

Snack Attack: Comical Paintings Exposing Hidden Deceptions of the Modern Food Industry

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Abstract

For most people, indulging in a puffed cheddar cheese snack is as a harmless act. However for some, eating those crispy, addicting puffs is like inviting death by a psycho killer in the Bates Motel. This series of large-scale paintings combines images from iconic horror films and classic junk food advertising into humorous Neo-pop paintings that relate to American culture. These paintings seduce the viewers through luscious paint and pop culture iconography into examining the hidden deceptions of modern food manufacturing. By researching the ways in which processed food is negatively affecting the nation, as well as researching classic horror films and other Pop Art painters of food, the artist will underscore the darkness behind the industry, but in a comical way that highlights the absurdities of feeling uncomfortable with personal body image. The series *Snack Attack* investigates how painted images can form questions about the fearful effects of manufactured food, while congruently aiding the artist's process of finding inner peace with her own food struggles.

Keywords: Snack Attack, Paintings, Food

1. Introduction

Eating pre-packaged cakes and dining at Wendy's after school was a very normal part of my childhood. Growing up in the early 1990s, when obesity was not so much a major national concern, everyone still indulged in these heavily processed "Franken foods" such as Twinkies and Cheetos. At that time and in the past, there wasn't much available public knowledge of what people were really being fed. Researchers have noted that, "Today, more than a third of Americans are considered obese- more than twice the proportion of 40 years ago. Worldwide, more than half a billion people are now obese."¹ How did this staggering statistic come to be? Some say it is simply caused by eating too much and moving too little, which can be debated, but much of it has to do with how our food is made. These statistics as well as facts supporting fraudulence of the food industry are the more concrete claims that prompted my visions for *Snack Attack*; however, my personal struggles with food and body acceptance are what inspired me to make art that paralleled my efforts to get healthier. Making artwork that was filtered through a pop culture and Pop Art lens mitigated the discomfort of confronting my negative body complex and allowed me to have fun with the process.

2. Food Manufacturing Deceptions

Ever since the industrial revolution brought about major technological advances and desired speedier production, food has morphed into a science project, rather than be a hardworking routine necessary for survival. These “scientists,” a.k.a. food companies, are primarily concerned with profits, rather than the health of their consumers, which is the controversial idea expressed in *Snack Attack*. These companies are instilling deceiving labels such as the word “natural,” using misleading advertising and cheap ingredients, and practicing government lobbying to bring about a higher profit while tiptoeing around the truth of their product. For example, labels stating that the product contains zero trans fats may not be completely true. “Nutrition panels are only required to list trans fats if they total no more than 0.49 grams per serving,” so many manufacturers reworked their foods to be just under this amount and be legally allowed to say there are no trans fats in their product². If people are thinking they are making good choices when they are actually ingesting unhealthy amounts of trans fats over time, they may eventually wonder why they wound up in a hospital. Yale University professor of psychology and public health Kelly Brownell is a proponent of the view that the processed food industry should be seen as a public health menace³. Researcher and writer Michael Moss believes that “a conscious effort is taking place in labs, marketing meetings and grocery store aisles to get people hooked on foods that are convenient and inexpensive.”⁴ These addicting, popular foods, such as Doritos and Dr. Pepper, stem from years of testing and experimenting with how the food interacts with the mouth and what will keep people craving more. A concept that came to food industry legend, Howard Moskowitz, was something called “sensory-specific satiety” which became the guiding principle for the processed-food industry. They are “complex formulas that pique the taste buds enough to be alluring but don’t have a distinct, overriding single flavor that tells the brain to stop eating.”⁵ The result of this formula is that one finishes a whole bag of chips and doesn’t realize it, and then needs to return to the store to buy more. It is a constant cycle that is driving people to overeat and almost everyone in the modern world has had this uncontrolled, unnoticed experience. If processed food didn’t have this, one would normally be satisfied with just one, maybe two Keebler fudge elves and the good life of moderation would exist. Instead, the craving remains. The paintings created for “Snack Attack” highlight the fact that junk food, altered by industry to create addiction, have been one of the culprits that has brought about obesity to America and the world. Being knowledgeable about and propelled by these facts, I create paintings that convey my anger, sense of betrayal, and guilt associated with eating these delusive foods. However, I use a light-hearted and comedic tone that parallels advertising strategy to maintain a positive, intermediary approach to such off-putting and revealing information.

Throughout my undergraduate experience, my paintings have dealt with feelings of guilt, being overwhelmed by cons of the modern food industry, and how they contribute to unhealthy perceptions about the body. My earlier paintings brought me to a realization that bingeing and obsessing over body image are haunting and dangerous places to be. I also came to realize how eating habits fearfully controlled my life, rather than being a healthful part of it. The past four years of my life have been controlled by an eating disorder and it was by working on large canvases and feeling compelled to paint about body image and food that allowed me to see that food anxieties were always on my mind and something that needed to be confronted. This unhealthy place was captured in one of my earlier paintings titled, *Drips in the Dark*, where I was bingeing and gorging on cake at night where no one could see me. Although the painting may look dreamy and delectable, it was based on fear of what a greedy, overindulgent monster I become if I don’t treat my body respectfully. When not eating, I viewed myself as a helpless, shrieking female casting shadows behind closed doors; much like a typical scenario in an iconic horror movie. This unhealthy mental state is something that can overcome one’s whole body and can be followed by a controlled or very uncontrollable act, much like the sensory-specific satiety.

One either realizes consciously that they’re giving in, or they are not aware of what harm they’re doing. All they can do is reach for the next thing they want their tongue to taste. For instance, a box of open Oreos will be sitting on the worktable as you pass the open door. They are birthday cake flavored, a personal favorite. You catch a glimpse of their sprinkled icing center pressed between two dark chocolate cookies. They bring back nostalgic feelings of childhood, but you know they are so heavily processed and are a set back in all the healthy eating you’ve been keeping up with. Will this buttery, sugar-laden cookie thicken my round face? Is this the culprit of a fat America and the rolls on my sides? As the mental process races, the smell of sweet vanilla takes over and the cookie is taking laps around your salivating tongue. Those released endorphins are quickly shadowed by feelings of fatness and your ideology in avoiding heavily processed foods. The guilt of fattening foods and loss of self-control build up and you’ve been defeated. This high caloric, processed food is always coming for you, always and forever hiding behind

a door. It never stops. The Jack Torrence of pastry cakes, salty chips, and pizza bites never lets you leave the Overlook Hotel of the food industry.

Finding visual references that connected horror films to food fears/negative body image led me to use paint as a healthy outlet for recovery. I was exhausted from feeling bad about my body and mind and I longed to be happy and relate to people in a different, more positive way.



Figure 1. Allison Fawcett, *Drips in the Night*, 2012, oil on canvas, 48in x 60in.

4. Film

Film is an integral aspect of American culture and brings millions of people together in a bond of shared experience. Popular horror films such as Wes Craven's "Nightmare on Elm Street", haunted and delighted everyone in America, and Freddy Krueger became a household name. A convincing storyline, as well as inventive lighting and camera angles combine to reel the viewer into a heightened sensory experience, much like the way light, composition, and subject matter can be used in a painting. Horror movies use disturbing images to frighten an audience or make them feel suspense through light and shadow interplay. A film director such as Alfred Hitchcock is a master of manipulating light and creating tension through unexpected camera angles. In a murder scene from his classic film, "Psycho", the always backlit murderer comes storming out of a room to attack an intruder coming up the stairs. The camera is placed in an aerial perspective and the attack is spotlighted at several different angles to cast multiple

shadows on the walls, thus creating an overall terrifying atmosphere (Fig.2). By examining some of these different approaches in horror film cinematography, I extended my own use of composition in the painting series.



Figure 2. Scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, 1960, USA.

Hitchcock's approach for successful movies is also seen in his use of female characters. Not only is the female character something I personally identify with, but it's this "paranoid woman" model that made Hitchcock's movies so publically acclaimed as well. Professor of film studies Mark Jancovich states, "those films that have come to be seen as examples of the paranoid woman's film, were generally regarded as more prestigious and important within the period."⁶ Actress Grace Kelly is an example of this typecast female in Hitchcock's films "Dial M for Murder" and Oscar nominated "Rear Window." With this in mind, I chose to follow Hitchcock by incorporating this notion of "the paranoid woman." After I established a woman character, it was equally important that there was a narrative in the painting, similar to what is needed in film. Wes Craven says that horror movies are "like boot camp for the psyche. In real life, human beings are packaged in the flimsiest of packages, threatened by real and sometimes horrifying dangers, events like Columbine. But the narrative form puts these fears into a manageable series of events. It gives us a way of thinking rationally about our fears."⁷ This analogy relates to my personal struggles with food. Throughout the process of making these narrative paintings, it was like gaining control of the situation; releasing lingering, unhealthy spirits about food and body image, and putting those feelings into paint. By examining film's narrative forms, directorial approaches, and their illustrative storyboards, I developed a better understanding of what compositions and subjects were needed to make a successful painting. One that is understood, I incorporate a more engaging color palette, which is where my Pop Art aesthetic comes into play.

5. Pop Art

Pop Art is a well known term but is one that is hard to define. It is most simply understood as a movement that peaked in the 1960s and is characterized by a response to the emerging environment of television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and movie screens, which provided both entertainment and unremitting information. Art writer Robert Rosenblum states, "the authentic Pop artist...represents mass-produced images and objects by using a style which is also based upon the visual vocabulary of mass production."⁸ The subject matter is usually mundane,

commercial objects, but it's something that people relate and connect to in an instant familiarity. *Snack Attack* gives the viewer that same proverbial connection to mass-produced foods, like Doritos and Swiss Cake Rolls, but displays that association within a new context. Most people refer to Andy Warhol when referencing Pop art, but Wayne Thiebaud and sculptor Claes Oldenburg are the artists with whom I most resonate.

Thiebaud skimmed the outskirts of Pop, by arranging “cafeteria still-lives under a creamy impasto of pastel sweetness”⁹ or in other words, painting cakes with paint so thick and buttery, that it actually resembles spread on icing. He would paint rows of cakes and pie slices in candy shop pastel colors. His treatment of everyday forms elevated the subject rather than dismiss it as a mundane object, like many other Pop artists might have done (Fig.3). Thiebaud’s work is “distinctly different from the imagery in Pop art, which simultaneously draws upon and satirizes consumer society...his work is honest, Thornton Wilderesque appreciation for aspects of the American experience.”¹⁰ His appreciation of this kind of food was genuine, whereas I am painting food with more negative and harmful connotations. Obesity wasn’t really a problem in Wayne’s day, but processed comfort foods continue to be what many Americans most enjoy, so junk food subject matter continues to be related to Pop art and popular culture.

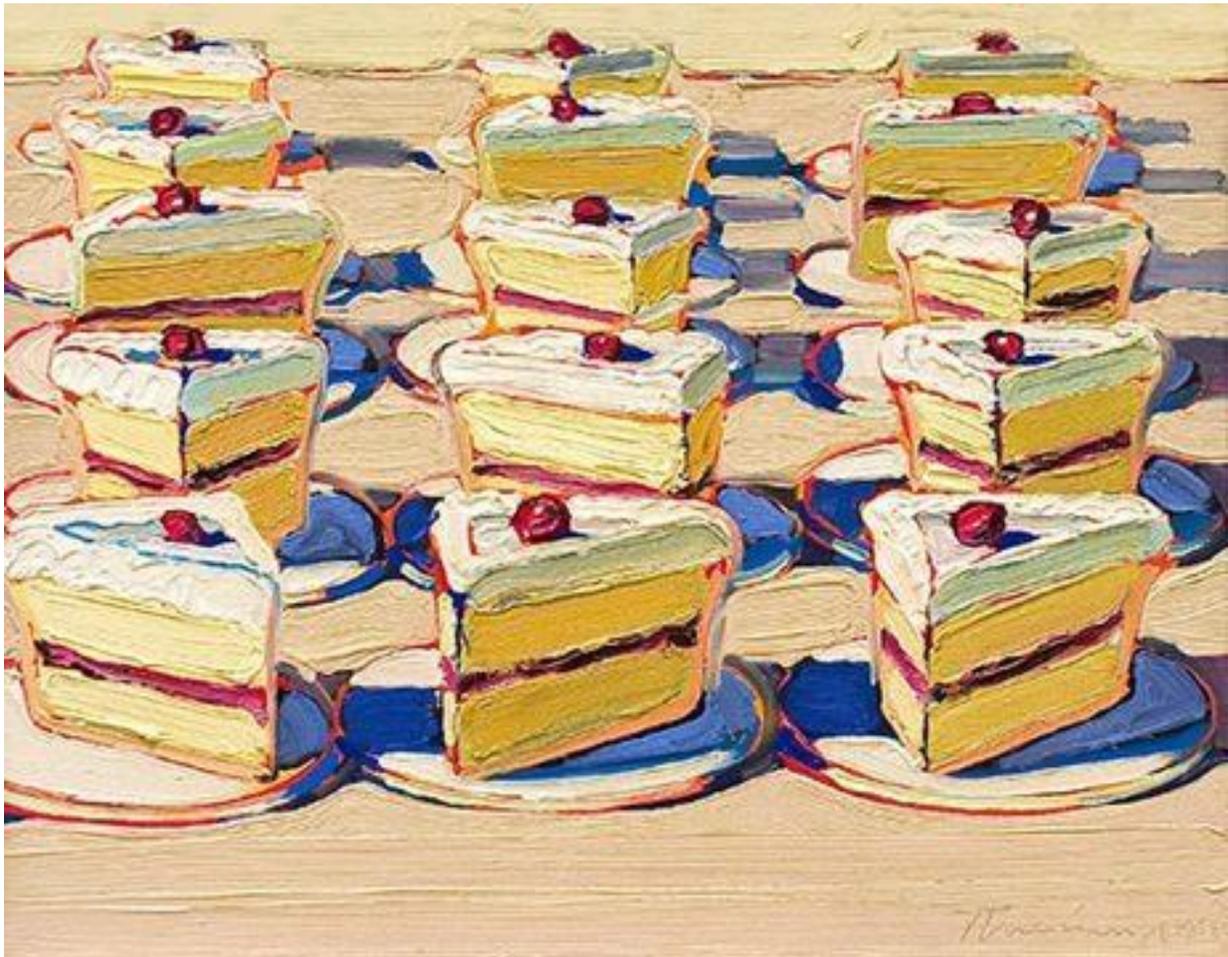


Figure 2. Wayne Thiebaud, *Boston Creams*, 1962, oil on canvas, 14in x 18in.

Claes Oldenburg also responds to American culture with his “gritty evocations of the same subject.”¹¹ One of his most famous exhibitions was entitled “Store” and included “three-dimensional objects and wall reliefs depicting hamburgers, pastries, ice cream cones, a shirt and tie, and other commodities, fashioned out of cardboard, plaster, and canvas and painted with bright enamel colors.”¹² He also created “soft-sculptures” and a series of drawings for “colossal monuments” of which he is more recognized for today. In the early days, he was on a limited budget and used whatever materials he could find that spoke about his surroundings. Oldenburg, in talking about his art, says, “

it's anti-elitist, it makes use of its surroundings, it's located in personal experiences and relationships, it struggles to get out of a museum, and it revolves around the forms that hold man together. At the bottom of everything I've done, is a desire to touch and be touched."¹³ Perhaps this is why so many people resonate with his artwork, because it is so human and he doesn't view his work as above anyone else. His work is for everyone to be enjoyed. *Snack Attack* is also trying to bring about a fun, entertaining experience to the viewer, but still attempts to maintain an underlying darkness to the paintings and communicate the deceptiveness of the food companies as well as the artist's previous personal struggles.

For example, in *I'll Kill You Slow*, Figure 3, I painted an engaging image in reference to the famous bathtub scene in "Nightmare on Elm Street". However, instead of Freddy Krueger's hand emerging from the water, it is a menacing hand with Bugles corn chips on the fingers. Much like Oldenburg's work, this painting is rooted in personal experiences and relationships, or a childhood memory of placing and eating those chips from my fingers. Eating Bugles is something I wouldn't enjoy half as much as I did then, but the campy quality and the ridiculousness of my obsessing and worrying about eating a chip is what I wanted to address and literally bring to the surface. My paintings can also be compared with Oldenburg's monumental artworks, such as his large-scale plush sculpture of French Fries falling from a suspended paper bag (Fig.4). I emulate this idea with my large-scale canvases that confront the viewer and make their experience up close and personal with the subjects of the painting. Another important aspect of Oldenburg's work is humor and playfulness, which is what *Snack Attack* is trying to utilize as well.

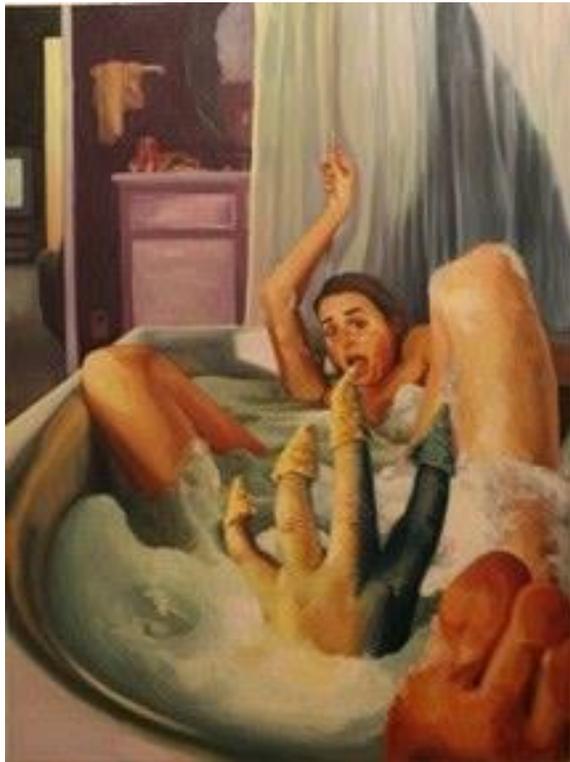


Figure 3. Allison Fawcett, *I'll Kill You Slow*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64in x 48in.



Figure 4. Claes Oldenburg, *Shoestring Potatoes Falling From Open Bag*, 1966.

6. Humor

Eating disorders, deceptive food companies, and an obese America aren't normally thought of as funny topics in conversation, but humor was the only conceivable route I wanted to take in order to face these challenging and

sensitive subjects. Humor is something that many people turn to when facing something difficult. According to an article in *The International Journal of Mental Health*, Freud “observed that jokes and comical expressions enable individuals to defend against anxieties, fear, anger, and other disturbing emotions. Freud presented humor as liberating and capable of providing comfort in relieving the pain of misfortune, thereby allowing the client to deal with situations in a mature, intelligent and constructive fashion.”¹⁴ Using this approach throughout my process was my personal form of therapy. I use humor as a way to make paintings and have fun with the process, rather than revert back to a negative headspace where food was controlling my life and was reminiscent of an unhealthy and depressing time. Other artists have used this approach as well and adapted it to their own preferences, as seen in the work of contemporary artist Monica Cook.



Figure 5. Monica Cook, *Sprouting Potatoes*, 2009, oil on canvas, 4ft x 4ft.

Cook makes very personal work but her images are something every person can relate to. She states, “It’s definitely personal but I like to talk about the struggles that we all feel, the nobleness of persevering- despite the internal struggles-and the humor and ignorance of the self.”¹⁵ She makes paintings, drawings, and stop-motion videos that display this sense of grotesque joy – bodies of flesh covered in a goey slime that are being pressed and pulled against each other creating a somewhat surreal, erotic moment where they are lost in their own world of mischief and indulgence. They are comical in the sense that some of the figures we’ll be laughing and smiling as

they lose themselves in childlike wonder playing with greasy sea creature tentacles and dripping, juicy fruits (Fig.5). Her paintings inspired me to capture a similar dramatic scene with realistically rendered food and people but with a darker, more stage lit approach revolving around one figure per painting. I felt the use of one figure related more towards the loneliness of an eating disorder and was also more manageable to paint. Figure 6 highlights the moment in the 1979 film ‘Alien’ where a creature bursts out of man’s chest while he’s eating dinner. Similar to the deadpan face of Cook’s figure at the bottom, the imploded woman lies motionless, as a realistically rendered “alien” hotdog stares her down in defeat. Although the painting stems from a horrifying movie, the juxtaposition of the hotdog for an alien is what brings out the humor and camp that causes the viewer to smile and see the act of eating a hotdog in a different way. Monica also says that working with an uncomfortable situation or prop until she becomes comfortable with it is how she captures a moment of surrender or acceptance. “It’s all about private performance and amplifying the absurdity of a situation-and making myself laugh.”¹⁶ This laughter and absurdity is what also resonated for me in *Snack Attack* and how this process of painting and creating allowed me to be a healthier and happier person overall.



Figure 6. Allison Fawcett, Detail from *The Food 'Aint that Bad*, 2013, oil on canvas, 72in x 36in.

7. Conclusion

Creating this body of work was a continual process of growth as an artist, a learning to let go of past food and body abuse. The compulsion to have a healthier mind and body, the reading of articles on health and food as well as my love for pop culture iconography, inspired me to use my talents as an artist and release my anxious feelings into

paint. Throughout the process I learned a lot about food and the different measures people take to be healthy, but I find that a life of moderation is key to maintaining a healthful perspective and not taking the food industry too seriously. Having some Doritos or a piece of cake every now and then won't kill you, and if it brings you joy, then you should treat yourself to that comfort. I think many people, including myself take food too seriously. *Snack Attack* is my way of visualizing those thoughts into a series that overcomes fear with laughter and absurdities, as well as being able to connect to a broad audience with iconic horror scene and Pop Art inspirations. In the past, eating a Cheeto was much like being stabbed by a psycho killer, or being eaten inside out by a screeching alien. Now that my work as a painter has brought me to a more mature perspective, I can view food and body image as a knowledgeable spectator, rather than as the helpless actor who gets killed in a shower.

8. Endnotes:

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