



## New Eyes

*A conversation between W.M. Hunt and Efrem Zelony Mindel  
looking at the work of Arden Surdam*

WMH:

Efrem, you and I communicate with each other on a regular basis by exchanging images in a visual *corps exquis*. We don't get much of a chance to talk about our choices so let's take this opportunity to do that here, with a look at the work of Arden Surdam

Start with Surdam's *Still Life with Rayfish*. I like the mess. The whole piece seems wonderfully off balance - no subtle Laura Letinsky sleight of hand here - this is much weirder and wilder. I like the hand that may be missing an index finger and the odd tart-like food stuffs on plates and the dripped blood. The whole thing riffs on classic still life - *nature morte* - but there is something very whacked and contemporary here. I liked it right away. And this nature is definitely morte.

For me the master of the photographic food portrait was Irving Penn, with Jan Groover as the master of the tabletop. Ms. Surdam acknowledges her predecessors here but is confident to go her own route. I like the Penn-like wedge of roquefort in front of the clear plastic seamless in *Charcuterie* and the oysters à la Groover on Mylar in *The Buffet*.

I am not being an art snob when I cite art historically valued artists like Laura Letinsky, Irving Penn and Jan Groover. It is simply a way of describing work for others and to shake loose new thoughts in my own head.

Like a *maraca*, I rattle and bow to you, Efrem.

EZM:

There's a boom in still life right now to push beyond the plausible and even the edible. Objects become lush and I get the urge looking at a lot of this work that I want to feel these things in my mouth but not necessarily swallow them. Surdam pushes the digestible to this place that starts to feel more like ritual. The consumable has become about the visual. Feeding ourselves with looking at the absurd until we are so satisfied that we can't have a single morsel more.

Surdam has a very strong basis of history and theory for her work both visually and philosophically. I find myself thinking a lot about some of her contemporaries too like Maisie Cousins or Bobby Doherty. Surdam's works seem to break the rules of what is expected while welcoming in new forms of thoughtful macabre. We are, after all, the fruits of our insecurities and I think this work plays a lot on those desires to understand what's inside, literally.

When we talk about the "myths historically coded into our ideas about food," I think that is directly connected to what we're looking at here. I'm generally drawn to anything that smashes expectations. Frankly this work makes me think a lot about the work of William M. Harnett a late 19th Century trompe-l'œil painter whose still lives are often a little bit less than acceptable. In Surdam's work, like Harnett's, I linger on the places where things go awry. In this picture *Picnic* the line of vision is obscured by what looks like a sheet of frosted Plexi, that single tentacle of the squid branching out, like propagating lightning, brings the whole composition into itself. "What the hell is happening?" There is something very covetous here in the intimacy of the works call to understand. It becomes deeply personal.

WMH:

From Maisie Cousins and Bobby Doherty to William M. Hartnett, you dazzle me.

The sensual appeal of this work is the visual. Continuing to look at the work, I appreciate the density of the dark color in the works like *Caviar* and *Liver I & II*. *Black Pudding* looks like a sandwich soaked in crankcase oil, impenetrably black and thick. Best is the artist's celebration of light as it bounces around in these images. She spins the notion of how drapery should behave in classic still life, and the result is full of light.

The Artist's name, Arden Surdam, piqued my interest. It works out as possibly meaning a silent Eden, a place of solitude and great beauty without sound. Deaf beauty. Not bad.

She studied under JoAn Callis at CalArts, and I was thinking of Callis when first seeing this work. Callis has always been a sensualist, a seeming seeker of pleasure. That and this work are redolent with female sexuality. Callis' iconic "Man at table, 1977" depicts the arm and left side of a man seated at a table covered with a white damask cloth with an enormous red wine stain, a loaded suggestion of the female presence. Both of these artists like their fluids.

What about the insertions of candid photographs in the Surdam still lifes? At first I thought they were body parts, but they are actually cut outs from vintage cookbooks. These show up in a number of the works and act like mirrors reflecting back upon the artist as if to make self portraits or little *puncti*. They are unexpected and violate the notion of still life — as if there were rules governing what can or cannot be included. They interrupt the classic mode of drapery and food and blood.

Now you.

EZM:

One of the things I believe photography does so well is lust for the sensation of touch. Being two-dimensional the torture of seeing and imagining, but never being able to have is always present. I think about that a lot in these photos, that is something that deeply adds to the ceremony of Surdam's photos in particular.

I'm drawn to the density as well; like in *Context Collapse II & IV*. The lush combination of the drapery, smoke, and fire is so incredibly pleasurable. There is a great interview with another young contemporary artist Rachel Stern, in which she says, "Fire is decadent. Fire isn't useful anymore in daily life." It's interesting to me to see how these seemingly archaic, if not obsolete, elements come together Surdam's context. The musings of the offal and fire layered with found imagery speak to the sanctity of these seemingly new exorcisms of beauty and desire.

WMH:

Like you I respond to the very basic elements in this work, its primal quality. Surdam does touch all the senses. Intellectually she has done the homework; art historically she knows her stuff, slyly alluding to iconic Renaissance and Modern Art paintings. I appreciate the left and right brain balance.

Myth was referenced in our correspondence. The mythological story I can think of with this work is Tantalus. He boiled up parts of his son for the Olympian gods to

feast on. He got punished, and we got *tantalize* as a word. Dark, but a swell mix of food and drink and life and death.

Arden's appreciation of Proust is palpable. That writer's statement that the "real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" comes mind, and body when looking at this work.

That is how she sees.

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WMH and EZ-M delight in collaborating. Reacting and sharing their thoughts about Arden Surdam's new work presented these writer-curators with a unique opportunity to do that.

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