

sculpture

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Installation view of “Around the Table,” 2024. Photo: Vivian Marie Doering

“Around the Table”

December 4, 2024, by Sarah Tanguy

Washington, DC

de la Cruz Gallery, Georgetown University

What struck me most about “Around the Table” ([on view](#) through December 8, 2024) was the limited presence of food as material and image, a surprising approach for a show exploring food as a social connector. But curator Vesela Sretenović makes a strong case for her conceptual focus on global threads associated with sharing, including patterns of consumption and labor. Impassioned installations by eight international artists weave personal and shared histories into moments of beauty, conflict, and contemplation. Added together, their layered conversation feels like wandering through a food court after hours and being left to sample on your own.

Suzanne Lacy's all-women *International Dinner Party, 1979* introduces the idea of food as a tool of collective celebration and resistance. Using photography, a re-created site map, and other archival materials, Lacy revisits her 1979 dinner-performance in honor of Judy Chicago, organized over 24 hours at different venues worldwide, and the premiere of Chicago's landmark *Dinner Party*, two touchstones of feminist art and activism.

Food as social glue isn't immediately visible in Jennifer Wen Ma's suspended dome of glittering glass pendants and cascading black vines. But once inside *BElonging*, motion detectors trigger lights and some 50 recordings of more than 200 local participants who respond to Ma's prompt, "Tell us about a time that someone's action made you feel that you belonged." Many statements address food directly, like the whispered, "Can I try that butter chicken?" Ma explains that the leaves reinforce the message of "longing to belong" already embedded in the title; their laser-cut design is linked to the Chinese word "belonging." Within this wonderfully intimate forum, the lived experience of others provides sustenance and warmth.

Helen Zugraib's equally intimate *Eat the News* (2016–ongoing) delivers a gut-wrenching commentary about ingestion, highlighting her personal trauma as a Lebanese American and that of others from war-ravaged zones. Seven place settings at a round table each feature a single handmade glass plate filled with collaged newspaper clippings bearing images of destruction and human suffering; the fragments are connected by patches of gold paint and, in one case, punctuated by the word "hope." The eighth setting offers an empty dish and a stool. An Arab gesture of hospitality, the empty stool invites viewers to sit down and reflect.

No seating accompanies the antique dining table of Valeska Soares's sumptuous *mis-en-scène*. Instead, spirit-filled, vintage crystal goblets cover the table's mirrored surface, evoking the aftermath of a fancy party. Echoing Golden Age vanitas paintings, an uneasy tension ensues between absence and presence, haves and have-nots. Though seductive, *Finale* (2013) taunts with feelings of guilt, loneliness, and unfulfilled desire.

Inclusion is physically channeled through ceramic ware in separate installations by Adam Silverman and Jo Smail. Silverman's *Common Ground III* (2019–24) features a cone-shaped stack of plates made from earth, water, and wood ash gathered by locals in all 56 U.S. states and territories and a photomural charting their respective composition. Smail's display of tea ware and wall-mounted boards, covered in repurposed newspaper and advertising scans, handwritten recipes, and postage envelopes from her native South Africa, explores the policies of apartheid and other social injustices of her childhood.

Welcoming visitors in the gallery lobby, Monsieur Zohore's delightfully provocative, colorful piñatas from the "Dead Ringers" series provide some much-needed humor with their spoofs of such familiar icons as George Washington, Tiger Woods, and Michael Jackson. And yet, undertones of violence and cannibalism complicate the fiesta vibe. The papier-mâché figures must be beaten open, but their promise of sweets nods to the generosity and grace of Félix González-Torres's candy installations.

Michael Rakowitz's *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* best encapsulates the notion of breaking bread as a transformational bridge between different peoples. Out in the courtyard, an unmanned food truck with Illinois plates bears texts in Arab and English, including "A House with a Date Palm Will Never Starve." Inside, a video commemorates a heartwarming feast that Rakowitz held in Dubai, where all the dishes were made from his grandmother's Jewish Arab recipes. There is also an explanatory interview with the artist, who is scheduled to participate in the closing reception.

Food in art has long served as a memory carrier of displacement and joy, an emblem of wealth and want, and a reminder of our mortality. "Around the Table" tackles this well-trodden subject matter with an eclectic selection and communal engagement. In this pluralistic look at our fundamental need to share, some installations express a more discernable link to food, but all invite slow consumption best savored in the imagination, often with the support of didactics. For me, the most affecting works delivered an immediate experience, fostering connectivity in the face of strife and uncertainty.