

Torrie Groening

AMUSE BOUCHE, OR THE AUDITION

Torrie Groening: *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*

BY ROGER BOULET

Artist's Statement (2006)

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Notes on *Amuse Bouche* (2007)

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I

Torrie Groening presently makes her home in San Francisco. She moved there in 1999. Until then, all of her professional career had taken place in Canada. Born in Port Alberni in 1961 where she first attended school, her family moved to New Westminster in 1973. Her career path begins when she took art classes and theatre arts at New Westminster Senior Secondary School with Tom Mah. He encouraged her parents to send her to the Banff Centre in 1978 where she attended lectures by Takao Tanabe and Alan Wood. This was followed by courses at Langara College in Vancouver, and then a transfer

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Amuse Bouche, or, The Audition, 2006

Ultrachrome inkjet inks on rag paper

(91.5 x 198 cm) Artist's Proof

SAG 2006.05.01

Gift of the artist, in memory of Jane Young,

Curator at the Surrey Art Gallery, 1982-1987

Photographs by Scott Massey



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

to the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Her four-year program concentrated on printmaking, and she took lithography courses with Bob Evermon, an alumnus of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop. She graduated in 1983 and began exhibiting her work at this time, working at the Dundarave Print workshop in Vancouver and becoming a member of the Malaspina Printmakers Society. In 1984, Jane Young, then Curator of the Surrey Art Gallery, included her work in *Pressing Matters: Prints by BC Artists*, an exhibition held at the gallery. Torrie has always regarded this as a watershed date, her first significant inclusion in a public gallery exhibition. Her donation of *Amuse-bouche, or The Audition* to the Surrey Art Gallery commemorates both this event and the memory of Jane Young.

More than 20 years have elapsed, and during that time Torrie Groening has been busy. In 1985, she worked as a printmaking instructor at Open Studio in Toronto and became Director of the Lithography

section in 1986. At Open Studio, she worked alongside Don Holman, another Tamarind alumnus, and with Harold Klunder, Janet Cardiff and Otis Tamasauskas (to name a few). It was from Holman that Groening received her 'chop,' the mark and seal of a master printer. She first taught printmaking at the University of Guelph in 1989, returning to Vancouver that year where she taught summer courses in printmaking and also established Prior Editions Studio.¹ She continued to take on teaching duties at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the University of Victoria in the 1990s. Prior Editions Studio provided her with the opportunity to work with very significant artists who editioned and published their work there, work eagerly acquired by important public collections. Among the long list of artists with which she worked were Joe Average, Doug Biden, Molly Bobak, Gathie Falk, Carel Moiseiwitsch, Toni Onley, David Ostrem, Gordon Smith, Jack Shadbolt, Takao Tanabe and Robert Young (www.prioreditions.com).



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, 2006, Ultrachrome inkjet inks on rag paper (91.5 x 198 cm) Artist's Proof SAG 2006.05.01
Gift of the artist, in memory of Jane Young, Curator at the Surrey Art Gallery, 1982-1987. Photograph by Scott Massey.

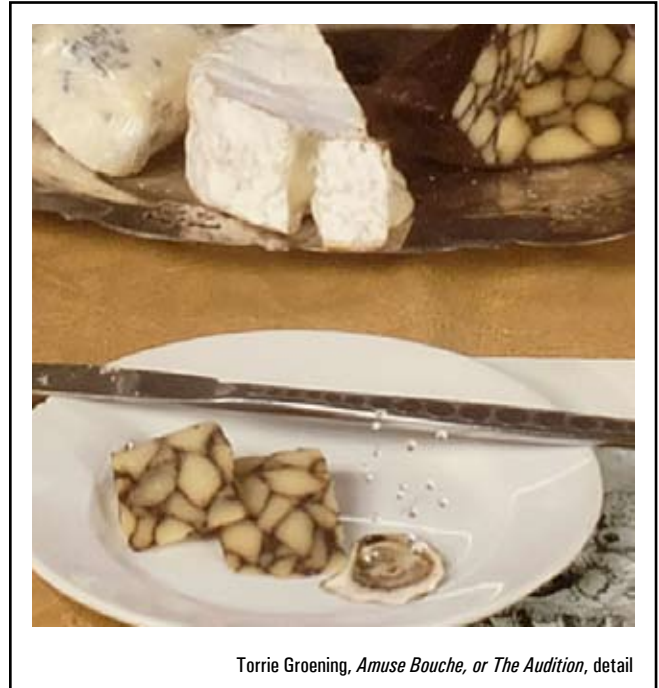
Groening closed the Vancouver studio in 1999, moving it to San Francisco. The story behind this move is a personal one. In 1998, Groening had met in San Francisco Dr. Stephen Melvin, a computer engineer who had established a company in 1983 called Zytek Communications Corporation. As the relationship developed, there were many trips to San Francisco, many fine meals, and the birth of a son, Oliver Henry Melgrove, in 2000. Still referring to Stephen as her fiancé, the US Customs and Immigration at one point stamped her passport "Torrie Groening has 90 days in which to marry Stephen Melvin." That was in 2001 and they decided to marry. The families of the couple gathered in Las Vegas for the ceremony at the Graceland Wedding Chapel with vintage Elvis Presley music, followed by a reception at Bellagio Hotel's famous Le Cirque restaurant. Another reception would be held in San Francisco aboard the landlocked sailing ship of Mutiny on the Bounty fame. These somewhat surreal events are characteristic of the artist's sense of "occasion."

In San Francisco, Torrie Groening has continued her printmaking activity and associations. She joined the Achenbach Graphic Arts Council Board within the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 2003. Currently, Prior Editions focuses on the production of Groening's own work. She still returns to Vancouver with some frequency to visit family and friends, as the couple still owns a home in the Kitsilano neighbourhood.

II

The year Torrie Groening met Stephen Melvin, she also dined with him at The French Laundry restaurant in the Napa Valley, near San Francisco. This shared interest in fine food and dining happened to coincide with the artist's love of the typical subjects one finds in still life. She says that she often takes along a

digital camera and discretely takes snapshots of the finely presented courses of a meal. The presentation of food where composition is paramount finds its obvious parallel in still life composition.



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, detail

But there is more to still life than food. The artist has always been attracted to the representation of material objects, and not necessarily those of her daily life. The appearances of these sometimes exotic or esoteric objects, through their surfaces, textures and colours, are the first things we see. But what these objects represent is less obvious.

Objects acquire meaning through the associations they conjure up, not only for the artist who selects and assembles them, but also for the viewer who perceives them.

Still life painting has a long tradition. It blossomed in the Netherlands during the 17th century due to the increasing availability of consumer goods brought about by progress in manufacturing and agricultural production. But these things in themselves could have

merely emphasized a materialistic society. Providing still-life with moralizing or elevating messages allowed artists to indulge their love for the luxury of these objects, and to demonstrate the virtuosity of their technique at a time when still-life painting was considered to be far less worthy of attention than narrative or history painting, portraiture and landscape. A vanitas still life suggested the vanity of material life. A memento mori still life reminded the viewer of the transience of life itself.



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, detail

Allegorical representations of the five senses flourished, as the senses were the gateways to experience and knowledge. The senses are included in the *Iconologia* of 1593 by Cesare Ripa (c.1560-c.1623). This book was a literary work that provided an iconological catalogue and so became a reference for any artist interested in allegory. Later editions of Ripa's work were illustrated by various engravers including that published in 1758-1760 by Johann Georg Hertel in Augsburg, with images by the artist Gottfried Eichler the Younger (1715-1770). What is

particularly significant about the Hertel edition is that it did away with most of Ripa's erudite text, in the belief that the content was more effectively conveyed by Eichler the Younger's work. The publication date places the images very firmly in the Rococo era, one of the most sensuous in all of art history. By then, Ripa's *Iconologia* had been published in several languages and was well known. (The Hertel classic edition is still available today in a Dover Publications edition.)

While philosophers considered the various senses as the gateways to knowledge through experience, moralists and theologians also warned that the senses were the way to sin and perdition by way of sensuality. The catalogue of the five senses in iconology leads quite naturally to various related sins and virtues, also duly catalogued.

Groening's *Amuse Bouche*, celebrating the sense of taste, evokes this still life tradition, but there is little moralizing here. Instead we find the celebration of earthly life — what still life has been all about from the beginning. It is the precise representation of these specially selected objects that is celebrated here, objects represented by drawing or by photography. The artist cites the influence of the writings on food of M.F.K. Fisher whom she credits with the desire to be inclusive of a variety of information.² Reality, however, is always illusive because we base reality on sensory experience and memory, and these are highly subjective. Associations contribute to a highly complex individual reality.

III

In 2003 the artist made another move when she began to explore digital media. In this transition, she cites both an unsettling dance with cancer and the

growing awareness of being exposed to noxious chemicals in traditional printmaking media, such as etching and lithography. Some of her colleagues may have looked askance at her shift to digital, but in the end it is the final work of art that validates the medium used. For Groening, the shift to digital media echoes the increasing use of photography in traditional graphic media. Rather than the exclusive use of photographic imagery, however, her work incorporates photography and scanned images from prints, usually etchings based on meticulous drawings, transformed and manipulated digitally through software such as Adobe Photoshop. The series on the five senses is one of the most ambitious in scale ever undertaken by the artist, made possible again by digital technology.

It is not surprising that the series would begin with the sense of 'taste', given the artist's interest in both still life and fine food. The preparation for such a work is considerable. A list of objects is compiled, much consideration being given to the choice of what will be depicted. Many of these are collected for the tableau, which is captured as a very high-resolution digital photograph in a rented studio. She poses behind a table on which various still-life objects are arrayed. The composition makes an oblique reference to Edouard Manet's *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882) but by removing the top two thirds of the work, the focus on the figure is reduced. The table surface has been tilted up in the manner of Paul Cézanne and now occupies two thirds of the composition. The subject is the artist and this is a special day, her birthday, which explains the velvet party dress she wears, and the festive array of food on the table.

A kind of double exposure is suggested as the artist is engaged in two activities. She has arranged objects of a still life relating to taste and she is also in the act

of 'drawing' these objects, although the final work will not involve any drawing at all. As drawing was involved in the making of some preliminary sketches and etchings, these were in turn scanned and floated via Photoshop over the existing digital image. It is an image of process as well as a presentation of gustatory delights, and some of the objects depicted seem to have little obvious reference to taste. The various drawing and painting implements, such as pencils and brushes, including an incredible array of colour pencils (purchased by happy circumstance at auction), and the presence of an old camera (standing in for the digital camera capturing the tableau), are all suggestive of 'process', of the means by which the end is to be achieved. In this series of works, we access all of the senses through sight. It is, after all, visual art.



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, detail

Groening's approach to her work on the senses is not to include all the attributes of any particular sense as compiled by scholars of allegorical representations. She is more subjective. Cross-sensory metaphors

are what the brain perceives and then must organize. This is not really synaesthesia (the union of at least two senses as a result of one sensory experience) but a demonstration that the senses work together in perception, and may evoke the experience of additional sensory experiences as the mind attempts to classify or “make sense” of the experience. Making sense here is seeking meaning, and as such it is the beholder who will bring to the work a unique set of experiences, comprehending a scene in a highly individualized way. That being the case, the selection process in still life is tentative. A subsequent viewing may negate meanings perceived in an earlier viewing of the work. By giving a work a title, often before the work is initiated, however, the artist sets up a series of parameters for its creation and clues for the viewer, and it is to these we react.

The expression ‘amuse-bouche’ refers to small appetizers presented to diners before the real meal begins, somewhat like hors d’oeuvre. These are teasers and stimulate the taste buds for things to follow. Groening presents both sweet and savory appetizers, and so *Amuse Bouche* is the perfect first work in the series and prepares us for the delights of the courses still to come.



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, detail

1. For more on Prior Editions, see *Prior Editions: 10 years of Canadian Printmaking* (Burnaby: Burnaby Art Gallery, 2005, and www.prioreditions.com (accessed Nov.14, 2007). See also the artist’s website: www.torriegroening.com (accessed Nov. 14, 2007).

2. For information on M.F.K. Fisher see www.mfkfisher.com (accessed Nov 14, 2007).

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I work on the still life images like stage sets – the objects, the actors and myself, the director. Objects are chosen for their evocative sense and may take on new understanding when linked by proximity to another. These new works include objects from nature and from those shelves where we stow the things that are not treasures but objects kept for their particular allure. With the collection and arrangement of the still life scene I create unlikely but not impossible situations.

I work in two linked methods: I draw, paint or make prints of objects — these pieces exist independently and later may appear in new-collaged compositions and be used as props in photo-based work.

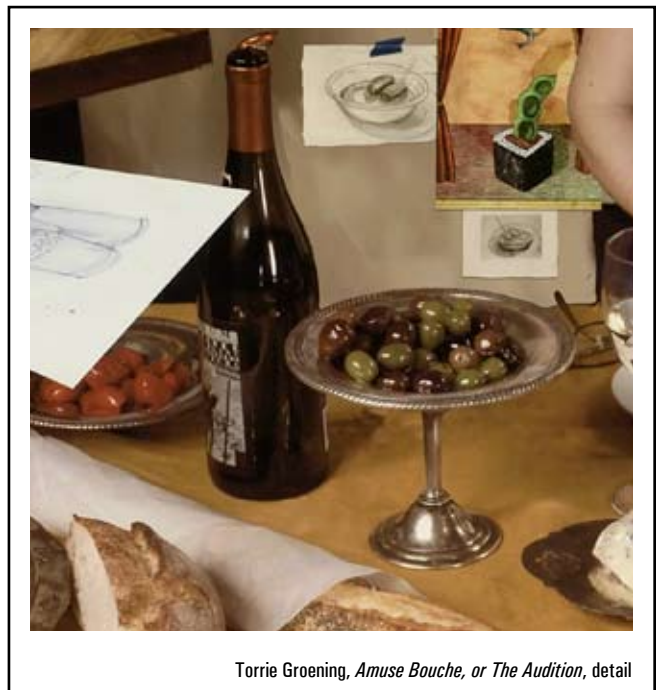
In this fluid state, the collages are added to and economized until the composition is established. Several objects have recurring roles in new works, often transformed for their new setting

Notes on *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition* (2007)

This food-filled still life is at the same time subject matter for the seated artist and an enticement for her across-the-table viewer of the art. The title, *Amuse Bouche*, recalls the small gift from the chef that precedes a meal and heightens the anticipation, sharpening the senses for tastes to come.

As a *vanitas* still life, the artist conjures abundant delicacies. If the view remains with the artist, the title *The Audition* follows her appraisal of both the still life objects and the figure as possible subjects of the next drawing.

Amuse Bouche, or The Audition is part of a series on the five senses.



Torrie Groening, *Amuse Bouche, or The Audition*, detail

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