

Democracy Dies in Darkness

ART

An art show about dinner gatherings is a feast for the senses

“Around the Table,” a Georgetown show about food and community, delivers several delicious moments — but as a meal, it’s inconsistent.

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Review by Kriston Capps

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After “The Last Supper,” the most important dinner gathering ever committed to visual art has to be Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” a room-size sculpture of a triangular banquet table with 39 ceramic place settings for heroes of feminist history — past and present, real and fictional.

Los Angeles artist Suzanne Lacy recognized “The Dinner Party” for the sensation it was destined to become. For the 1979 debut of Chicago’s installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Lacy organized soirees around the globe to commemorate her former teacher’s achievement. Lacy’s satellite piece spanned six continents, with dozens of feminist supper clubs coming together over the course of 24 hours. With “The International Dinner Party” (1979), Lacy hitched her wagon to Chicago’s star.

Lacy’s meta-performance is the main course in “Around the Table,” an exhibition at Georgetown University’s de la Cruz Gallery that explores dining as a social convention — not as a meal but rather as a gathering. Food appears only fleetingly in the show, which includes painting, sculpture and happenings that point to the social markers that surround dining.

“The International Dinner Party” is represented in the exhibition by a wall-size map to show where some 200 groups comprising more than 2,000 women assembled for their own dinner parties, plus a display with archival materials, including telegrams that the groups dispatched to Lacy. This documentation reveals some of the limits of second wave feminism and its manifestation in art. The map shows only a smattering of meetups across all of South America, Africa and Asia; photos tell a similarly dated story about White feminism. The art world was much smaller back then.

“The Dinner Party” by Chicago — now permanently displayed at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum — still resonates after so many years in part because it continues to generate new critical perspectives as feminism itself evolves. Forty-plus years later, the most interesting thing about “The International Dinner Party” may be its blind spots.

Lacy’s performance might have been the anchor of a show about how “The Dinner Party” reverberates today. An academic gallery such as de la Cruz is the perfect venue for rethinking the postwar canon and how groundbreaking works such as Chicago’s masterpiece were received at the time. Instead, “Around the Table” is much more like a conventional gallery show with a loose thematic center. There’s nothing wrong with that — and the show delivers several delicious moments — but as a meal, it’s inconsistent.

The showstopper, no question, is “Finale” (2013) by Valeska Soares. The sculpture by the Brazilian-born New York artist is a long mirrored dining table covered in vintage glassware. Brilliant goblets that dazzle the eye gradually yield details of a bacchanal long since past. Distillates left behind in the cups — forensic evidence of a robust red accompanied by peals of laughter, gossip or perhaps tears — summon the bittersweetness that any good host has felt in the wake of a roaring party. If “The International Dinner Party” is the show’s entrée, then “Finale” is its after-dinner digestif.

Jo Smail’s works are similarly satisfying. Her constructions are packed with energy: compact collages that take the shape of cubist compositions. “Teapot” (2020) and “French Coffee” (2020-2022) are examples of a recent series by the South African-born, Baltimore-based artist that makes direct references to foodstuffs. While some of Smail’s collages include snippets of old recipes, pointing to the past, most of her contributions to “Around the Table” are fairly literal, such as “Seven Ways of Cooking Eggs” (2020-2022).

Contemporary artists who explore meals have come away with a cornucopia of ideas about rituals, heritage, labor practices and status signifiers. Conceptual artist Jennifer Rubell served breakfasts to glamorous art fair visitors in Miami for more than a decade; a performance by Rirkrit Tiravanija, which turned a gallery in SoHo into a full-scale kitchen, now belongs to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. So a show like “Around the Table” could take its theme in any direction, with all the moods and flavors that life offers.

Curated by Vesela Sretenović, the former director of contemporary art for the Phillips Collection, “Around the Table” never commits to a single culinary vision. A piece by Jennifer Wen Ma commissioned for the exhibition seems especially out of place. “BElonging” (2024) is a motion-activated chandelier: Viewers who step under its dome of elaborate handblown glass pendants will activate a sound recording of people from around Washington recounting times when they felt a sense of belonging. That’s spreading the feast motif a bit thin.

Two other works correspond with each other — at least topically. “Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)” (2013-ongoing) is a dinner series by Iraqi American artist Michael Rakowitz in which he serves the Iraqi Jewish food of his grandmother, a cuisine that can no longer be found in Iraq outside scattered households. (The food truck from which the artist staged his original intervention in Dubai in 2013 will be on-site from Nov. 7 through Dec. 8.) For “Eat the News” (2016-ongoing), Helen Zughaib has collaged newsprint headlines and images from the Middle East onto glass plates. A table set with the Beirut-born and D.C.-based artist’s topical china includes a blank plate and a stool, inviting the viewer to take a seat.

The formal differences between all these works, however, are vast. They range from collages that only nominally fit the theme to interventions — including several private on-site events hosted by Philippa Pham Hughes — that are essentially dinners themselves. With a few tweaks, the show might have served up a wide-ranging buffet of postwar performance art centered on the dining table, from “The Dinner Party” to now. “Around the Table” instead offers an a la carte experience: some decent dishes from several eras, with no particular palette in mind.

If you go

Around the Table: Shared Experiences

Georgetown de la Cruz Gallery, 3535 Prospect St. NW. 202-687-8039. delacruzgallery.org.

Dates: Through Dec. 8.

Prices: Free.

