

Brains in a Golden Gratin

Makes 4 servings, on view January 20 and good thru March 17, 2024

MoCA Arlington is pleased to serve *Brains in a Golden Gratin*, a solo exhibition by resident artist Bahar Yürükoğlu. The title of the dish is taken from the 1982 cookbook *Hors d'Oeuvre*, published by Time-Life Books (Alexandria, VA).

“Cleaning brains”

The corresponding photograph in the cookbook shows two pruney hands removing the membrane off a brain above a basin of water made orange by the calf’s blood. This instructional image is as utterly banal as it is horrifying, and you will not find it among the collaged fragments in Yürükoğlu’s new works. But something in the “spirit” of this photograph—and the recipe—prevails throughout all of the works in *Brains in a Golden Gratin*: Yürükoğlu takes the messy, often revolting stuff of our mortal bodies and transient lives, and searches for connections between them and ideals of beauty, motherhood, and civilization—all somehow (and indeed intimately) related to food—with gusto. Unlike the Time-Life recipe, however, the completed works do not attempt to tame the above into a (merely) palatable dish for visual consumption; the medium of collage instantiates the artist’s cerebral processes of visual and logocentric “thinking” and makes them available in perpetuity with all of their rough edges, both physically and metaphysically. After all, taking stock of these visual and thematic connections and mindfully making space for them (without trying to overdetermine or banish them) is good housekeeping for your brain.

“Slicing the brains”

“The brains that you should buy,” writes the authors of *Hors d'Oeuvre*, “should be pale pink, plump and evenly formed.” Yürükoğlu too exercises extreme caution before she lets found images onto her collages, but, unlike the brains for the gratin, heterogeneity—as opposed to evenness—is the norm in the artist’s “kitchen.” In addition to vintage cookbooks, she scours anatomy and nature atlases, DIY books, instruction manuals, and art historical sources to build up these works. As a result, several categories of visual specimens (minerals, shells, horses, ancient statuary, diagrams of the female reproductive system, miscellaneous medical imagery) resurface across the series, but there are few organizing principles beyond the optical intuition of the artist’s eye.

“Combine brain slices with mild-flavored vegetables...”

In a similar vein, artist Ellsworth Kelly expounds on the paradoxical method that lets him source motifs from the *physical* world (a museum window, a toilet *alla turca*, shadows across a staircase) for his *abstract* paintings: “I automatically *distance* the idea of what I’m looking at... I don’t look at [what I see] with a thinking mind but with the possibilities of my vision.”* And yet, if art taught us anything about vision since Paul Cézanne, it is that vision cannot be divorced from sensation and bodily experience, and those do not take place in a vacuum. Just as Kelly advocates for “a painting whose interest is not only in itself, but also in its relationship to things outside it,”** Yürükoğlu takes advantage of the facility of collage for abstracting worldly phenomena from their origins and (re)constituting another—strange but vaguely familiar—world of relations on the same plane: technicolored pills spill from a diagrammed ovary to a spoon held by a disembodied hand in *Over-Easy*, 2022, while, elsewhere in *Mother*, 2023, multiple, oversize hearts cramp the viscera of a goddess Athena who has hijacked Aphrodite’s shell.

“The blood may affect the flavor... the surface membrane might contract during cooking and distort the shape of the brains.”

If art historian Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, 1926–1929, attempted to tap into the reservoir of visual continuities—what he called *Pathosformeln* [“pathos formulae”]—across cultures from ancient to modern, Yürükoğlu brings visual order into the chaos of being alive in the twenty-first century: she does so *not* by forensically seeking gradual migration of forms across centuries, but by letting deeply intimate and temporary associations emerge, filtered through her own experiences of motherhood, modern medicine, domestic labor, as well as of natural and cultural timelines. Despite the particularity of Yürükoğlu’s point of view, I know that the artist is *not* interested in introducing a new set of symbols or symbolic relations, almost like riddles, with a predetermined code to be deciphered. In fact, she welcomes you, the viewer, to shudder and delight before the strangeness and the beauty of this world in your own way whatever sensation, thought, or emotion it may elicit. Warburg named the *Mnemosyne Atlas* after Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory and the mother of the nine Muses; Yürükoğlu’s collages, then, could be said to constitute an abridged *Theian* Atlas, after Mnemosyne’s titan sister Theia—the goddess of sight and brilliance, mother of Helios (Sun), Selene (Moon), and Eos (Dawn). It’s no wonder there are so many rhinestones.

“Coating the brains and tomatoes”

Yürükoğlu is averse to tomatoes, so for this dish she suggests replacing them with inversions: throughout these collages, what is typically “inside” become visible from the “outside,” be it the interior of a womb or a cake, or, in the case of seashells, the enclosure always intimates its visual unraveling. Like ciphers of the artist’s exquisite sensitivity to her environment, they simultaneously embody the curiosity of the inquiring mind and the fragility of bodies and things in the face of human intervention, whether physical or epistemological. Another kind of inversion takes place in the background of these works (with the exception of *Democracy II*, 2022, made on postcard stock): here, Yürükoğlu has repurposed photographs, which she shot herself by filtering light through pieces of colorful plexiglas, and—in some cases—projecting this light onto volcanic stones. Indeed, this use of plexiglas in her artistic practice is closely associated with taking a (literal) back seat in many of the collages. Their ambient light illuminates and deflects how Yürükoğlu approaches the issues metonymically contained within the works. This phenomenon itself could be seen as a counterweight to the process described above, sifting and stilling an entropic universe through a very personal sieve into becoming art. On the other hand, the authored, photographic backdrops of the collages *will* formal—if not metaphysical—coherence into fragments of lived phenomena pasted onto them, like the proposed containers for the brains: “...the cooking vessels are small gratin dishes, which make tidy individual servings.” Thus, with *Brains in a Golden Gratin*, Yürükoğlu neatly but not unexpectedly consummates the all-too-familiar feedback loop between art and life in delectable portions. Serve immediately.

Gökcan Demirkazık, Los Angeles, December 2023

Bahar Yürükoğlu works with photography, installation, sculpture, and film in order to probe the boundaries between the human body with its environment, abstraction and kitsch, and the natural and the artificial, particularly through her experimentation with light and space.

Endnotes (may be formatted as footnotes depending on the layout)

*Ellsworth Kelly, quoted in Tricia Y. Paik, “Sights of His Life,” in *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards*, eds. Ian Berry and Jessica Eisenthal (Saratoga Springs, NY and New York: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and DelMonico Books, 2021), 316.

**Kelly, “Fragmentation and the Single Form,” in *Ellsworth Kelly: Postcards*, 8.