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San Antonio

Sandy Skoglund's Immersive Art at the McNay Art Museum

By Kathleen Petty | April 2021

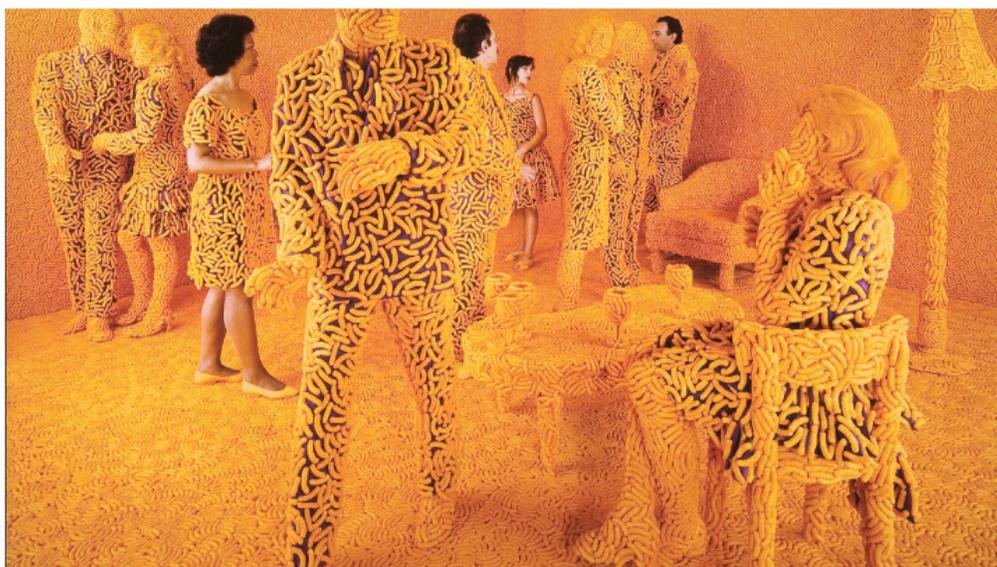


Photo courtesy McNay Art Museum.

Artist Sandy Skoglund never wants her art to come off as superior. Rather, she sees her works as reflections of a society of which she is as much a part as anyone examining her pieces.

That's what she told René Paul Barilleaux, McNay Art Museum head of curatorial affairs, in a video interview when "Cocktail Party," which features cheese doodle covered sculptures, was first installed at the museum a decade ago. That sentiment has continued to hold true for her, including in her new largescale piece, "Winter," which made its museum debut as part of the McNay's latest exhibition, *Limitless! Five Women Reshape Contemporary Art*, on display through Sept. 19. "Winter' is an intense blue and it's really meant to evoke the cold and crisp bareness of winter," Barilleaux says.

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In “Cocktail Party,” part of the McNay’s permanent collection and back on display in Limitless!, Skoglund uses cheese doodle snacks to highlight the unnaturalness of interacting at a social gathering—an experience everyone has at some point. In “Winter,” she also captures a moment in time, albeit a quieter one, and leaves space for contemplation thanks to her carefully crafted figures and recognizable forms, like snowflakes, plus the focus on a singular color.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, guests will have the chance to experience video installations, including “Botanic 3,” by Jennifer Steinkamp, which is part of the permanent collection and is projected on floating screens. Another video by Martine Gutierrez is presented on all four walls of a pavilion that is meant to make visitors feel like they’ve stepped into a club.

An installation in the AT&T Lobby by Letitia Huckaby opens the exhibition while Yayoi Kusama’s “All the Eternal Love I Have for Pumpkins” sits near the end of the show and literally invites guests into the piece. Made with mirrors, wood, LED and other materials, the work is a full room that individuals can step into one by one, just as they did in 2018 when Kusama’s “Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity” was on display as part of the McNay’s Immersed exhibition.

Knowing how much locals loved that experience is what first inspired this latest exhibit, Barilleaux says. After securing a loan of the Kusama piece from the Dallas Museum of Art, he and Lauren Thompson, assistant curator, built the show around women—an important focus at the McNay—including artists of varying generations, mediums and backgrounds. “They’re all very different, but they all share that fearlessness and are very independent,” he says.

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THE
NEW YORKER

Goings On About Town : Sandy Skoglund

By Johanna Fateman | February, 2020

This veteran American artist's new installation "Winter" transforms the gallery into a surreal periwinkle tableau: statues of owls, the figure of an icy nymph, snowdrifts made from crumpled paper, and giant snowflakes. The installation continues Skoglund's long-standing tradition of staging elaborate environments of high artifice, which she then photographs. Her latest monochrome fantasyland fulfills its dramatic potential in a single picture on the wall: a vigilant little girl stands in a far corner of the installation with a distracted man and woman, her red hair a striking contrast to the blue environment. Another section of the show is devoted to delightful examples of Skoglund's earlier work, including two images, from 1979, set in eerily white rooms. One is dotted with blue and red plastic spoons; the other is punctuated by colorfully striped paper plates. Both images are as playful as they are exacting.

Through March 7.

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Sandy Skoglund. Hybrid Visions

January 24 - March 24, 2019



Sandy Skoglund. *Revenge of the goldfish*, 1981. Courtesy: Paci contemporary gallery (Brescia - Porto Cervo, IT)

On 24 January 2019 it opens to the public in the spaces of CAMERA - Centro Italiano per la Fotografia, in Turin, the important exhibition "Sandy Skoglund. Hybrid Visions", first anthology of the American artist Sandy Skoglund (1946), curated by Germano Celant.

The exhibition brings together works ranging from the beginning in the early Seventies to the still unpublished "Winter" opera, to which the artist has worked for over ten years. It will be this image - accompanied by some of the sculptures created for the installation from which the photograph was taken - the focus of the exhibition: a spectacular world premiere that once again confirms the uniqueness of its research and its language, formed in full conceptual climate to evolve into an imaginary suspended between dream and reality, of extraordinary evocative power.

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The exhibition therefore allows us to follow this path through over one hundred photographs, almost all of large format, and sculptures. We go from the first photographic series produced in the mid-seventies, where the characteristic themes of the domestic interior and its transformation in place of appearances between comic and disturbing, up to the great compositions of the early eighties, which gave the artist international fame.

The exhibition is organized in collaboration with Paci contemporary gallery and with the support of LCA Studio Legale .

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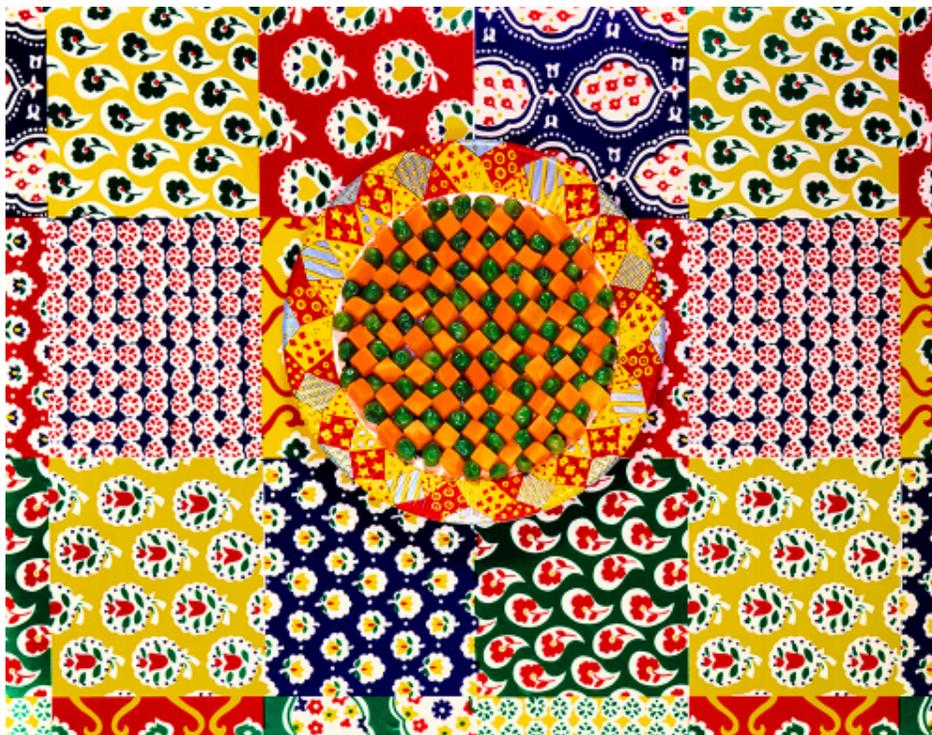
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HYPERALLERGIC

Psychedelic Photographs of Processed Food

In a series on view at Ryan Lee gallery, Sandy Skoglund melds classical still life paintings with Cold War-era consumer culture.

Elena Goukassian • August 1, 2017



Sandy Skoglund, "Peas and Carrots on a Plate" (1978) © Sandy Skoglund, courtesy the artist and RYAN LEE, New York.

One career day in elementary school, I took a field trip to a food photography studio. The encounter sticks in my mind not because the job sounded particularly interesting, but because I remember the photographers describing how often they had to cover the food with inedible glazes and fake water droplets in order to make it presentable enough to shoot. One of them told us he once took home a rare, unsprayed pie, only to discover that the crust was filled with newspaper.

This childhood memory jumped to mind as I walked through Ryan Lee gallery's exhibition of

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Sandy Skoglund's *Food Still Lifes*, a series of 10 color photographs of painstakingly arranged processed foods, all set against popular — and at times instantly recognizable — 1970s contact papers. Shot in 1978, when the artist was in her early 30s, the series marks the beginning of what came to be Skoglund's signature style of staged, surreal, and carefully pigmented tableaux.

The gleaming white walls of a commercial gallery are perfect for this series, which melds classical still life paintings with Cold War-era consumer culture. Skoglund's images of corn, peas, and carrots — all obviously taken out of a can — hang on one wall. A second presents us with more obviously processed foods: marble cake, rectangular slices of ham, and Keebler Fudge Stripes. On the third wall, the food is merely implied — save for one lonely orange, the only seemingly natural food in the series — by way of mysterious boxes wrapped in the same contact papers as their backgrounds.

Skoglund's pairing and arrangement of foods with the matching designs, textures, and colors of the papers is astounding. The careful consideration of hues especially calls to mind the photographs of William Eggleston, while the self-consciously artificial compositions are characteristic of someone like Cindy Sherman — both artists who made some of their best work in the 1970s. "Nine Slices of Marble Cake," "Luncheon Meat on a Counter," and "Cookies on a Plate" are particularly arresting for the way they play with the two-dimensionality of the photograph itself. Shot from above, they lack the shadows that would place these compositions in the real world. It's as if they, like the processed foods they show, only exist in the abstract, as Platonic forms. But isn't that what commercial photography has always aimed for — presenting the idealized image of something that has and will never exist in real life?

Which brings us back to my field trip to the photography studio. Like the story of the newspaper-filled piecrust, *Food Still Lifes* reminds us of the emptiness of so much of what we eat, our increasing distance from what we call food, and, perhaps most importantly, the artifice of tricking ourselves into desiring something that straddles the line between fiction and reality. It's called "food porn" for a reason.

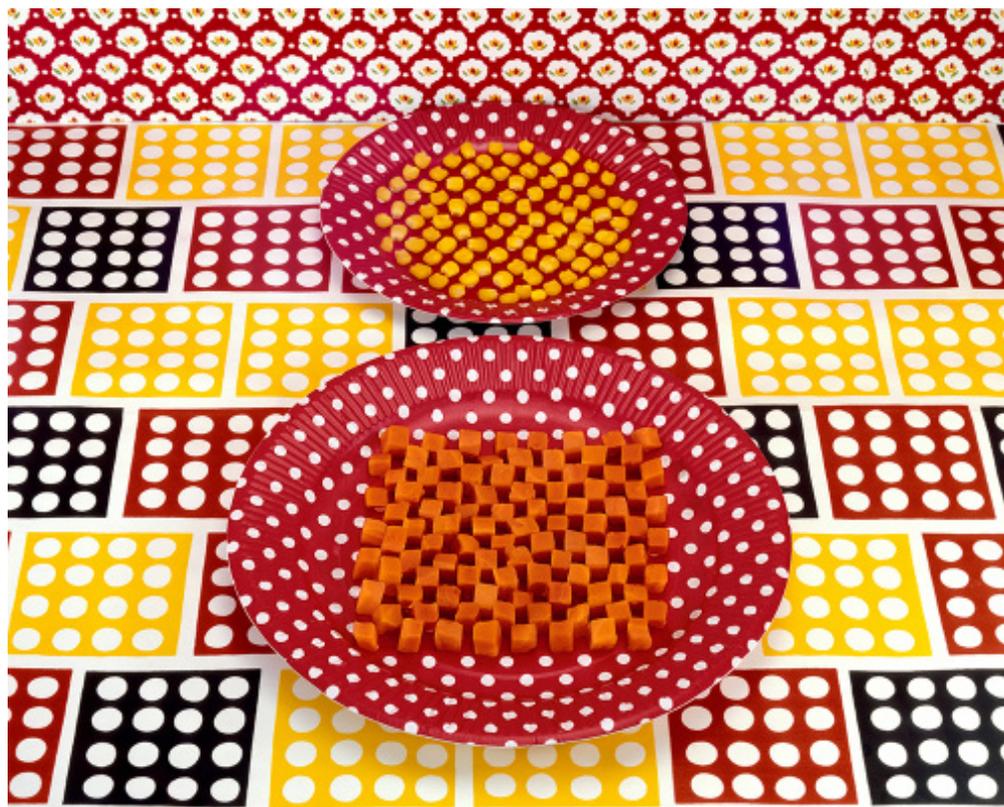
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THE
NEW YORKER

ART

July 24, 2017



In 1978, Sandy Skoglund played with her food in a giddy series of still-life photographs (including 8 “Cubed Carrots and Kernels of Corn,” above), on view at the Ryan Lee gallery through Aug. 11.

COURTESY THE ARTIST / RYAN LEE, NEW YORK.

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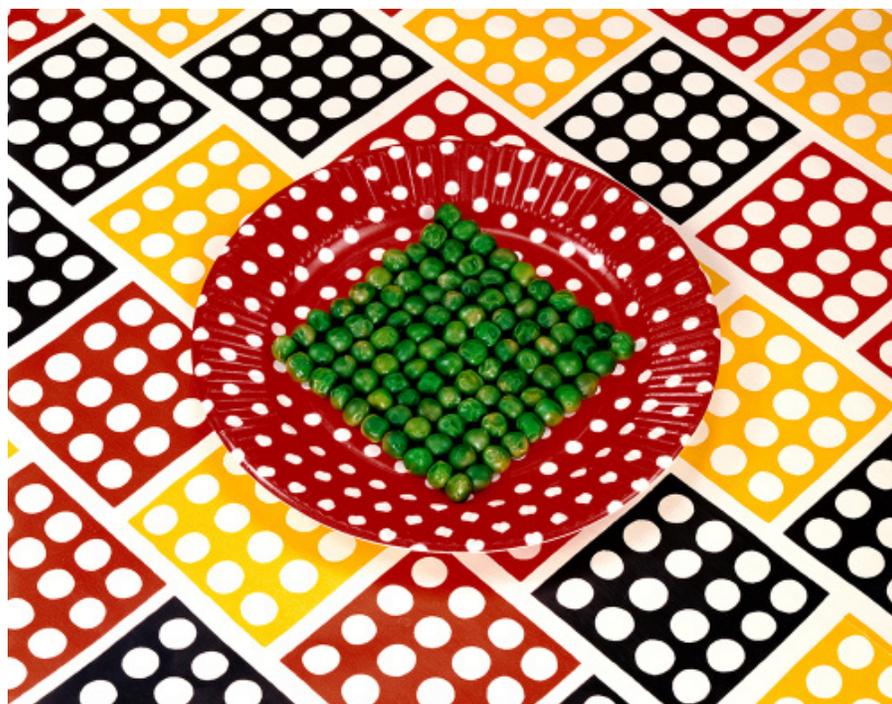
T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Some Things T Editors Are Really Into Right Now

July 21, 2017

Fun With Food

By Kate Donnelly



"Peas on a Plate," 1978. Credit © Sandy Skoglund; Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

In the '70s, 40 years before the dawn of Instagram and before food styling became fashionable, the artist Sandy Skoglund was prepping her own still-life photography, using kitchen contact paper and packaged foods she purchased at Woolworths (on 34th Street). The result is a delicious sprawl of pop colors with a kaleidoscopic quality. They are now on view in her new show, "Food Still Lives." They feature iconic '50s American diet staples, like peas and carrots and packaged luncheon meat. Seemingly unfazed by her playful and compelling compositions, Skoglund once remarked, "After all, everyone eats."

On view through August 11th at Ryan Lee Gallery, ryanleegallery.com.

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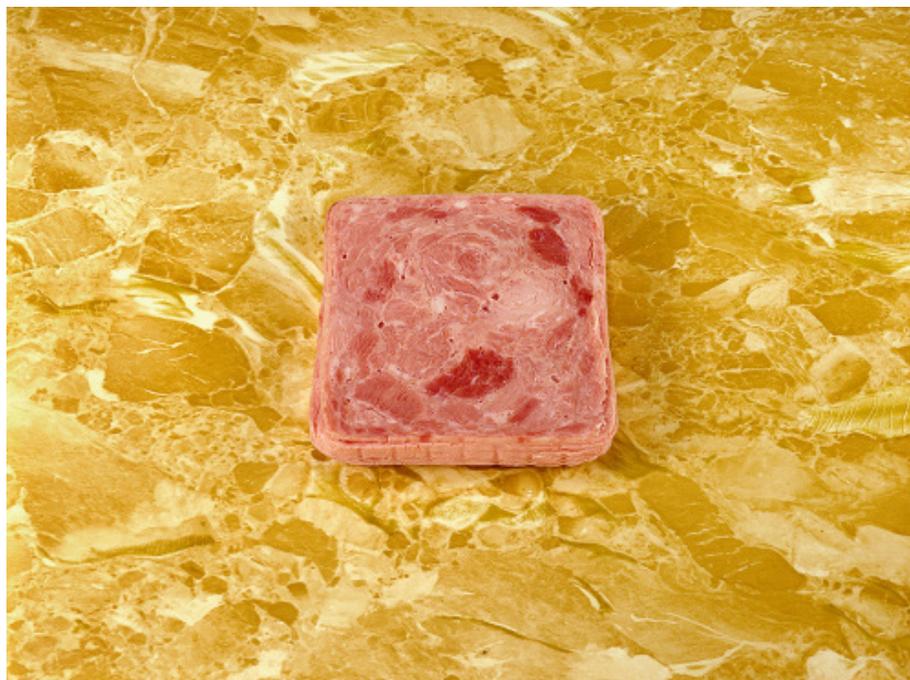
MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Exhibition Review: Food Still Lifes at the Ryan Lee Gallery

By Kathryn Kearney

July 20, 2017



Sandy Skoglund, Luncheon Meat on a Counter, 1978. (c) Sandy Skoglund; Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE, New York.

The seventies consumer culture is profound. It set the precedent for the nation's marketing industry-- loud colors, bold prints, inviting patterns and big font drew the attention of people across the country to buy, buy, buy. Food advertisements featured strategic arrangements of different meals. The layout of these ads was traditional and American photographer, Sandy Skoglund in her 1978 series, *Food Still Lifes*, considered the staging and arranging of both traditional still life compositions of all sorts of food.

Each still life in this series of photographs was strategically shot, depicting a precise arrangement of the processed food that Skoglund took the time to study. *Food Still Lifes* includes photographs of canned meat, vegetables, cake, and cookies. Behind all of these items, is a piece of evocatively

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patterned contact paper that mimics the patterns of the food being shot. All of the contact papers used by Skoglund are bright, resembling the ads of consumer culture during this era.

Skoglund fills the frame of these photographs with these contact papers which creates an array of sensations while observing. This perspectival distortion makes for an interesting experience as certain foods seem to move back and forth while others buzz.

In “Peas on a Plate”, Skoglund places a red polka-dotted dish with peas organized in the shape of a diamond. She put the plate on top of a wild contact paper that adds the movement dimension to this piece. The red in the plate is carried over into the background-- a grid of alternating red, black, and yellow squares. The spherical shape of the peas is repeated in the polka dots on the contact paper and in association with the colors, you are sure to feel as though this plate is not stationary.

The universality of food consumption motivated Skoglund to really invest herself in the project. It is ubiquitous and Skoglund aptly claimed, “after all, everyone eats.” Intrigued by the commercial food industry’s manipulation of its products through advertisements which wouldn’t have been possible without photography, Skoglund thought this project serves as a derisive commentary on that trade. Skoglund’s characteristic combinations in this series of photographs has different layers— all of which make for an inclusive show.

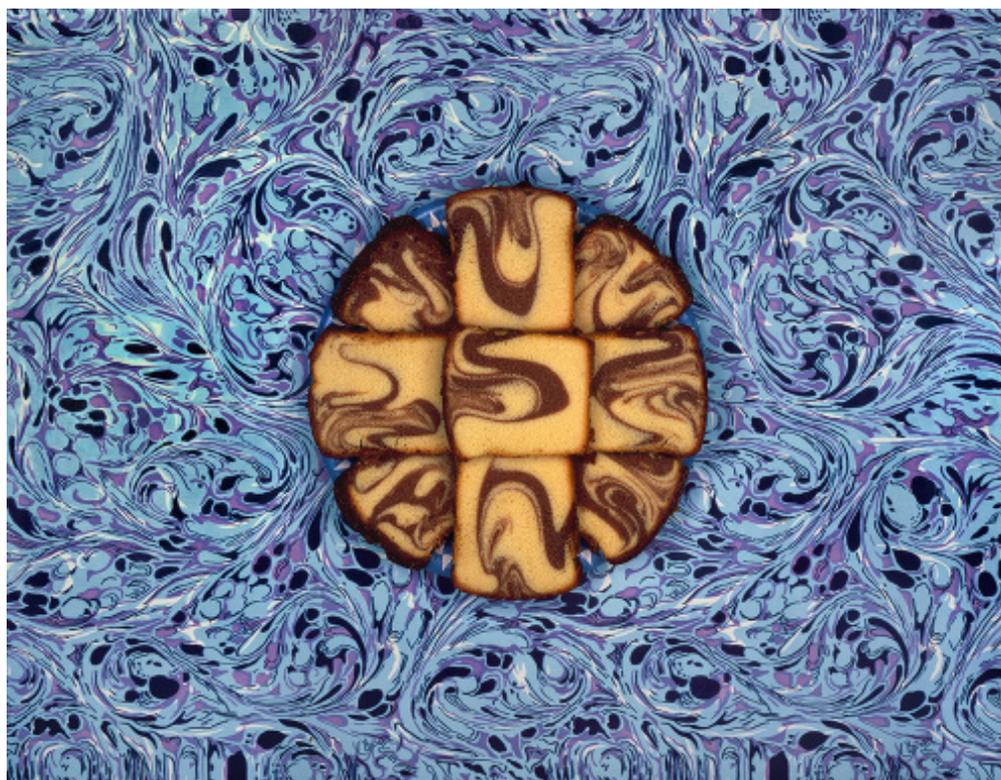
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martha stewart

Check Out the Colors and Patterns of These Pre Instagram Food Art Photos

By Alexandra Lim-Chua Wee
July 14, 2017



Sandy Skoglund, "Nine Slices of Pound Cake," 1978, archival pigment inkjet. (c) Sandy Skoglund and RYAN LEE, New York.

Sandy Skoglund takes a perfect food photograph. But we're not talking about anything like your #Insta-worthy smoothie bowl or latte art. In fact, the contemporary artist's photo series, *Food Still Lives* -- which opened this week at the Ryan Lee gallery in New York -- might just change how you see marble pound cake.

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Created by Skoglund in the seventies, the series was a commentary on how much work was actually needed to make processed foods look natural and appetizing. Skoglund focused on how these foods were being presented in commercial photography, from newspaper advertisements to billboards.

“I was going to a lot of supermarkets as an art activity,” the renowned artist says about creating the series. To mimic and emphasize the amount of retouching required for many commercial food photographs, Skoglund decided to pair her food subjects with exaggerated colors and textures. “Everything was a deliberate choice on my part, from how the food looked to how it would combine itself with plates and tablecloths.” And no detail went untouched -- the plate of peas? “They weren’t just the first ones that rolled out of the box, I carefully selected each one.”

A pioneer of staged photography, surrealist photography, and installation pieces, Skoglund is well-known for her use of bold, bright, and contrasting colors. In creating *Food Still Lives*, she says she was largely inspired by both the universality of food and her own experiences as a child. “Growing up in America in the 40s and 50s, my beliefs about what was real and what was artificial were much simpler.” To better illustrate the culture of the era, Skogland chose “certain foods, like the frozen vegetables, because of their 1950s context.”

And though the photo series debuted almost 40 years ago, Skoglund noted that not much has changed in commercial food photography since then. “The way I was looking at food in 1978 still fits contemporary ideas of how food should look.” We’d say that food art in the Instagram world is a whole other story!

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Newsweek

Susan Bright; Billy Bragg

By Amy Fleming

June 30, 2017



Feast for the Eyes: The Story of Food in Photography By Susan Bright Aperture, out now \$60 HUNGRY YEARS: Clockwise from top left: McCall's magazine shoot, circa 1943; "SelfPortrait With Eighty Cakes," by Tim Walker, 2008; "Peas on a Plate," by Sandy Skoglund, 1978; General Mills campaign, 1947.

AS FOOD MARKETERS have long known, we eat with our eyes. But this book by art historian Susan Bright shows there's more to food photography than eye candy or food porn. The compendium of images from the 1840s to the present day is part social history, taking in humor, aspiration, sex and taste, while also telling the story of photography.

"Eating is one of the most base, visceral and profane acts," Bright observes in Feast for the Eyes. In this spirit, we see Weegee's 1940 image of a young man poised to cram a waterfall of spaghetti

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into his open mouth; Martin Parr's famished swimmers at a fast-food stand in the 1980s; and shots from Peter Menzel's 2005 photojournalism project, *Hungry Planet*, in which families in different countries stand next to their week's groceries.

But there's another, equally compelling story here: the evolution of food styling. The Technicolor platters of 1970s *Weight Watchers* recipe cards—for dishes like a "crown roast of frankfurters"—sit in hilarious contrast to the 21st-century obsession with authenticity and simplicity—a humble pork chop, for example, caramelizing in a pan of butter froth (*Bon Appétit* magazine, 2013). You might not want to eat a crown of hot dogs, but the photo makes a good case for their glorification in art.

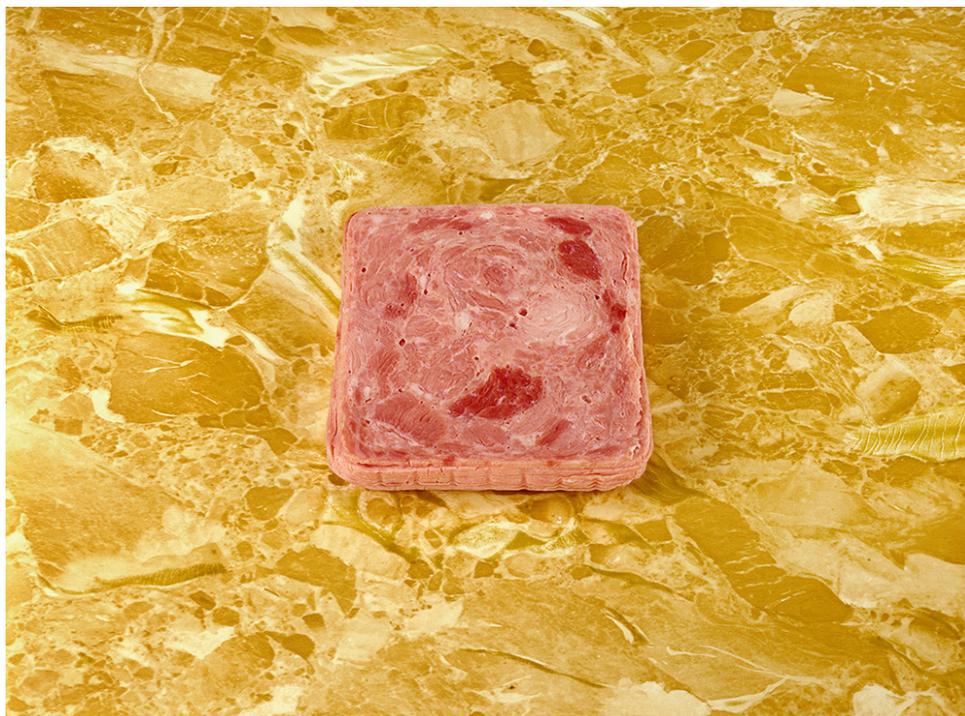
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These Trippy Photos Celebrate Vintage Food Advertisements

Jordan G. Teicher • June 08, 2017



After World War II, processed food emerged as a major force in America. But there was, at least at first, resistance to the frozen, canned, and dehydrated foods that manufacturers had learned to produce for military. The stuff looked weird, and its flavor and texture was often lacking. Initially, processed foods were even more expensive than fresh foods.

So how did processed food manage to take over American culture? In a word, marketing. In the decades after the war, manufacturers ran colorful advertisements in magazines, organized nationwide baking contests, and sponsored television programs that suggested ways viewers could use processed foods in their recipes. Photography played a big part in making these

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strange products look like food worth savoring.

The artist Sandy Skoglund found all this fascinating. In 1978, she created a series of photographs, *Food Still Lifes*, that simultaneously critiqued and celebrated the food industry and the techniques it used to sell its goods. The series, which has only been shown in its entirety once before, in 1992, will be on display at Ryan Lee Gallery in Manhattan from July 12 through August 11. Select images are also included in the new Aperture book *Feast for the Eyes: The Story of Food in Photography*. I caught up with Skoglund to find out more about these arresting images and her work in general.

Extra Crispy: What was going on with you artistically in 1978?

Sandy Skoglund: In the '70s, the idea of fine art versus commercial imagery was not as fluid as it is today. There was a total schism between the two. I was interested in was investigating commercialism as a way of thinking about how things look. Food photography is about trying to make things look very natural and very appetizing, and they have to resort to artificial means to do that because the real thing very often does not look as appetizing as they want it to look. It was this enhancement of the real world that interested me. To me, *Food Still Lifes* is really about the idea that photography doesn't always tell the truth. It's just that simple. You can't help yourself, once you get behind the camera, from going in and editing and moving things around.

This is a critique of photography and commercialism, but it's a playful one.

In a way, it was making fun of commercial practices. It was a parody based on all the technology, all the lighting styles, all the careful arranging of food photography. That whole editing and massaging of the material really fascinates me.

How did you choose which foods to photograph?

I was trying to find subject matter that was not as common historically in still lifes and yet had a real tradition in commercial photography. I didn't think too hard about the meaning of the foods, really. I guess I was looking for iconic food that would be common enough that it wouldn't be mysterious, so that you could look at it and know you were looking at cookies or corn. Then I did extensive shopping for the plates and all the backgrounds.

Those patterns, in many cases, mirrored the patterns of the food.

One of my favorite ones is the lunch meat on the counter. We're looking at this swirly yellow formica counter top which was very typical of the *Mad Men* era of the '50s and '60s. Now, what does that mean? It's about American culture, which basically looked at marble, luxurious European surfaces and says, "Well, why can't the person that lives in a mobile home have the same feeling as the person who lives in a palazzo?" So we took that look of organic swirly-ness, and we translated it into plastic. It's kind of a top down approach to luxury that allowed everybody access. Then on top of that you have the luncheon meat, which is another kind of artificial construct. Why is it rectangular? It's rectangular, so it will fit on the bread. And the idea of beauty in the lunch meat is really not a concern for that manufacturer. Showing the two together—the formica and the meat—hopefully says something about what is beautiful.

The photographs also play with space and dimensions. What was your intention there?

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The patterning, the flattening of the space, all of that came out of looking at pattern painting. I really loved pattern painting. The overall intended effect for me was to pose the question, “What am I looking at?” “Am I looking at a photograph or am I looking at a drawing or a painting?” I wanted to make photographs that didn’t look like a photograph at first glance.

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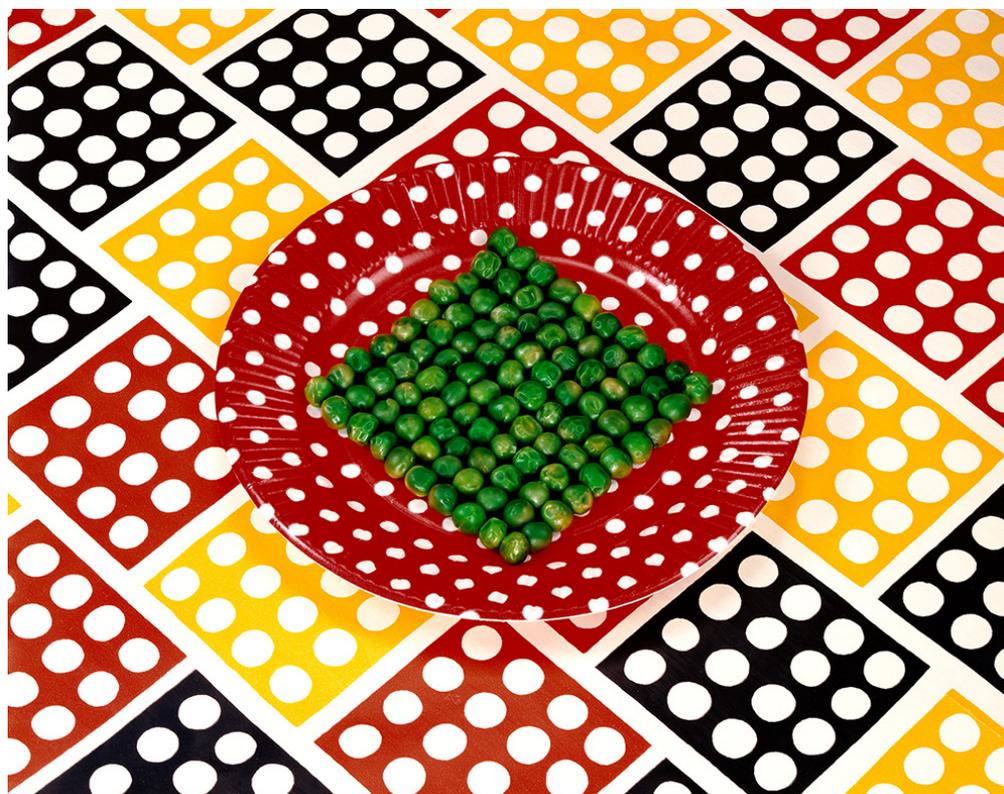
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British Journal of Photography

Published on 18 May 2017

Photobook: A Feast for the Eyes

Written by Tom Seymour



One of photography's earliest subjects, food is still a mainstay of the medium today says Susan Bright - who's written a book on the topic and who spoke to *BJP* for our December 2016 issue

When William Henry Fox Talbot pioneered the salted paper and calotype processes in 1841, he soon turned his new inventions to food, capturing two baskets overflowing with fruit. Creating an image designed to mimic the paintings of the time, and to contrast the colours and textures of the pineapple and peaches, he also made an image rife with welcoming symbolism – the pineapple a sign of hospitality, the peach a sign of fecundity.

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“Fox Talbot’s photograph was copying the traditions of painting and its attendant symbolism,” photography curator and writer Susan Bright told BJP for our December 2016 issue. “But it was also concerned with the role of photography, and elevating its status to that of art.”

“In this respect it resonates nicely with artists such as Daniel Gordon, whose work also deals with the medium of photography. But his constructed pineapple has nothing to do with symbolism, or striving to be understood as art. It is art. He is questioning the role of visual perception, what is real and what is not.”

“The way food is photographed says a tremendous amount about significant aspects of our culture,” Bright continues. “It is often about fantasy, be that national, sexual or historical. Photographs of food are the carrier for so many things – desire, consumption, taste, immigration and feminism, for example. It has been a major part of the development of fine art, editorial, fashion, marketing and product photography throughout the 20th and 21st century.”

Bright explores the many elements of where and how we encounter photographs of food in her new book, *Feast For The Eyes – The Story of Food in Photography*. Made in collaboration with Aperture’s senior photography editor, Denise Wolff, it covers the many ways in which food has been imaged and imagined.

“Food photography is full of contradictions,” Bright says. “It says so much about our rituals and celebrations in society. It comments on the way we have welcomed and integrated other cultures into our own, how we invent tradition, what we aspire to be.”

“In art, food has long been a subject for investigation for feminists,” she adds. “For so long the preparation and cooking of food has been women’s work, and the domestic space is where gender ideologies are most insidiously played out. There are numerous examples of artists using photography to comment on this.”

“Think of the performance *Meat Joy* by Carolee Schneemann, and *Semiotics of Kitchen* by Martha Rosler, and Jo Ann Callis’s work in the 1970s, Cindy Sherman in the ’80s, and Sarah Lucas in the ’90s, all of whom used food both for its sexual and sexist connotations.”

But what about advertising, marketing and product placement? Or projects that verge on this area, such as cookbooks – the medium one thinks of first when approaching food photography? For Bright they’re just as culturally loaded, and she illustrates her point by referencing the foreword of a *Good Housekeeping* cookbook from 1968.

“It starts with the words: ‘Mention *Good Housekeeping* cookery books in any gathering of women and someone is bound to say, ‘Oh yes – all those lovely colour pictures of food,’” she says. “In fact, the colour pictures in the book are scarce – only 64 as the cover proudly states.”

It’s the apparently passing reference to the ‘gathering of women’ which carries the most weight, she continues, though its coded and subtextual. “In the post-war era, after the food rationing at the end of the Second World War, and during the New Deal in America, we saw the rise of domestic cook and advice books that promised new ways to cook and serve food, to have neater

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homes and better lives,” she says.

“This food photography was aspirational. Those cookery books would promote recipes with ingredients that were hard to get hold of. It was a way, in my opinion, to get women to create a job out of the home, complete with the latest technology and appliances. Not long before, those same women were in factories making bombs and guns, now there was a real push to get them back in their homes, back in the kitchen, making dinner for their husbands.”

And little has changed, she believes, though it’s less immediately apparent. “Many cookbooks are still mainly marketed at women, though not as blatantly as they were,” she points out. “Look at *Jamie’s 15-Minute Meals*. Before you get to the recipes, there is a spread of photographs of Jamie Oliver’s family.

“The subtext is that his wife is holding it together in the home – the busy mum able to put nutritious meals in front of her family every day, as directed by the man of the house. It’s subtle but it’s there.”

And, she concludes, if cookbooks still trade in stereotypes and assumptions, so too do new media platforms such as Instagram. Meanwhile, artists continue to challenge and undermine some of the very same notions. “The subject of food can cross over all these practices,” says Bright. “Art and advertising, satire and earnestness, and so on.”

A Feast for the Eyes is published by Aperture in June, priced \$60. aperture.org This interview was originally published in the December 2016 issue of BJP, which focused on food and can be bought via www.thebjpshop.com

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The New York Times

In Paris, Revisiting the '80s in Photography

By Charles Curkin

March 2, 2016



“Radioactive Cats,” 1980, by Sandy Skoglund. Credit 1980 Sandy Skoglund, via Centre Pompidou/Dist. Rmn-Gp

Fashion has always been a fan of the historical dress-up box.

The '60s and '70s, in particular, seem to have become something of a default inspiration, with keyhole maxi dresses and space-age minis popping up on runways almost every season. Increasingly, however, the '80s have been added to the mix — much to the dismay of some who lived through them — and the decade defined by the shoulder pad is being reassessed.

“We got so trapped by the problems of the '80s, so petrified of the shoulder, so petrified of Lurex, so petrified of the excess, that we forget that some of the most interesting designers came from the '80s,” said Jonathan Anderson, one of a new wave of designers who have embraced the decade. One of its members is Peter Dundas at Roberto Cavalli, whose debut spring collection

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was replete with acid-washed denim and bandage dresses, and Gareth Pugh and Alessandro Michele at Gucci, both of whom featured exaggerated shoulders in very different ways in their recent fall shows.

“Gaultier, Westwood, Castelbajac; the creativity was nonstop. It was really one of the most influential times,” Mr. Anderson added.

Now the Pompidou Center is attempting to put the aesthetic influence of the decade in perspective, focusing attention on the photography that captured the era in an exhibition called “The Unbearable Lightness, The 1980s.”

Named for the 1984 novel that made the author Milan Kundera a household name, “The Unbearable Lightness” — on view through May 23 — presents a sweeping look back at the decade of not only Azzedine Alaïa and Thierry Mugler, but the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. On display are 60 photographs by 20 Western artists including Jean-Paul Goude, Agnès Bonnot and Martin Parr.

The exhibit perfectly captures the look of the time. Or rather, looks. There wasn’t just one.

“They were crazy years,” said Karolina Lewandowska, the museum’s curator of photography and the show’s mastermind, who acknowledges that “The Unbearable Lightness” was put together to draw in a younger audience. “Young people like to ask questions about that time in history,” she said. “They’re interested in it.”

According to Ms. Lewandowska, photography in the ’80s, much like fashion, was about the unnatural: scenes and situations that are pure contrivance. “There’s something uncanny about it,” she said. “It’s like a dream, but very realistic. This kind of strangeness is ever-present.”

Ms. Lewandowska referred to the American photographer Sandy Skoglund, whose work is in the exhibition, to illustrate her point. Ms. Skoglund’s piece “Radioactive Cats” creates a stark tableau, showing a couple in kitchen, oblivious to the swarm of lime green cats wreaking havoc around them. “It depicts the invasion of animals into the human world,” Ms. Lewandowska said.

And that world is gray and dead. “It’s strange,” she added. “Like Baroque art in decline, disintegrating.”

Works by Paul de Nooijer and Nagatani Patrick give similar impressions. “They’re really playing on straightness,” Ms. Lewandowska said. In Mr. de Nooijer’s “Electriclawnmowingiron,” the gray room reappears, with a man in a faded fedora and apron holding a faded pink iron to a patch of his lawn on the ironing board. “Exaggeration and the artificial is very present.”

Ms. Lewandowska also asserts that the decade was an augur of things to come. “The ’80s predicted the digital way of thinking,” she said. “If you put the photos in the exhibit next to contemporary ones, they are much more similar than you’d expect.”

For some designers, however, the ’80s were simply their halcyon years. “Maybe it was because

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I was young,” said Pierre Hardy, who designs shoes and accessories for Hermès as well as his own brand, and who recently received the Légion d’honneur. “But it was a very fun time. Full of energy and dynamism.”

Mr. Hardy, 60, said he had been continually inspired by the ’80s, as is visible in his work: full of bright hues, colorblocking and geometric lines. “There is a strength from that period that I try to maintain and express,” he said. “It’s still very important.”

He acknowledged that the decade wasn’t all flowers and sunshine, but was careful to point out that, for him, something very important has been lost in the passing decades that makes the ’80s worth revisiting again and again.

“It was the last period that believed in the future,” he said.

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the PARIS REVIEW

Lighting Up the Green Decade, and Other News

By Dan Pipenberg, December 10, 2015

In the eighties, Sandy Skoglund was struck by a disparity she saw throughout New York, where Wall Street and crime rates were soaring side by side. She began to photograph the city, and now she's made a series of collages, "True Fiction," that try to capture the aura of that decade with stark contrasts and bright colors. "I never saw a particular implied narrative other than astonishment, which was a mirror really of my own experience of the contradictions of New York City and living in the 1980s ... I hope they have a kind of transcendent quality that does allow a kind of open interpretation and not just an ahistorical document."



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Slate

Striking and Alarming Collages That Capture a Fractured 1980s New York

By Jordan G. Teicher | December 8, 2015



Sandy Skoglund, "Value of Wasted Time," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

In the 1980s, New York was a city of contrasts: Wall Street boomed while crime and homelessness soared. This strange duality inspired Sandy Skoglund, who was living in the city at the time. Beginning in 1985, she spent two years making photos around town—and, on a few occasions, in Detroit and Houston—of people and places. She used these images as raw material for striking and alarming collages.

"I never saw a particular implied narrative other than astonishment, which was a mirror really of my own experience of the contradictions of New York City and living in the 1980s," Skoglund said.

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Sandy Skoglund, "Errors of the Efficient Mind," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.



Sandy Skoglund, "Semiotics of Surprise," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

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Sandy Skoglund, "Parallel Thinking," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

Skoglund took all the photos in her original series, "True Fiction One," in black and white and added color to them in the darkroom afterward. After cutting and pasting pieces of the prints together according to designs she'd spent months sketching, she then rephotographed the completed collages with her 8-by-10 camera in order to make the final images uniform.

"I wanted them to feel magical in a way, as if they could have been a single picture at some point," she said.



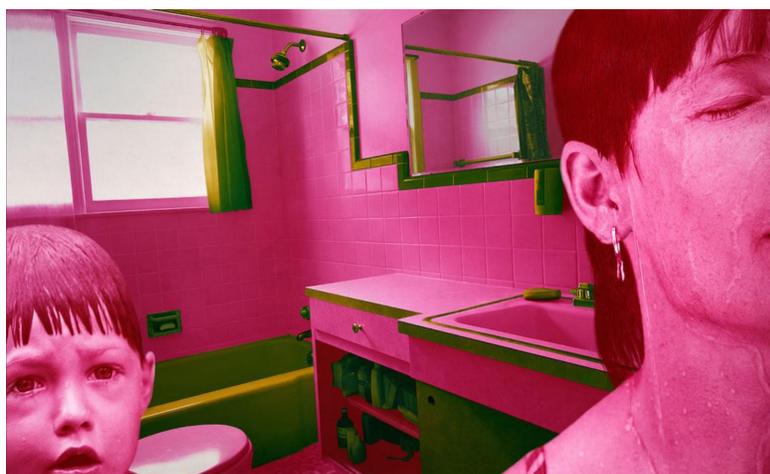
Sandy Skoglund, "Circumstances of Appearance," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

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Sandy Skoglund, "Blue Bulb," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.



Sandy Skoglund, "Testimony in Tile," 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

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In 2005, she tweaked the photos slightly in Photoshop to get rid of some rough edges. The images in the revamped series, “True Fiction Two,” will be on display at New York City’s Ryan Lee gallery until Dec. 23.

Skoglund’s scenes of domestic and street life reflect the style of the decade while hinting at the violence and excess that defined the period in New York’s history. Still, the particulars of the stories these photos tell remain elusive, and Skoglund wants viewers to fill in the blanks how they see fit.

“I hope they have a kind of transcendent quality that does allow a kind of open interpretation and not just an ahistorical document.”



Sandy Skoglund, “Laws of Interior Design,” 2005. Copyright Sandy Skoglund. Courtesy of Ryan Lee, New York.

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THE NEW YORKER

ART
NOV. 23, 2015

SANDY SKOGLUND October 29 - December 23, 2015

In the late seventies, Skoglund made her mark with staged photographs of monochromatic interiors—people surrounded by a school of orange goldfish or a clowder of chartreuse cats. One of those Pop-surreal images, a yellow room festooned with blue coat hangers, has been re-created in the gallery's window, but the exhibition proper focuses on a series of tableaux made in 1986 and revised in 2005, to heighten their already startling impact. With clashing colors, flattened pictorial space, and odd pileups of incident, the meticulously constructed photomontages suggest stills from a Pedro Almodóvar movie—even a parakeet seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Through Dec. 23.

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The New York Times

INSIDE ART

Window on the High Line

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS | Friday, September 18, 2015



If millions can stare into your window, why not give them a show? When Ryan Lee Gallery moved into its third-floor space on West 26th Street in Chelsea in 2014, with a window at eye level to the High Line, it inaugurated the space RL Window, with video projections to hook the audience streaming through the elevated park. Beginning on Oct. 29, it will present its first performance installation, bringing to life Sandy Skoglund's comically disorienting 1979 photograph "Hangers."

A pioneer of staged photography, Ms. Skoglund built the original set for her breakthrough image, first shown at Castelli Graphics, in her former tenement studio on Elizabeth Street. There, she taped blue plastic hangers every which way over aggressively yellow walls and a pink floor, and photographed a young man in yellow pajamas entering this hallucinatory cabinet of curiosities, also strewn with rubber duckies, rubber gloves and chairs of the same fluorescent palette.

"I was imagining that a future culture coming upon these mass-produced objects might display them as historical artifacts or try to come up with ideas of how they were used," said

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Ms. Skoglund, who became well known in the 1980s and '90s for images of people in mundane interiors invaded by, say, green radioactive cats or giant goldfish that she constructed by hand.

At Ryan Lee, in her first solo show in New York since 2001, she will recreate the “Hangers” tableau, but now oriented toward the High Line rather than a camera. On Saturdays for the run of the show, a performer will periodically wander into the room as a stranger in a strange land. “In some ways, all my work is a performance, even if it’s been private for the camera,” Ms. Skoglund said. In the main gallery space, she will exhibit “True Fiction Two,” based on handmade photo collages of people in incongruous places that were first shown at Castelli in 1987 and later reworked with Photoshop “to look more photographic,” she said.

Jeff Lee, a partner in the gallery, said: “Handcrafted photography is something explored by a lot of young artists, and I am really interested in how Sandy’s early body of work is in dialogue with a lot of things happening in contemporary art. Her trippy psychological spaces and retro color palette are very fresh again.”

INTERVIEW WITH SANDY SKOGLUND by Luca Panaro.

August 2, 2008

This interview took place in connection with an exhibition at the Betta Frigieri Arte Contemporanea, Modena, Italy. Sept. 19, 2008- Nov. 1, 2008

Question from Luca Panaro: In your works you have always demonstrated a great ability to oppose reality to fiction, a distinctive feature valued as premonitory of the present world, especially among the artists of your generation. How originated the idea of mixing natural and artificial?

Sandy Skoglund: The origins of my interest in mixing natural and artificial arise from my being a spectator of myself as I behave in the world. I see myself naturally attracted to some very artificial things, almost as if my life depended on it. If I try to talk myself out of being attracted to these things, but then I am lying to myself and full of miserable conflict. By these things, I mean delicious cookies to eat, fragrant creams to put on my skin, or exciting fabrics and colors to wear. To me, a world without artificial enhancement is unimaginable, and harshly limited to raw nature by itself without human intervention. So, to answer your question, the mixing of the natural and the artificial is what I do everyday of my life, and I hope that I am not alone in this process.

Question from Luca Panaro: From the end of the Seventies you have always used colour photography realizing images that continue to be effective and topical. Corns, oranges, carrots cut into cubes and other natural products are presented in strange ways, placed against colourful backcloths which deceive the common perception. What did you intend to communicate through this series of photographic works?

Sandy Skoglund: From the end of the seventies I used the subject of food as a means to create a common language. After all, everyone eats. So, my purpose in working with the subject of food was initially to create a bond with the spectator of my work. As I gazed around at the world of food I realized that human intervention with the appearance of food is a broad cultural phenomenon. The manipulation of food in terms of shape, color, taste, and so on, has achieved highly unnatural results. In the developed Western cultures, the shipping of food over long distances has given rise to artificial colors to simulate a freshly picked fruit or vegetable, for example. In the medium of commercial photography, the truth of the food is sacrificed for the appearance to the camera, resulting in shiny oily coatings to make something look juicy, and drops of dimethicone to imitate the sweat on a cold glass of freshly poured beer. The quality of freshness becomes something to be re-created in our contemporary world of plethora of options and possibilities.

Question from Luca Panaro: Since the eighties your best-known works have consisted of perfect rooms crowded with real people and monochrome sculptures reproduced in series. Once again the camera can document these fantastic sets before their inescapable disappearance. Are they children's dreams or today's nightmares?

Sandy Skoglund: Since the eighties, I have been fascinated with interiors and invading these interiors with problems and interruptions usually by animals. The animal presence to me is the link between ourselves and the natural world. We look at a dog and the dog looks back at us. During that moment we know that we are not the only consciousness at work in the universe. The world of earth is an inhabited place, full of many living entities that do not and cannot see reality in the same way that we do. This form of multi-consciousness has always been disturbing to me, as it introduces a world of chaos that we actually cannot see ourselves. Reality itself, then, is chaos that has been made presentable by the limitations of human perception. So, in my work, I am trying to show reality as it actually is, as a rupture through the fabric of our human consciousness.

Question from Luca Panaro: Who were the most influential authors in the development of your artistic research?

Sandy Skoglund: Right now, my favorite author is the Swedish mystery writer Henning Mankell. His work helps me to understand how much in common Americans and Europeans have, which is comforting. As a teenager I loved very long books, like Tolstoy, and very romantic brooding books like the Bronte sisters. In art history my favorites were the Italian Mannerists like Bronzino and Pontormo.

Question from Luca Panaro: In the series True Fiction, a preview for Italy, you seem to move from your traditional iconography. However the ambiguity, typical of your previous works, stays the same. Could you tell us about these images and about the necessity to interrupt the construction of sculptural environments in order to realize a sheer photographic work?

Sandy Skoglund: True Fiction initially came about in 1985-86. I wanted to make images that depicted contemporary interiors and exteriors of typical urban and suburban American places. Living in New York, I was struck by the close proximity of the violent imagery of crushed and abandoned cars and buildings that formed the backdrop for fashion forward narratives of urban renewal. I felt at the time that photography more than sculpture could help me to preserve the strangeness of that moment in American culture.

Question from Luca Panaro: Speaking from a technical point of view, how did you make these works?

Sandy Skoglund: I began the project in 1985 by photographing people, places, and things, all independently of one another, and in black and white. I wanted to erase the color from the subject matter so that I could go back in and rework the color. I was thinking about repainting the world to see, for example, how a bee sees or how a frog sees. I spent two years on the gathering of the images: from friends, family, and their homes, as well as around New York and Brooklyn. Once the images were gathered, I started to combine them using drawings to make narratives. Then, in 1986 I made color photographs from the black and white negatives by making the prints myself and dialing in colors. These color photographs were each monochrome, made of only one color, since they had been made from black and white negatives. To make the final narrative pictures, I cut out different people and pasted them into backgrounds using collage methods of scissors and glue. This resulted in a final collage for each of the twenty images in True Fiction. Then, I re-photographed the collage using my 8 x 10 camera. This resulted in an 8x10 full color negative. In 1986 I produced a portfolio called True Fiction, which was printed in the dye transfer color printing process. I never finished printing the full edition of 25 for this portfolio. Then, in 2004 I decided to take the original full color 8 x 10 negatives from the first edition of True Fiction and scan the negatives into the computer. From these scans I was able to work on the edges of the subject matter and to blend the cut elements to merge more naturally with the rest of the picture. This second edition is called True Fiction Two, which is printed in pigmented inkjet with an edition of ten. It is the second edition, True Fiction Two, which you have on view in your exhibition.

Question from Luca Panaro: Do you think that creating new images in a world like ours, now turned into a massive database, is still significant? Don't you think it would be easier to use existing visual material and work on it by changing its meaning?

Sandy Skoglund: I really don't think that our world has been reduced to a massive database. The massive database is just one more form of technology. If someone chooses to immerse themselves in the reality of digital existence, then that person might believe that reality is dominated by electronic media. However, in my opinion, it is the exchange and communication that is facilitated by the digital media that makes it so relevant to humans at this time in history. We, as humans, crave a social interaction. In prisons, solitary confinement is considered very harsh punishment. So, to me, the digital media are the means and not the end. The end is still the same: to make each other feel more comfortable in a world that does not make much sense. And we make each other feel more comfortable by sharing our discomfort.

CONTEMPORARY MASTERS

The Savannah College of Art and Design Contemporary Masters micro-museum series of contemporary art exhibitions focuses on an elite group of significant, high profile artists. Each exhibition includes works representing quintessential currents of avant garde art, presented in the context of support materials such as biographical and art historical information.

The series begins 2001 with Sandy Skoglund, *Shimmering Madness*. The series will continue with exhibitions of work by artists who are making an impact on the history of art. These artists are defining or altering the course of contemporary art and are contributing work that is influencing the critics' and historians' concepts of modern style and design.

The Savannah College of Art and Design expresses appreciation to the artist, Sandy Skoglund, for sharing insights into her art and for arranging for the exhibition with her generous loan of the work. Gratitude is also extended to Dr. Maureen Burke for helping to shape the series and for her ongoing editorial assistance, and to the gallery staff of the Savannah College of Art and Design for their expert assistance. We are grateful to Betsey Brairton and Mark Rand for catalog production and creative advice.

JUDITH VAN BARON, PH.D.
VICE PRESIDENT FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

BERGEN HALL GALLERY

January 20 – March 17, 2001

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SANDY SKOGLUND

CONTEMPORARY MASTERS
SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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Sandy Skoglund shapes, bridges, and transforms the plastic mainstream of the visual arts into a complex dynamic that is both parody and convention, experiment and treatise. She remains an individual at a time when huge quantities of art are produced for the masses and some art is even produced en masse—collaboratively, generically, and globally. The modern merging of the message and the medium has created an audience undreamed of by her predecessors, yet Skoglund does not pander to her viewers' sometimes one-track sensibilities by identifying her self or her art with technology, although she fully understands its positive and negative impact on the visual arts. She is inimitable but is decisively influential in both the fine and commercial arts, her work being both multidimensional and cross-disciplinary. Skoglund keeps her work coolly non-didactic, accessible, and delightful to the eye. Although her work is often light-hearted and humorous, it is not easy by any use of the word nor stretch of the critical imagination. She is a wit, an intellectual, and a person of lofty ideas and ideals.¹

Skoglund has distilled the most significant elements of the last three decades of visual art, and indeed of the preceding century, into an art form that defies imitation and even definition. She is a painter, photographer, sculptor, set designer, installation artist, and conceptualist. Her work is visceral with a highly charged physical presence. It is transitory, appearing frozen in time, while quietly and almost imperceptibly mutating into other states of being. She creates works with a pop art flavor and a surreal anxiety. She heightens reality and illusion simultaneously. Her work is utterly straightforward and simple, yet devilishly complex. She emphasizes artifice while drawing her art from life.

Skoglund finds unusual materials and then uses them, she admits, inappropriately, or at the very least, unexpectedly. In her words, it is her own encounter with the materials, the experience of playing with the materials, that determines the essence of the art work. Skoglund's search for new and unusual materials and her use of those materials in high art is what she characterizes as "inappropriate." When the material is food—raw hamburger, for example—her "play" with the material is like a child's "play" with food: inappropriate. Unlike the child, Skoglund exercises great control. The child's behavior is antisocial; the artist's behavior is anti art or at least anti what we have come to accept as "appropriate" to art.

If any one word applies, in all its definitions, it is "plastic," even "plastique." The work, either in photograph or sculptural installation is plastic-molded, shaped, impressionable, capable of undergoing metabolic changes, capable of being renewed, capable of continuous and permanent change, deformed but restorable.² Skoglund's work is also hypocritically false and synthetic, as much of it is drawn from and reflects an artificial and consumerist culture. In point of fact, her work is often composed of the very products of that culture—fast food, paper plates, snacks, clothes hangers, plastic spoons and various other disposables. And, as in pantomime, it is plastique, like the action of making very slow movements in dance, like a statue in motion. Butterfly wings barely flutter, marshmallows gradually stiffen, eggshells crumble under mere gravity, jelly beans twinkle, and light continually reflects and refracts from three thousand dragonfly wings frozen in glass. It is this plastic quality that gives substance to images and forms and attracts the viewer to indulge in the formal elements of art for aesthetic pleasure, amusement, and intellectual stimulation.

Robert Rosenblum asks Skoglund in a 1996 interview the key question that is uppermost in everyone's mind when first confronted with her work. "How do you define yourself? I mean, if you had to put yourself in a pigeonhole, an 'ism', a classification, a medium... where would you locate yourself?" Skoglund's reply is slightly tongue-in-cheek while still being totally serious. "I would say that it falls within the idea of a theme park... almost nonart."³ This is as close as anyone has come to encapsulating Skoglund's work into a single, broad term. Her comment does help us understand the synthesis of the photographer, set designer, painter, sculptor, and filmmaker all represented in one person and the mediums all combined in one work. Yet the opposite of this aesthetic synthesis may, in fact, be true. Rather than beingless art (or even nonart), Skoglund's work may indeed be *more* art—turbocharged, super, high test, ultra, maxi, premium, advanced, and exclusively hers.

Skoglund was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1946. She followed the rather typical path of education for the American artist of the twentieth century, graduating in 1968 from Smith College with a bachelor's degree followed by M.A. and M.F.A. degrees in painting in 1971 and 1972 from the University of Iowa. Art school was where Skoglund learned to be an artist. Apart from the skills she acquired, the techniques she mastered, and the appreciation of pure,

sensual beauty—the glide of the palette knife oozing through corpulent oils, the firm decisiveness of boar bristles laying on glistening glazes, the seductive but deadly aroma of turpentine and rabbit skin glue, the whispered whir and click of the camera, and the sensual lure of raw flesh under the glare of studio light—she learned the most important lesson of all. She learned that it was possible to be an artist.

It was while at Smith College that Skoglund first understood the possibility of creating, as an artist, not only objects of beauty but also objects of meaning in society. In her words she learned to empower herself, to find an understanding of what it is to pass through life. The history of art showed her that art empowers the artist and the viewer. She discovered that being an artist is possible; leading a life of examination is possible. In fact, it is desirable. Skoglund has followed this guiding principle throughout her life and career, always placing the emphasis on the flowing process of art and discovery rather than only on the end result, the object itself.

During her studies at Smith College, Skoglund took time for a year's sojourn in Aix-en-Provence and Paris, where she studied art history at the Sorbonne and the École du Louvre. It was an important period in her life and her learning. There she had the opportunity to reflect on art as an expression of different cultures and different time periods. She confirmed the value of the history of art as a record of the artist's effort to influence reality through the application of illusion. She studied art at a time in which elitism and regionalism were rapidly being replaced by populist concerns and global awareness. Her study of art history in another culture helped prepare her to develop enlightened perspectives on the sometimes tenuous connection between art and life.

The University of Iowa offered a unique experience in the '60s and '70s. This Midwestern center of culture, art, and political unrest was a spirited environment in which artists tested the limits of their desires to fulfill their destinies, and art historians pushed the limits of their abilities to understand the artists. Everyone was in the intellectual soup together, sharing feminist issues, Indian mysticism, aesthetic dialogue, and political inquiry. Students seemed to be from everywhere else besides Iowa, creating a mingling of New York with California, of art with psychology, and of the Writers' Workshop with the Lasansky print studio. Some univer-

sity students celebrated the Maharishi, some made bombs, some dropped out, and more than a few became really good artists, curators, writers, and musicians. Several of the painting professors themselves had been schooled in abstract expressionism, so it was likely that Skoglund would develop as an artist for whom the direct experience of making things was of primary importance. The process of working has always been paramount with Skoglund. At the university, Skoglund was able to hear all voices—artist's, historian's, critic's. She learned it is the personal authority of the individual in a culture that establishes values and effects change.

Skoglund remembers "we were pretty angry women" in those days. She recalls spontaneous consciousness-raising sessions in the halls of academe with her peers, other equally insightful women testing their mettle in the artistic and social battles of the period. Her graduate exhibition at the University of Iowa was predictive of things to come. She had already begun working with food but used it for its symbolic and rhetorical association with women's issues and experiences, not as any specific feminist statement. Several works, satin stitched embroidery on burlap, included such themes as sunset with sweet gherkins, peaches on the beach, and starfish stuffed with popcorn. She created paradoxes and contradictions that she would later exploit on a larger and grander scale. Peaches would become Barbie dolls and the beach would sizzle with massed French fries. In later work, food often is used to obliterate individual features of the figures in photographs: Raw hamburger covers the bodies and background in *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 1992 (figure 12), and uncooked bacon robs the figures of their features in *Body Limits*, 1992 (figure 11). The feminist rhetoric is so subtle as to be almost nonexistent, but it is effective nonetheless because the artist allows the medium to speak for itself.

Although Skoglund is one of the most purely art for art's sake artists of her generation, two events in particular affected her life and art.⁴ Art for art's sake is an identifying phrase because Skoglund is interested in the materials and processes of art—the activity of the artist—more so than in her cultural or philosophical shaping, though it is obvious she draws from both in her choice of consumable materials and the commentary they make about contemporary American life. First, the death of her mother from cancer while she was in graduate school profoundly affected her. She suffered terribly from the loss of someone dear to her

whom she credits with her strength. But she also came face-to-face with the lesson of an experience that is nearly unfathomable: finality. Only death can teach that lesson, and it is the hardest lesson of all to master. Dealing with the concept removes the experience from the realm of the personal—specific to an individual—and folds it into the realm of the universal—shared by humanity. It is only after the artist learns that lesson that he or she can comprehend the value of the transitory and the value in capturing the moment and freezing it in time. Duplication, repetition, and reinterpretation are devices used to defy finality. What the artist does is to make concepts concrete and to form perceptions into graspable substance. The artist freezes time and that is the only thing that even comes close to death's own magic. This concept has always been implied in photography and may be what attracted Skoglund to the medium. Only the artist works with the mystery of making the transitory permanent and the temporal final.

The second event that helped to shape the artist and her oeuvre was that Skoglund moved to New York City immediately after she completed graduate school. When she first arrived in the very early '70s, she got a foothold, survived, and succeeded because, in a way, she just didn't realize it could be any other way. Part of the legacy of the University of Iowa for Skoglund is that the artist learned to believe in her potential to become an artist, having already learned what was required to make art. All that remained was to do it. The encouragement of dialogue between artist and historian or painter and sculptor led to a sensibility among all that the artist is the best leader in any society because the artist is the caretaker as well as the creator of our dearest held tenets of civilization.

After locating a studio in Little Italy, Skoglund rented a Xerox machine and began experimenting with making serial art. She selected some of the most unassuming products to reproduce; saltine crackers were a favorite in 1973. These homely little objects possessed a grid-like pattern, were multidimensional yet basically flat, had differing textures yet were unremarkable in their sameness. She experimented with the simplest of materials, using the copier to make the art even more artificial by removing it further and further from the real. She took found objects, mechanically copied them onto paper in two dimensions, crumpled the copies and copied them again, keeping and displaying the various stages. These prefigure later work in which she exhibits more than one "stage" of the process: the sculptural

installation, the photograph alongside it including the living figures, and close-up panels of details of the larger work.

Skoglund seemed to be testing the idea of where or when, within the process, "art" was actually created. How far could the artist remove the object from the idea and keep the connection between idea and object, beginning and end? At a time when conceptual art was being practiced widely and was accepted by critics, if not yet by historians, this placed Skoglund smack in the middle of the avant garde and formed a stylistic foundation for her later work. By 1975 Skoglund was also involved in performance art. *Percussion for Jelly Beans and Gumdrops with Solo Broom*, for example, allowed her to further experiment with serial stages of the process without creating either theater or film, although she was schooled in both. She was actually enriching the process of making art by creating the synapses between and among the mediums.

Skoglund has never departed from valuing repetition; if one image or object is good, two or twenty or two thousand are even better. In the early days she was somewhat restrained. But by 1978 she turned from the rather boring black and white reproductions of saltines to other foods of a more visceral nature. Frozen green peas, marbled cake, and luncheon meat replaced the stoic and static crackers. She experimented with "pattern" painting after a fashion and even a bit of optical illusion without really embracing any one style or trendy fashion. *Nine Slices of Marblecake*, 1978 (figure 2) and *Luncheon Meat on a Counter*, 1978 (figure 3) both play one pattern against a similar pattern creating disconcerting juxtapositions not only of objects and textures but also of double-entendre trompe l'oeil effects that are heightened by photographic images of real objects. Hangers, spoons, ferns, and items of apparel followed, adding color, three dimensions, human figures, set design, and the mediums of sculpture and photography to full-scale tableaux.

Skoglund had begun working with photography in 1974. Possibly her interest in filmmaking while in undergraduate and graduate school influenced her interest in staging photographs from the sculptural tableaux. Skoglund's earliest photographs were complex, although small-scale, still lifes and landscapes.⁵ The early tableau photographs that followed are larger and possess substance because of the human figures that inhabit them. *Hangers*, 1979, *Spoons*, 1979 (figure 4), and *Ferns*, 1980 (figure 6), all are representative of the more ambitious tableaux and photographs. Without the figures, the photographs remain one-dimensional and static and serve only as documents of the instal-

lation. Plastic spoons or hangers are devoid of expression or animation unless they are put to some use. Including figures to animate the environment finishes the work in these early pieces.

The early work is enduring, albeit some materials have certainly come and gone, but it is the animal environments that fix the most lasting images in the minds of many viewers. The ferns, the spoons, the hangers leave one cold while the garish green cats sidling around gristly grey chairs and springing onto a grey table in a relentlessly grey kitchen inhabited by lifeless, old, grey people titillate the sensibilities and fire up the imagination. They are memorable. *Radioactive Cats*, 1980 (figure 5) begins the decade of the '80s with those full-scale tableaux that represent Skoglund's continuing interest in mimesis as the real activity of the artist. Rather than using only found objects, Skoglund painstakingly creates the creatures by hand then duplicates them until she has enough to swarm throughout the tableau, which now functions more like a set for the animated, yet inanimate, clones of natural, believable creatures. Here Skoglund gives full reign to her obsessive insistence upon the artificial nature of art. Art is not a mirror of nature; it is a synthetic invention of the artist.

Revenge of the Goldfish, 1981 (figure 7), *Maybe Babies*, 1983, and *Fox Games*, 1989 (figure 8), continue her studies in mimetic sculptural forms. The fish, the babies, and the foxes are slightly threatening. They are out of their elements, rather aggressive in body tension and, frankly, somewhat ugly. Not one of Skoglund's sculptures represents cuddly, Disneyesque, attractive creatures. Eyes bulge, mouths gape open, and bodies invade every space. Her babies have sinister expressions that suggest they would like to eat the viewer, and the foxes move in predatory orchestration upon the persons in the tableau or upon nothing in particular.

Food has always remained one of her continuing materials and images. Works such as *The Cocktail Party*, 1992 (figures 9 and 10), *Body Limits*, 1992 (figure 11), and *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 1992 (figure 12), launched the '90s by moving the viewer into a scary, otherworldly environment and idea. What Skoglund does that her predecessors in the surrealist cabal or pop art party didn't do is work from nature and remove its individuality bit by bit. Her reductionism is almost sinister. She takes an otherwise perfectly good and normal squirrel and turns it into a slightly sinister rodent (*Gathering Paradise*, 1991). An

innocuous box of raisins grows, multiplies and creeps across the surface of everything as if it were some horrible, wrinkled, fruity plague spawned by the atom bomb (*Atomic Love*, 1992). Crusty, gaudy Cheez Doodles cloak mannequin-like figures (*The Cocktail Party*, 1992), and hard-shelled jelly beans utterly snatch the bodies from once-animate beings and form a creepy second skin (*Shimmering Madness*, 1998: figure 1). These works are reminiscent of B grade Sci Fi flicks from the '50s except that, instead of huge spiders and gargantuan glandular plasma, it is food—the necessary sustenance of life—in its most artificially colored and shaped form that threatens to possess living forms and conquer the world.⁶ What we trust most, food—ersatz Mother's milk—has become a monstrous substance that we would surely reject if we were fully conscious and totally alert.

Shimmering Madness represents a significant departure from the fables and foibles of Skoglund's strange and provocative animal kingdoms. Although the basic tableau is the same—figures within a set—the concept is stripped bare of detail and of mimesis. Although lush with color, aflutter with butterflies, and glittering in hard-shelled, jewel-like, candied opulence, this work represents a further step in the reductionism of nature into the artificiality of art. There is no furniture; there are no clothes. The sculpture figures are trapped and immovable in their sugared suits of armor. Even the live figures, staged for the photograph, are nude, nearly hairless, and cold as corpses. They are stripped of life, identified as shapes and actions, and frozen in time. It is as if they have been banished to a parallel universe, harking again to that art she did not pursue—film. One wonders, when looking upon such a still and Spartan work, what Skoglund would have made had she gone on to New York University and pursued a degree in filmmaking as she had wanted to do when she first left Smith College. Is this just a still from the long movie playing in her head which joins the other stills, frozen in time, starring green cats, blue dogs, red foxes and horrific, big cannibal babies? Maybe, maybe not. Behind the frozen figures, as a foil to the frozen jelly bean floor, is the background—soft, quivering, exotic, and shifting. The hundreds of feathery butterflies are attached to tiny, thin mounts that allow movement with the slightest shift in air currents. They occasionally require repair or replacement. So much for finality.

Ground that is once broken needs to be planted, and

Skoglund is always willing to feed and nurture her creative ambition. Handling thousands of jelly beans in the making of *Shimmering Madness* was not quite satisfying to the "hands on" imperative of this artist. Skoglund's recent work, *Breathing Glass*, 2000 (Figure 18, 19, cover), advances not in another direction but into another dimension. In this huge installation, shown first in the American Craft Museum, Skoglund has returned to a bit of mimesis by sculpting the glass dragonflies by hand. The live figures are warmed by drapery-like clothes and the sculptural mosaic figures would be perfectly at home alongside the glittering glass of a Byzantine church or Ravenna chapel. The figures simply stand there, on their heads, perfectly comfortable among the dragonflies and marshmallows. In the photograph the figures walk on the ceiling as do the miniature marshmallow men, quite at ease in this bizarre world.

Heightened realism and intensified illusion exist side by side, like ying and yang. Contradictions feed each other and nothing is ever canceled out. Reality and fantasy together make a brain—neither ever gains the upper hand in Skoglund's work. Likewise, her work is neither photography nor sculpture. Rather, it is both, each medium contributing an essential component to the whole. Peter Frank observed that Skoglund's sets "have all been originally built to be photographed."⁷ This observation suggests that the set is subordinate to the photograph. It is not intended to be so, but the eye of the beholder will often place emphasis where it is most comfortable or desirable. Although photographers are among the first to recognize Skoglund's merit and genius, the inhabited set, contrived to be photographed, is not the end result. It is a part of the process. The uninhabited set, with its inanimate objects creating the tableau, is the end result. But it is not final, as the installation can be changed if the objects are placed in different settings or painted different colors. The various analogies to theater are acceptable to Skoglund because they recognize what she describes as the prismatic and fluid nature of her work. However, the analogies inevitably fall off when she reminds us that the narrative in her work is entirely after the fact while the opposite is true in theater and film.

Skoglund's work is almost totally without didactic content. She seems to be absorbed in being the artisan, in the sense that, to her, working with materials—making things—is the essence of being an artist. In the final analy-

sis, Skoglund is the penultimate summary of the last quarter of the 20th century and the promise of the next, defying definition, flaunting convention, and deliberately exploiting the new and the different for her own sake. She is a sorceress who can cast a spell on the viewer who, in turn, is willing to be drawn into her peculiar world. The viewer knows Skoglund's art is drawn from life and the viewer is willing to suspend disbelief on where the line between the two is drawn.

1. NOTES

1. I first met Sandy Skoglund in 1970-71 when we were both graduate students in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa. We launched our careers in New York City at about the same time, and I have followed the development of her work over the years. Observations about her work and references to her own statements are taken from personal communication, unless otherwise noted. Skoglund is straightforward and acutely articulate. Years of teaching have honed her verbal skills so that she gets to the point quickly and concisely. Her study of art history has informed her understanding of aesthetics and prepared her to develop ideas and share them intelligently. She always knows what she is talking about.
2. In his essay on Skoglund's work, Philippe Piguet uses the word "plastician," a term taken from Dominique Baque's *La photographie plastique, un art paradoxal* (Paris, Editions du Regard, 1998), and applies it conceptually and practically to Skoglund's photographs. (*Sandy Skoglund*, translation by Charles Penwarden, Art Bartschi Compagnie SA, Geneva, 2000.) I am using a much broader term with a more traditional art historical meaning and applying it to the entirety of the art work: installation, photographs, individual panels, found objects, and sculpture.
3. Robert Rosenblum, "An Interview with Sandy Skoglund," *Reality Under Siege, A Retrospective*, p. 12, Smith College Museum of Art, in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998.
4. I do not use the term "art for art's sake" in the same way Robert Rosenblum does in his interview with Skoglund, p. 24, as the opposite to art for commerce's sake. I use it broadly, in the 19th-century, Whistlerian sense of existing not only without commercial motive but also without a cultural, personal, philosophical, emotional, or religious motive, either.
5. The *Resemblance and Difference* cottage series of 1974 were small cibachrome prints measuring only 9" x 13 5/8". They were subtle but intriguing images with minimal detail. Several photographs of 1977, *Pink Sink*, *Peaches in a Toaster*, *Iron*, and *Toaster* are only slightly larger but are far more complex, even baroque. They use some favored photorealist devices—images reflected in highly polished surfaces, light reflecting off juicy fruits—without leaving the realm of photographic still life. And, of course, the favored objects and subjects prevail—natural food, within the context of artificial, contemporary, found, manufactured processors.
6. Robert Rosenblum makes a similar observation. "You really seem to have this scenario of terror and apocalypse... something like a science fiction movie." Rosenblum, p. 16.
7. Peter Frank, "Sandy Skoglund," *Cast of Characters, Figurative Sculpture*, p. 7, The Albuquerque Museum, 2000.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SANDY SKOGLUND

By Douglas Dreishpoon, curator of 20th Century Art, Albright-Knox Art Gallery

Dreishpoon, Douglas. "An Interview with Sandy Skoglund." In *Sandy Skoglund: Raining Popcorn*. Grinnell, Iowa: Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, 2001. © 2001 Douglas Dreishpoon. Used with permission

When this interview took place on 27 January 2001, the present installation had no title and the studio was full of fodder: popcorn (of course), red pipe cleaners, wood panels, metal springs, small motors, and epoxy resin—sundry edible and non-edible substances awaiting deployment. Studios function differently for different artists. In the Skoglund studio, an unlikely cross between a playground and a laboratory, high-minded ideas commingle with basic materials through a series of procedures until another kind of world emerges. Sandy's has always been an empirical creative process from beginning to end. Research and experimentation drive her conceptual orientation. Between the flash of an idea and its realization lies a rigorous and programmatic investigation. Numerous issues arise along the way. Those of a procedural nature are generally tackled and resolved immediately. Others, however, remaining in flux, become the cultural, metaphorical, and psychological subtext of a given piece.

The interview traverses a still accelerating career. I felt it germane to begin at the beginning, with a discussion of two early drawings from the mid-70's. These two-dimensional works on paper, executed by the artist straight out of graduate school, presage a sensibility drawn to repetitive gestures and fantasy spaces— a mind prone to conceptual problem-solving, but receptive to unexpected discoveries and unlikely associations. As a prelude to subsequent installations, they signal a prescient point of departure.

With any spontaneous interview, fits and starts are inevitable. Ours was no exception. In editing the transcript, I set out to extract salient passages without compromising Sandy's distinctive voice. In the hour and a half spent together, we covered a lot of terrain. The resulting text combines philosophic musing with the existential demands of a piece in process—an appropriate dynamic given the nature of the work.

Douglas Dreishpoon: Let's start with some of your early, conceptually based drawings and your remark to Carol Squiers [in *Sandy Skoglund: Reality Under Siege*, exh. cat. (Northampton, MA.: Smith College Museum of Art, 1998)] that obsession and repetition have been a constant element in your creative process. Starting with *Two Lines* and *Starting with a Pencil Sharpened Once* (two drawings executed in 1975) seem to embody the essence of your sensibility. Given drawing's ability to affirm the primacy of personality, several observations come to mind: First, that these early drawings demonstrate a preoccupation with the systematic development of an idea; secondly, both seem to project an architectonic dimension, especially *Starting with Two Lines*, as though you were already visualizing, even if subconsciously, a room-like space – a curious coincidence in light of the environments you began to design and photograph four years later; and thirdly, the drawings' titles and the notion of starting with one thing or an idea and ending with another prompts me to ask about the role of improvisation in your creative process – that which unexpectedly enters the process and results in something marvelous.

Sandy Skoglund: The primary issue for me as an artist is how to reconcile the irrational and the rational and how to include insanity in the context of sanity. Your questions raise dualities — systematic and rational verses obsessive – that is to say, when the system through its own perseverance undoes itself. The trajectory of rational thinking and rational behavior has done so much for us. I'm grateful to be alive in the 21st Century, at a time when I can benefit from all of the scientific investigations that have made my lifestyle possible. At the same time I think we, as citizens in this culture, experience a sense of emptiness in spite of the positive products of reason. So for me the element of dysfunction is an equally compelling theme: How do we deal with the non-rational byproducts of rationalism?

So, I engage in repetition, for example, and in the process divide myself in two and investigate this split condition. Growing up in the suburbs, in a manicured landscape where everything seemed to have a human intention behind it, I felt dissociated from the larger world. My family lived in many different suburbs, yet always the same, and very American. This was the landscape of my youth, and the feeling of loneliness and disengagement it produced has been an underlying subtext for my work.

DD: To my mind, a systematic orientation also connotes a methodical approach to the selection of materials, whether it's a piece of popcorn or a jellybean. And you constantly change materials. It's a little like shedding skin; new materials demand new procedures. Yours is a hands-on, empirical approach to materials, which often assumes a repetitive gesture. The results, however, are unpredictable. When you have an idea and begin to develop it, how does that idea morph in the process?

SS: I evolved from being a conceptual artist to a figurative artist who is a photographer and sculptor. Inevitably, ideas develop through various procedures and materials, depending on the scope of the project. That said, the process of repetition generates a variety of subsidiary procedures. One is learning. That's why I use the term "research and development," because there's a built-in experimentation with most projects in terms of materials and how they behave. I search for unusual materials that haven't been used before, so I have to figure out how to use them. In the case of the Grinnell project, popcorn is the sculptural material. I like to begin with a material or subject, as in *Radioactive Cats* (1980), where I focused on the cat. *Raining Popcorn* is more material-based, where the material itself determines the way in which the thing is made.

DD: There's a conceptual rigor to most of your work.

SS: There is. And there's humor as well.

DD: And a sensitivity to materials. You seem to love making sculpture and experimenting with form, even when that experimentation is more intuitive.

SS: It's very schizoid in a sense, or holistic, depending on how you look at it.

DD: I'm fascinated by the early drawings as subliminal handwriting, because they were empirical and intuitive, and they implied pictorial spaces. Each of your installations, including *Babies at Paradise Pond* (1995), conceived outdoors, develop within spatial parameters, eventually modified through the camera's viewfinder.

SS: Although the early drawings suggest a feeling of space, it's illusionistic. I set out to construct a three-dimensional experience from this limited point of view.

DD: Was it liberating to realize that first three-dimensional space?

SS: It was unbelievable. I had gone through a ten-year period, struggling to find a voice. I tried a little filmmaking and had worked with a strict conceptually based program. And then, I got my hands on a material like plaster and at the same time acquired a camera and started taking pictures.

At that point, being alone in the studio was no longer meaningful. I wanted to create a

vocabulary that somehow grounded me in the world. What that came to mean for me, in a funny way, was shopping, buying, finding things – a worldly orientation far removed from those early drawings.

I realized, too, that photographic representation solved the problem of figuration for me. I desperately wanted to work figuratively, but being conceptually focused as I was at the time, any kind of figurative painting or sculpture seemed burdened by history, whereas the kind of automatic representation possible with the camera wasn't.

DD: Let's talk about the figure, a reappearing motif since 1979. It can be sculpted or real. The human beings you sometimes incorporate into certain installations when they're being photographed adds a performative, theatrical quality to the resulting image. What's the figure's importance? What does its presence add to the work?

SS: The figure brings a sense of scale to the work. From the beginning the figure was also a kind of foil, so that when you encounter the strange material that is the work, there is still something you can relate to. The figure functions as a psychological gateway, without which the photographic space might seem too alien. Once the photograph is taken and separated from the installation, a whole new reality sets in. New questions come up, whether the person is real or not.

DD: Would you say that the inclusion of a live human subject introduces a greater sense of pathos?

SS: A sense of poignancy perhaps in terms of life and death, temporality and transience. The notion of reality constantly escapes us. Especially with the photograph, implications of mortality seep in.

DD: How do you go about selecting people to pose in your installations?

SS: Well, it depends on what the person is supposed to be doing. In *Breathing Glass* (2000), or even *Raining Popcorn*, where the landscape is made up of popcorn, rather than having people assume quotidian or ordinary kinds of gestures, I see them more symphonic and ballet-like. In some recent installations I worked with dancers, which was a very rewarding experience.

DD: Do unforeseen things happen during the process?

SS: Things are always changing. If I knew what the piece was going to look like six months before I started, there would be no sense of fun or interest in making it. So I generally avoid fully resolved preliminary drawings, preferring to work spontaneously as much as possible.

Right now I'm fascinated by how popcorn kernels resemble snowflakes. Each one is unique – the result of a little primal explosion. And I love the philosophical reverberations of this kind of investigation into arcane areas of reality, because in the big picture, they're just as relevant as, say, Einstein's theory of relativity.

DD: Does a piece start with a title, or do titles evolve along the way?

SS: Titles arrive differently for each piece. *Breathing Glass*, for instance, began with a commitment to glass, to making glass vibrate and move and the inappropriateness and scariness of that. Breathing was a term I felt embodied the notion of glass moving.

Walking on Eggshells (1997) came about at the same time as the idea of using eggshells. I just loved the cross-cultural implications of such a simple phrase, which says so much about what life is like.

For that piece, I knew I was going to work six to nine months on something whose perfection in the end would be disturbed, crushed by people walking on the eggshells.

DD: *Walking on Eggshells* was in process during my last visit to your studio, in 1996. You were then working on the hieroglyphic line drawings for the walls.

SS: I felt like an art historian doing the research for those drawings. A lot of my process has to do with intentionally putting myself in situations that create a kind of irony. These are not necessarily artistic situations; they're life situations, where I set out to understand something unknown to me. I incorporate this dynamic into my work. And it's actually very uncomfortable.

DD: Always or at times?

SS: It's almost always uncomfortable, even irritating. Usually, there comes a point when I ask myself why I'm doing this, which inevitably raises the issue of comfort and discomfort in the art-making process. Most people are under the impression that artists, for the most part, are happy doing what they do. In my case, though, the process can be very unsettling.

DD: Is that because your process is about continually asking questions, whose answers may be deflected by ever-changing circumstances?

SS: That's right. And I get bored easily. It's hard to look at the finished work. I'm more interested in what's in front of my face, focusing on the process, and pushing in different ways to complete the piece. It can be very cathartic, though. Initially, there's this feeling of inner necessity, of forcing yourself to have an internal dialogue about what has to be done, even if certain details, like calling this person or that person about a material or procedure, or going here or there in search of something, are sometimes stressful. And then there's a feeling of relief once I've made my way through that period of information gathering, a certain peacefulness that comes about once the flow exists. At this point, I'm working with known processes and a feeling of predictability. But then, with the introduction of photography, the process veers into the unknown again. Photography, as a moment in time, introduces rigid pictorialism into the multiple viewpoints of sculptural perception. An installation is a lot more forgiving than the photographic element, which requires endless fussing with details as they appear within the frame. There's a discerning eye that comes into play because photography translates sculpture in a totally different way.

DD: Are you visualizing the photograph simultaneously with the making of the installation, or does the photographic process activate at a certain threshold?

SS: At a certain threshold; otherwise it might paralyze the process. When I start an installation, I don't worry about photography, because I'm more concerned with sculptural materials, even if the piece is temporary and not intended to travel: How materials behave. What they can do. How long they can last and what happens to them over time. With *Spirituality in the Flesh* (1992), I bought a lot of raw hamburger and kept it in the studio, playing with it, looking at it. I did the same thing with bacon in *Body Limits* (1992). It's all part of the research and development phase, where I experiment with new materials and procedures.

DD: What about your studio practice? Does that remain consistent or does it change with each installation?

SS: It changes. It's hard for me to tell whether a piece is successful or not, because I've been looking at it and working on it for so long that I'm blind to its merits or failures. It generally takes about a year for me to see my work objectively.

DD: Are those dynamics heightened by projects with deadlines?

SS: I don't believe so. When I was doing my early work, I had the same sensation. When I did *Radioactive Cats*, there was no pressure, no pending exhibition, and still I had the same feeling of "Thank God it's done." I sculpted those cats all by myself over many months. As a conceptual artist involved with repetitive processes, when does it really end? So the photograph became a reason to end the repetition. With the early drawings they ended when the sheet of paper was full. When I began to make sculpture, each one was an adventure, a mind-boggling experience of unification with the world.

It wasn't until I started photographing the installations that I realized the frame only accommodates so much visual information. It has always been important to me that the photograph be a complete statement on its own, so that if the installation no longer existed there would still be enough information in the photograph for the viewer to understand it.

DD: At one point in your interview with Robert Rosenblum [in *Sandy Skoglund: Reality Under Siege*], you mentioned that you were a child of the fifties, born into a consumer culture surrounded by things, and that this milieu affected not only your perception of the world but the way your work evolved. In terms of your photographic process, the acquisition, production, and subsequent arrangement of things, be they consumer products or hand-fabricated animals, helps to explain, on a formal level, patternistic tendencies in the work – a spatial strategy within the frame. And there are other levels of meaning as well, especially with the incorporation of animals, in both photographs and installations, where an unruly pack of foxes, dogs, cats, or squirrels creates a sense of menace. All this brings me to an observation and two questions: Your installations and photographs seem to function on a number of levels simultaneously. Do you consciously build in levels of meaning? Do you prefer open-ended situations where various interpretations are possible?

SS: I deliberately keep the work as open-ended as possible but within specific parameters. For instance, I'm very particular about what objects I select; it's this bed and not another. It's always a specific this or that. An image can simultaneously have political, psychological, sociological, and formal levels of meaning, which may or not

impact the viewer depending on how he or she experiences the world.

The ultimate conceptual work for me is playing around in my notebook, investigating all the possibilities on paper. This is the puzzle-making part of the narrative and various questions come up: What kind of space should it be? What are the people doing in the picture and why are they doing it? What else is in the image besides people? What are the materials? What does it mean to use these? I ask all these questions over and over again every morning as I work on the piece. And I scroll through the various meanings that arise. Actually, this is a very constructive element in my process.

DD: Tell me more about this notebook.

SS: I keep a notebook with me at all times, a small logbook, so I can record whatever I'm thinking about at the time. Stream of consciousness, it's all there. Everything I want to remember, though not necessarily drawing. My need to remember ideas has changed over time. When I started out as an artist I would forget concepts and insights, so it became very important to write ideas down the moment they came to me. Now, when I get an idea, it may actually be twenty or thirty years old. The idea of using popcorn in my work occurred that long ago.

DD: In what context?

SS: In graduate school, I stuffed a sewn starfish shape with pink painted popcorn. When the Grinnell project came about, I had forgotten about this. I was interested in the notion of grain and the Midwest – Iowa and corn. I attended the University of Iowa for grad school and will never forget the endless fields of corn and the wonderful sense of equanimity that came as a result of the horizon line being so far away and yet so visible. It left an indelible impression of calmness on me. So on some level, I wanted to deal with that recollection.

DD: Babies at Paradise Pond brought you back to the landscape. With this installation, you're again dealing with the landscape in a way that brings you back to an earlier recollection. In this instance, though, the corn is not an ear of corn but a substance that's undergone a metamorphosis of sorts – the grain has been exploded. So what are we moving toward?

SS: What I like about popcorn is its cultural resonance. In terms of research, it functions on the same level as the drawings I did for *Walking on Eggshells*. For these, I researched representations of the snake and the rabbit through 3,000 years of human culture, the ways in which these animals came to embody different psychological states – power, anxiety, etc. Popcorn, too, is a very old cultural icon, a pan-cultural phenomenon with a long history of meaning, usually celebratory. Archeologists have found fired clay popcorn poppers in the American Southwest that are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

These are life-affirming discoveries that take me beyond contemporary cynicism. They're also conceptual fodder for an idea that traces the transformation of the landscape from endless rows of natural corn to something abstracted, exploded, and in the end, highly edible. That said, the exact meaning of all of this undoubtedly will take time to unravel.

DD: Perhaps it's better to leave meaning in flux until the piece is actually finished and you're able to see it from a distance.

SS: What's uncanny to me is how much sense the work seems to make when I finally discuss it, and how biographical implications come to the fore that have been long forgotten.

DD: Perhaps that's the autobiographical overlay, though I'm interested, too, in the sociological subtext that layers certain pieces.

SS: To some extent my role as an artist is not unlike a sociologist of American culture. I try to pretend that I've landed from another planet, which was essentially how I felt as a young person growing up in the suburbs. I wondered how I got there, who I was and about everything around me, like why my mother hung decorative plastic plants above the washing machine. A lot of choices made by adults at that time seemed mysterious and strange. So looking at our culture from the outside in, as a stranger to myself, is a compelling angle to work from. I find American culture exotic. From this perspective, narrative elements acquire an archetypal inflection.

DD: Is the challenge to maintain a clear sense of objectivity, to see the culture we live in through a critical lens?

SS: It all depends on how you observe behavior. Detachment isn't necessarily a bad thing if it brings objective insights.

DD: This is a process question: Do ideas come in a flash or do they tend to evolve naturally out of other installations?

SS: Some come in a grand flash; others come in a little flash which repeats until I have the faith to go with it. Once I have an idea, I have to find ways to make it work. Great ideas can require a lot of hard work to be realized.

DD: With the Grinnell project, what are you going through now in terms of your process? What are you experimenting with? What's the best popcorn around?

SS: Of course there are many kinds. Raining Popcorn started out as a floor piece. It was going to be waves of popcorn strung on long wires, like the lyric-inspired "amber waves of grain." So I started working with white popcorn made by Bearitos – pre-popped, with no oil, salt, or additives. I didn't feel it was important to pop the corn myself. I wanted to work with this popcorn in an unexpected and interesting way. I wanted to surprise myself. At the same time I kept thinking about the weather in Iowa and about the sky. I decided to focus on the feeling of falling, as opposed to flying, because the last two pieces had dealt with flying insects: dragonflies and butterflies. This piece is more about the sky, weather and precipitation, related to the endless horizon of the Midwest. Gradually, the piece evolved from the floor onto the wall, as I became more interested in a vertical space created by endless walls of popcorn woven together.

DD: Will the popcorn be adhered to wood panels?

SS: Yes, woven together with red pipe cleaners, the popcorn starts off on panels, because this element has an animated component to it: the corn appears to move selectively from section the section – the effect being like rain.

DD: Was Breathing Glass the first animated installation you conceived?

SS: Actually, Shimmering Madness (1998), originally created for Rutgers University, was the first piece in which most of the components moved. The last two installations expanded on that principle, which lead me to design and fabricate a network of internal springs in consultation with a spring company.

DD: And what about the conservation issue? You use a brand of popcorn that's free of oil and preservatives. Are you adding anything else to enhance its longevity?

SS: Each kernel is hand-worked and dipped in epoxy resin so that it will hopefully survive as sculpture.

DD: Looking at the panels here in your studio, I sense chaos in the patterns. I also get the impression of a grand tapestry or weaving, whose animation will throw the whole thing into another vector.

SS: That's what distinguishes this piece from the last two. The last two were very minimal in the sense that they were about the disbursal of dragonflies and butterflies. I want this piece to be more complex. The patterning is there but should operate on a different level. And I want the red pipe cleaners to appear integrated into the visual field.

DD: Were trees part of the original design?

SS: Yes, trees were there from the beginning. Now, it's a matter of what kind of trees, where to get them, and what they're going to be made of. They're going to be red, like veins, to contrast with the popcorn and to reinforce the color of the pipe cleaners. At least that's what I'm aiming for.[editor's note: Skoglund changed her mind after this interview, and the trees were never painted red. They were left as natural wood stripped of their bark.

DD: When I think about the landscape you experienced as a graduate student – ever-expanding fields and rows of green corn – the inherent order of that scene contrasts with the corn in Raining Popcorn – a subtle tension between what appears ordered and what's otherwise chaotic.

SS: Think of what a farm is: human beings at work reordering and reorganizing nature. It's a frightening notion but comforting at the same time depending on how you see it. Our ability to transform and control nature is built into our notion of civilization. I try not to be judgmental about it. I'd rather see the whole thing from a sociologist or anthropologist's perspective, to be a creative commentator rather than a political analyst. Still, the idea of people dominating the plains layers the content of the piece; the planting of corn replaced indigenous grasses. In that sense, corn comes to symbolize people's control over and transformation of the natural landscape through domestication.

DD: Are there any other components you're considering?

SS: Even though I'm coming down the homestretch, my process remains open to last-minute changes – more trees less trees, changes of color. The end is when the photograph has been taken. At that point the installation is truly finished, because without the photography, the end is only a relative state of completion.

DD: Have you ever added to an installation after the photograph was taken?

SS: Yes. And I've also exhibited installations before any photography happened.

DD: When?

SS: Shimmering Madness underwent numerous transformations. I made one installation for a show, Almost Warm & Fuzzy [now traveling through Independent Curators International], which was based on an earlier version commissioned by Rutgers University. The original had only adult figures in it. The new version incorporates children as well. Both were conceived and revised before any photography took place.

The opposite was true for The Cocktail Party (1992), an installation revised several times after being photographed. The first time, when I did it for the camera, I didn't know enough about cheese doodles. So when you look at the photograph, you might notice that most of the cheese doodles are not impregnated with epoxy resin or prepped for installation purposes; the entire set up was solely for the camera. Afterwards, I was so enamored with cheese doodles that I incorporated them on to panels and exhibited these as an installation, at the same time reworking the clothing, which had been tailored for real people, and adapting it to mannequins. In this instance, a large body of work came after the photography of that piece.

DD: In your mind's eye, how do you envision the Grinnell installation?

SS: Well, the ultimate excitement will be piling mounds and mounds of popcorn on the floor.

Introductory essay by Marvin Heiferman for the exhibition of RAINING POPCORN at the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College 2001

Marvin Heiferman. "Serious Thoughts are Popping Up." In Sandy Skoglund: Raining Popcorn. Grinnell, Iowa: Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, 2001. © 2001 Marvin Heiferman. Used with permission

It was more than a quarter century ago that American artists began to turn to photography—with excitement and in growing numbers—acknowledging that it was the medium best suited to make sense out of the complexity of late 20th-century existence. Some artists made deadpan photographic images to document their conceptual investigations or to comment on the quirkiest intersections of art and life. Others appropriated everyday commercial imagery, living under the skin of popular culture's pictures in order to understand how the photographs that claimed to represent reality had come to be as engaging as reality itself. Still another option, one pioneered by artists like Sandy Skoglund, was to explore photography's power to redefine reality by learning how to fabricate compelling fantasies and illusions.

That practice—which came to be known as tableaux or directorial photography—demanded a knack for storytelling, a sense of style, and a repertoire of convincing technical skills. And from her earliest major installations and photographic works to her most recent work, *Raining Popcorn* (2001), Skoglund has repeatedly proven her mastery of those skills. For two decades, she's been a canny pop-culture showman, producing appealing, yet ultimately disturbing artworks that never fail to attract viewer attention. It's hard to be blasé when confronted with Skoglund's signature, over-the-top psychodramas. And hard not to shake your head in disbelief or crack a smile when you find yourself, literally or figuratively, in a corner of the world where everything is covered in uncooked chopped meat, raisins, or jelly beans.

Skoglund's aggressive disregard of conventional good taste and "high art" seriousness often reads as humor and lightness in an art world prone to self-importance and pretension. But ultimately, behind the sometimes jokey and always raucous façades of her sculptural installations and photographic images, it is Skoglund's intention to trigger discomfort and self-reflection. It is the darker side of her imagination that gives the work its edge and depth, that keeps it from teetering into gimmickry and theme park insincerity. No matter how seductive or loopy her materials, imagery, or implied narratives might get, Skoglund is relentlessly focused on the production of metaphors that reflect human fear and vulnerability.

Behind the manic, matching props and the optical buzz of carefully calibrated color coordination lie more subtle, somber messages. Skoglund almost challenges her audience to wade through the distraction of surface patterns and to accustom themselves to the visual din to get to the essence of the work. And for those who do, something odd happens. A surprising calm settles over the work's hyperactivity. And Skoglund's lower-keyed, but more powerful juxtapositions and contradictions emerge: Humor co-exists with anxiety, the human with the animal world, and the banal with the apocalyptic. The work simmers down and reminds viewers of their smallness in a big, over-determined world where consumer culture, nature, science, and their interior gyroscopes regularly spin out of control.

Control lies at the core of Skoglund's work. Each project presents new challenges—the learning curve to master idiosyncratic materials, the logistics of mass production, long stretches of repetitive work, and repeated tests of willpower. From the conception of projects through extended periods of labor-intensive, factory-like production, to the final installation and photography, nothing is left to chance. Fortunately, Skoglund relishes that sort of challenge; she's always derived pleasure and satisfaction from hard work. To hear Skoglund reflect back on the joy and tedium she experienced on her earliest jobs—decorating cakes, hour after hour, on the night shift at a commercial bakery; selling shoes, perfume and even hot dogs at Disneyland—sheds biographical light on the content, process, and unforgiving intensity of her work.

Harnessing her skill and determination to create images for a world in which logic no longer rules, Skoglund aligns herself with artists and writers whose subject matter is the irrationality of modern life. Sigmund Freud, in a 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," was the first to describe the unsettling response one feels when confronted with situations that are simultaneously both familiar and strange, that trigger a kind of amazement, a sense of shock, and a thrill. That kind of exquisite discomfort inspired the earliest surrealist artists who responded to the horrors of World War I, and others in subsequent decades who responded to the dislocations of daily life by making artworks in which interior and exterior realities were experienced simultaneously.

Skoglund's work extends that tradition. Her work shares the theatrical flair of Salvatore Dali's hallucinogenic tableaux, the charmingly domestic preposterousness of Rene Magritte's paintings and sculptures, and the fancifulness of Man Ray's photographs. Ironically—given Skoglund's intense study and learned facility—there's something about her subject matter, choice of materials, and compulsive work habits that call to mind yet another group of artists—self-taught or “folk” artists. But while Skoglund might share their offbeat sensibility, unshakable sincerity, and transcendent focus, her visions are firmly rooted in her own cultural self-consciousness. From commercial photography, Skoglund has learned to meticulously craft the aura of perfection that transforms mundane realities into convincing illusions. She draws liberally from the conventions of science fiction and horror films, and the display techniques of natural history museums and store windows.

Dense as the network of sources for her work might be, Skoglund is reluctant to articulate specific meanings for her imagery. She's learned from years of experience that regardless of her own motivations and feelings, viewers layer their own stories onto her uncanny images. Still, in the months before *Raining Popcorn* was completed, Skoglund was willing to discuss some of the new work's ideas and allusions. The downpours and drifts of popcorn would refer to the historical movement of glacial ice sheets that cut the hilltops and filled the valleys of Iowa with rich soil, creating fertile plains. The piece is an homage to the expansiveness of the state's landscape, where generations ago indigenous tall grasses were plowed under for farming. And as corn emerged from a diversity of cash crops to dominate the natural landscape, so popped corn overwhelms nature itself in *Raining Popcorn*.

Skoglund spoke, as well, of her interest in themes of disorientation, disappearance, and death, and of her need to explore the poignant, ephemeral nature of the physical world—its seasons of growth, the lives and deaths of plants, animals, and people. Skoglund described how she's been profoundly moved by witnessing people come to accept their own vulnerability and learn to forgive themselves and others for who and what they are. Gone are the furniture, the claustrophobic props, and lighthearted sight gags that characterized so many earlier pieces. Even the popcorn-pale tint of this newest work signals a change of tone and concern.

In *Raining Popcorn*, the junk food most closely associated with frivolous entertainment is used to detail a primal scene. For this project, Skoglund researched popcorn's historical significance and cultural associations. She learned that long before European explorers arrived in the Americas, popcorn was used to decorate the ceremonial headdresses and necklaces of the Aztec's gods of maize, rain, and fertility. Millennia later, Native Americans served popcorn at the first Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth and brought "snacks" to meetings with the colonists as tokens of goodwill during peace negotiations. It was only in the late 19th century that popcorn became linked with leisure time, and its popularity grew as it was sold by vendors at state fairs, public parks, and international expositions. By the time of the Great Depression, both popcorn and movies had become so popular and cheap, they became linked in the minds of Americans as affordable luxuries. When candy was scarce due to sugar rationing during World War II, Americans' popcorn consumption tripled. And although popcorn sales slumped mid-century, when television's popularity cut into movie theatre attendance, popcorn sales today approach a quarter billion dollars a year, thanks to the prevalence of microwave ovens. A world knee-deep in popcorn isn't far-fetched, considering that the average American consumes 68 quarts of popcorn each year.

Recent front-page headlines and features on the evening news suggest at least one other way to interpret the meaning of piles of corn in our daily lives. In fall 2000, environmental watchdog groups rang alarm bells when they detected that genetically modified StarLink corn, neither tested nor approved for human consumption, had made its way into a popular brand of taco shells and onto supermarket shelves. While Europeans have argued loud and long about the spread and safety of genetically modified foods, this was the first time Americans seemed to pay attention to the public health, economic, and ethical issues the situation raised. Corn—one of America's premiere cash crops—is used in the manufacture of chips, sweeteners, starch, oil, flour, and cereals. Within weeks, almost 300 corn products were recalled. Foreign sales of American corn were threatened. The nerves and finances of farmers started to fray. Devoting acreage to genetically altered corn had seemed like an especially good idea to farmers who grew StarLink for animal feed; the redesigned food product was engineered to poison the caterpillars responsible for yearly crop losses of a billion dollars. But somehow StarLink corn stored in silos got mixed in with corn sold for human consumption. To the food industry and for Iowa, the kind of bad dream, fantasy scenarios Sandy Skoglund specializes in can seem uncomfortably real.

The fascination Skoglund's works hold for viewers has always been triggered by the references and frictions, the uncanniness she so carefully builds into her environmental scenarios. Her signature strategy of leavening levity with terror rings true because it is a tactic long embedded in popular culture. From mid-20th century Cold War fear-mongering to the calculated plots of summer blockbusters, the juxtaposition of joy and fear, of giggles and screams is guaranteed to stir the American imagination. And it is precisely these kinds of oppositions that Skoglund—a populist artist, supremely uninterested in showing restraint—has so enthusiastically embraced and shrewdly exploited in this new work. In *Raining Popcorn*, sculpture and photography, culture and nature, nature and business, and art and life interweave to shape yet another compelling and open-ended scenario about the complexities of the world we live in.