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A taste of art

BY KRISTINA ALDA / PRAGUE DAILY MONITOR / PUBLISHED 13 DECEMBER 2007



PETRA VALENTOVÁ

Petra Valentová's pig series explores the rawness and intimacy of food preparation as a reflection of human relationships.

Imagine one day you wake up to find your world has turned into a landscape made of cheese. Can't find a husband to your satisfaction? Create one out of lard. And if you're tired of the yearly ritual of baking Christmas cookies, why not make it into a glamorous event, complete with tousled hair and false eyelashes? Never mind that you might happen to be a man.

The exhibition *Smažíme umění* (Cooking Art), on display at the airy upstairs studio of Galerie kritiků at palác Adria until 23 December, dares viewers to step outside the normal boundaries of their relationship with food, blurring the line between the absurd and the logical.

Thirteen young artists, including Pavel Ryška, Petra Valentová, Lenka Klodová and Renata Slámková, examine food from a multitude of angles: food as edible art, food as an abstraction, food as a discovery, food as an expression of interpersonal relationships and gender roles, food as sex and, finally, food as a source of gleefully immature humour.

We resist the urge to nibble on masks made of gingerbread and hear dinner-table conversations between invisible diners. We witness a man in drag posing as he

prepares to bake Christmas cookies, see a woman lovingly handle a butchered pig, observe a child eating the contents of his nose.

Large colour photographs and computer-animated cartoons stand on display alongside objects made of perishable materials such as lard and chocolate – which at times makes the exhibition appear somewhat patched together and messy, like food itself.

"We have got various motivations for eating, food brings us to an array of discoveries," writes exhibition curator Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro. "This exhibition understands food from the perspective of equal interests, regardless of gender, by means of spiritually 'cooking art'."

Petra Valentová's series of colour photographs explores the rawness and intimacy of food as a reflection of human relationships. The preparation of a whole butchered pig for the oven takes on the appearance of an intimate ritual, as female hands caress and tie up the carcass. In another series, a raw turkey is artfully arranged, as though it were a nude posing for the camera.

Pavel Ryška takes a different but equally playful approach with his "Cheesy Luck", a computer animation starring a pixilated chick that wakes up one day to find its world has turned into a cheesy landscape. Frustrated, the chick kicks about chunks of cheese as it sets out on a journey through a grim dairy desert full of towering cheese cactuses. "I won't leave things this way," it says, via silent film-style intertitles. And sure enough, by sundown, the chick has turned into a mouse and starts to happily gobble the world around it.

Renata Slámková's "Fantomaska se Švestkovými povidly" ("Mask with Plum Butter") is a series of gingerbread masks based on her own face, complete with colourful icing. The soft organic appearance of the material is at odds with the masks' expressions – serene but stiff, like the stony grimace of a death mask.

For art objects, the masks look delicious. So much so that some visitors were apparently unable to resist the urge: Several of the gingerbread faces are missing noses. Food as art? Art as food? Evidently, no clear separation exists between the two.

