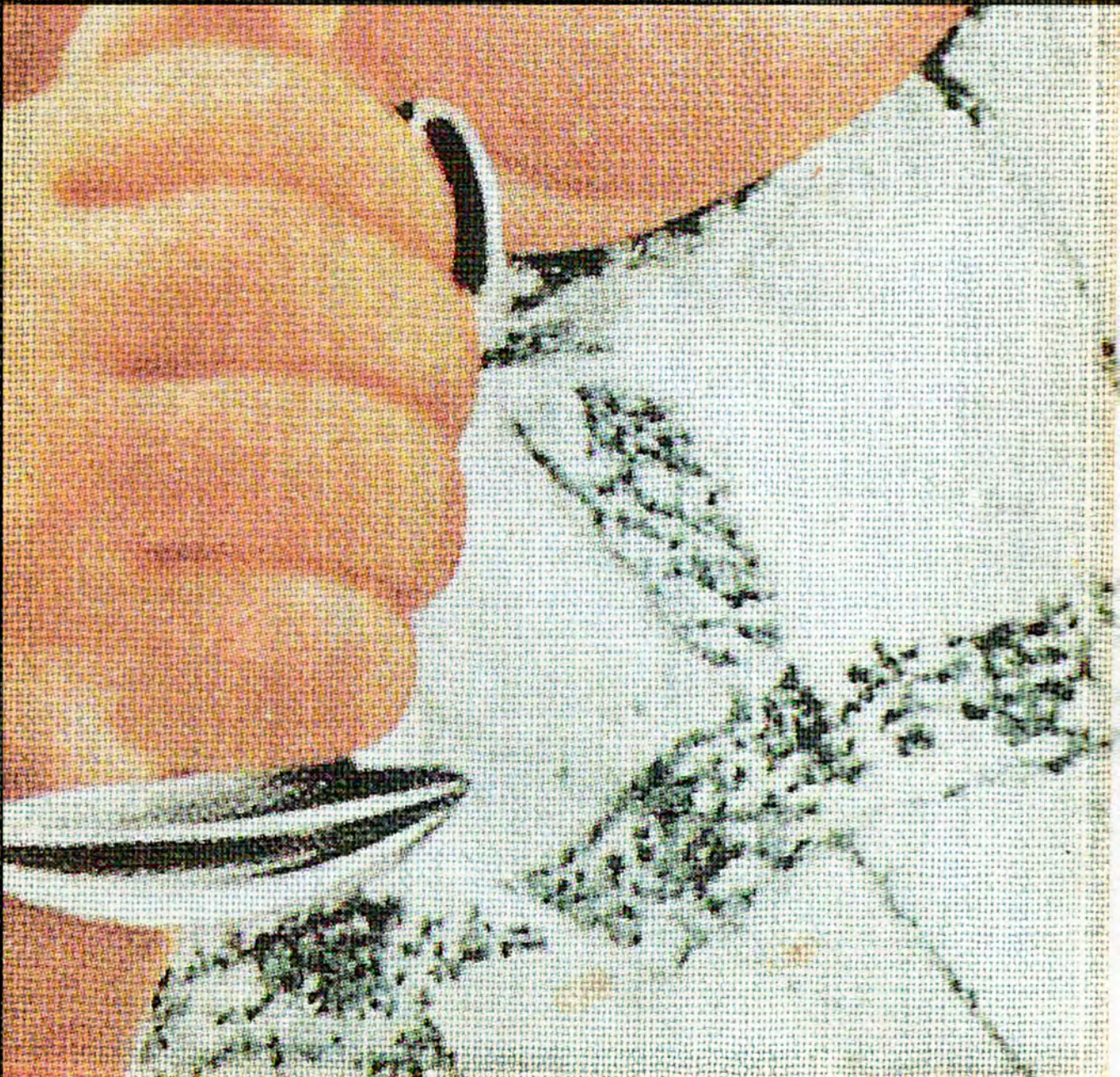




Acquired Taste

Food and the Art of Consumption



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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FILLMORE

Acquired Taste

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*Denotes recipes

GLAZED IMAGES

Megan Fizell

As a species, we are predisposed to seek out sugar to supplement our diet. “Sweet tooth” and “sugar rush” are colloquial phrases used to describe our bodies’ cravings for and reaction to the substance. In nature, sugar is found in the simple form of fructose produced within the flesh of ripe fruits. According to food activist Michael Pollan, fructose is “a rare and precious thing, typically encountered seasonally...when it comes packaged in a whole food, full of fibre which slows its absorption and valuable micronutrients.”¹ In the shape of fruit, sugar has riddled the paintings of the Western tradition dating back to the Northern Renaissance;² however, in contemporary works it is ominously absent. How closely does what we, as a culture, depict in art mirror what we consume?

The rise of the Pop Art movement saw the birth of confectionary imagery used to highlight consumption and excess. In the early 1960s, Wayne Thiebaud painted cakes in balanced and simplified compositions suggesting the counter displays of cafeterias and delicatessens. He cleverly used a thick application of paint to mimic the look and texture of frosting, underlining the idea of “object transference” for works in which the paint literally assumes the appearance of the element it is depicting. During this movement, Claes Oldenburg made his 1962 sculpture *Floor Cake*, a soft sculpture made of canvas and filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes. The swelling structure of the cake echoed the abundance found in Thiebaud’s paintings. It was at this time that the American diet began to change as well. Not only were cakes and pastries appearing on canvases, they were conveniently prepackaged en masse under the banners of the Hostess and Little Debbie companies, enabling Americans to readily consume at will.

The presence of processed sugar prevails in the recent work by Contemporary artists selected for *Acquired Taste: Food and the Art of Consumption*. Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik has installed a doormat made of powdered sugar and Jennifer Rubell created an edible installation. In once such interactive work titled *Old Fashioned*, an entire wall is covered with doughnuts and the viewer selects and consumes a pastry within the gallery, turning the simple act of eating into a theatric performance. The oversized build of the popsicles in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* by MyersBerg Studios is a less-than-subtle nod to Oldenburg’s work in that it presents the audience with a before-and-after illustration of consumption.

Considering the trend of contemporary artists to focus their efforts on processed sugar, it is important to note that 40% of the artists in *Acquired Taste* either use or portray junk food in their work. Our predisposition to seek out the sweet stuff speaks to the pervasiveness of sugar in the visual arts. According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average American consumes around 2,673 calories per day with 1,100 of them in the form of fat and sugar. These statistics inadvertently correlate; 40% of the works in the exhibition depict sugar, while 41% of the calories from the daily American diet are consumed as fat and sugar.³ If the spectrum of dishes and delicacies presented in *Acquired Taste* is anything to go by, we really do depict the foods we love to eat.

¹ Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008): 112

² Norbert, Schneider, *Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003): 121.

³ Tom Philpott, “The American Diet in One Chart, with Lots of Fats and Sugars,” *Grist*, 5 April 2011.

See <http://www.grist.org/industrial-agriculture/2011-04-05-american-diet-one-chart-lots-of-fats-sugars>