*. Beatrice Coron's escapes are restaurants, take out counters, and sidewalk cafés. Her books of paper cuts portray silhouettes of diners engaged in lively conversations, coffee drinkers watching the passersby, sushi eaters raising cups of sake, and philosophers contemplating life.

Darkness at 8:45, 9:05, and 9:40 A.M.

During my own lifetime I have known dark days filled with rage and desire for revenge, but, thankfully, the urge to kill and destroy, explored here by Sandra Jackman's chilling work, *On the Darkling Plain*, has not been part of my experience. Jackman's artist's book is a painful reminder that the human race can be lured and led by powerful maniacs with deadly consequences. *On the Darkling Plain* is about the desire to destroy and the vulnerability of man. Inspired by a 18th-century poem by Matthew Arnold entitled *Dover Beach*, and created in 2000, the work seems ominously prescient of the September 11 tragedy. Its shocking topicality resonates with our fears -- the universal nightmare that haunts us all. Recalling the panic that reigned during those horrific attacks, *On the Darkling Plain* portrays people running for their lives, scattering in all directions as a plane hovers menacingly overhead. The pages of the book are burned, torn, and covered with ashes.

"Protect Me From What I Want!"^[4]

We face temptations every day; they are part of our existence and of the human condition. Food, love, the need to escape -- these are just a small sampling of the endless temptations that can entice us. Temptations stir overwhelming emotions within us and often cause us to make life-changing decisions. With all of this in mind, it is consoling to realize that temptation is not a sin, but rather a condition of choice; submission or resistance is all up to us. The ability to choose -- and choose freely -- is the wonder of our humanity. Whether we choose wisely or foolishly, well, that's another story.

Notes

1. George Mauner, "Manet and the Life of Nature Morte," in *Manet: The Still Life Painting* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 2000), p. 12.
2. Telephone interview with Krystyna Wasserman 31 Jan., 2000.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Brise Marine " (Sea Breeze), trans. Henry Weinfield, in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 21.
4. Jenny Holzer, "Truism," in *Jenny Holzer*, Diane Waldman (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), p. 84.

About the Author

Krystyna Wasserman is the Director of the Library and Research Center at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, a position she has held since 1982. She is also the curator of the exhibition *Book as Art XIV: Temptations*. Ms. Wasserman holds a master's degree in journalism, from Warsaw University, Poland, and in art history, from the University of Maryland, and an M.L.S. from Pratt Institute, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Brooklyn. She is an active member of the Art Libraries Society of North America, the College Art Association, and the Women's National Book Association.

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The allure of food, love, money, and other permitted and forbidden pleasures are explored in the exhibition *Book as Art XIV: Temptations*, on view through January 5, 2003 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts' Library and Research Center. The 73 paintings, drawings, and distinctive books by 37 artists will focus on temptations that are ever enticing to humans. (left: Anne Buguet, *Night of the Enchanted Gourds*, 1998, gouache on paper, 14 x 20 1/2 inches, On loan from the artist). Food has seductive associations with relationships, love, and sex. Katherine Glover's book *Green Salad* takes the shape of a bowl of salad that had been prepared by the artist's lover, which was then left untouched when romance intervened. Submit your art. Upload your creations for people to see, favourite and share. Status update. Post an update. Tell the community what's on your mind. Journal. Post a journal. Share your thoughts, experiences and the tales behind the art. Literature. Submit your writing. Upload stories, poems, character descriptions & more. Poll. Ask the community. Find out what other deviants think - about anything at all. Motion book. Tell a visual story. Create comics and graphic novels that jump off the screen. DA Muro. Paint a picture. Experiment with DeviantArt's own digital drawing tools. Add to Favos The Athenaeum Music & Arts Library, one of 16 nonprofit membership libraries in the US, is devoted exclusively to music and art materials and presents exhibitions, art classes, and events. *Book as Art XIV: Temptations*, 2002. *Book as Art XV*, 2004. *A book of signs: the women's march*, January 21, 2017, Washington DC, 2018. *Books: inside and out*, 1990.