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H O M E

Art: The Bemis is Hungry

Renner, Kulik collaborate on 'outré' men of food art at Bemis' 'The Omaha Diner'

07

May
2009

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Issue: [May 6, 2009](#)

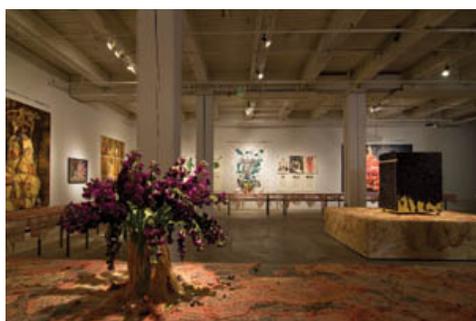


Photo by Larry Gawel

Paul Renner: The Omaha Diner

Through June 6
Bemis Center for
Contemporary Arts
724 S. 12th St.
341-7130

It is no secret that cable TV has made media heroes of such foodies, gourmands and top chefs as Anthony Bourdain, Rachel Ray and Tom Colicchio, to name but a few, who live to cook and eat, such is their obsession.

But, for a truly "outré" gastronomical experience, Andrew Zimmern aside, you will have to look beyond the Food Channel and enter the avant garde dining room of Paul Renner, an internationally known food artist and provocateur.

Since the turn of the century this extraordinary chef cum painter/performance artist has served up lavish evenings of fine wines, outrageous cuisine and rambling homilies that simultaneously celebrate and send up "Decadence."

"I am interested in those historical moments when the culture becomes so refined that it falls back into itself," Renner has said of his past multi-media, culinary experiments. Thus inspired, his interactive, social events have included among others, "The Hell Fire Touring Club," "Theatrum Anatomicum" and "Hardcore Diner," each a unique blend of visual, theater and food art at such exotic sites as Switzerland, Italy, Austria and more currently, New York.

Closer to home, Midwesterners will sample Renner's latest cultural concoction at the "Omaha Diner," a two-day event at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts this Friday and Saturday, May 8 and 9. Day one, a Gastronomical Journey through Europe," is filled to capacity at 80 diners, but reservations can still be made for Saturday night's "Gastronomical Journey through the United States." Both dinners begin at 7 p.m. and will last well into the night. Though Renner and his collaborator Paul Kulik, head chef at Omaha's the Boiler Room restaurant, remain mum as to the nights' menus, past courses at similar events have always reflected the evening's themes, a Renner signature and de rigueur.

His "Art, Philosophy and Digestion" in Vienna (2004) featured such delights as "Corruption of the Flesh with Charcoal," goose liver punch cake and "Heaven and Hell with Rhubarb," rotten cheese, acacia honey and mustard chutney. In 2006, "Iconographia Tenebrarum" in Zurich included scallops stuffed with goose liver and sour turnips and sorbet of anchovy fillets with sage and bilberry. If these make your eyes water rather than your mouth than you have a rough idea as to the imagination and lengths to fulfill it Renner and Kulik will go to make each evening a memorable and moveable feast. Each course is complemented by an appropriate wine or beverage and completed with performance and philosophical musings.

A host of Omahans got a brief two and one half hour taste of what to expect last winter at a preview dinner at the Boiler Room, yours truly included. Renner held court with his ramblings and visuals on Nebraska's roots in grain and beef, and Chef Kulik served surprising dish after dish featuring organ meats and much more all the while challenging various sensory expectations. It was an enlightening experience at best as well as an exhausting and satiating one depending of course on one's appetite and taste for the unusual.

In his preview notes for "The Omaha Diner," Bemis curator Hesse McGraw describes Renner's "anarchic, subversive happenings as existing between physical and metaphysical extremes. Is the 'Omaha Diner' a soup kitchen for the rich, a gourmet kitchen for the homeless, or a chamber of wonders for daily use?" Renner himself addressed these issues last Saturday at a Gallery Talk at Bemis, which not only

previewed the two dinners but his exhibition of the same name featuring paintings, stills and videos of his past events which continues through June 6.

The gallery is the dining room itself, a Grand Guignol sensory explosion that begins before you even enter as you immediately smell what is described as the lining of cow's liver, which serves as a tablecloth for the 80 place settings. It is called caul fat, the fatty membrane that surrounds internal organs of cows, sheep and pigs, and the odor is either just "offal" or ambrosia to the nose of those familiar with farms, feedlots or meat packing plants. Either way there is no denying its blood red and fleshy pink membrane that dominates the décor in a scene straight out of the film, "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover."

The table covering is a constant reminder that you are not in Nebraska anymore, or at least polite society, and it effectively sets the tone, so to speak, for the rest of the evening. It is also another Renner style point designed to take his captive audience out of its comfort zone in order to make it vulnerable and ripe for anything placed before it. Another possible indication of Renner's perverse humor in his theater of the macabre and malodorous is the potential play on the expression "caul fat" itself. It sounds like "cull fat," which means to select certain beasts out of the herd for a purpose, to cull the fat. Yet, figuratively, it also may mean "fat cats" or what the Grose 1811 dictionary referred to as "fat culls" or rich fellows.

That the "Omaha Diner" exhibition opened on the very weekend of the Berkshire Hathaway annual invasion may also be an unintended coincidence, but it is nonetheless an appetizing irony and comment on Renner's theme of decadence, one of several motifs for this weekend's soirees. In an interview following his gallery talk, he and McGraw made a distinction between European and American decadence, the latter beginning "during the peak of Roman civilization or Caligula's reign," Renner said. "American decadence begin at the turn of the 20th century and its Industrial Revolution."

Renner distinguished between a European decadence practiced by a greedy and complacent upper class, and McGraw accurately pointed out the recurring emergence of an American nouveau riche also susceptible to greed and corruption. Historically, further signs of decadence, particularly applicable stateside, are the apathy of a disenfranchised lower class and the possibility for either extreme by the middle class threatened with extinction. Given the recent economic downturn replete with government bailouts, X-rated CEO compensation, sub-prime mortgages and credit card dependency and exploitation, it is easy to understand Renner's interest in any civilization that threatens to collapse under the weight of its own greedy self-interest and indulgence, refined or otherwise.

Yet, all of the above is too heavy for this non-judgmental master of ceremonies and rituals. All are welcome at his table extraordinaire. Renner is an equal opportunist who simultaneously provokes and indulges all comers no matter where they purchase their bling, at a well-heeled jewelry store or on Infomercial TV. No difference. All will partake in a shared experience featuring his extreme menu and Kulik's expert preparation at tables in front of the diners. Meanwhile, Renner will alternately pontificate center stage from a hermetic cabinet cased in seaweed and table hop to cast his spell in microcosm as he did at the preview dinner.

Each night will offer as many as 19 items over six or seven courses via respectively a European and American cuisine. Regardless, each serving of food, entertainment and discourse will indulge another favorite Renner theme besides abundance and excess, the cycle of food partaken as it parallels life and death itself from ingestion and consumption to digestion and decay. For the artist, it is all about how we not only process food and art but our lives as well. Renner is neither politically correct nor timid as each "dish" challenges not only what one eats, drinks, thinks and acts accordingly but, for him, the more important question of "why?"

Nor is he concerned if his audience walks away from the dinner and exhibit a bit offended.

"To be shocked is sometimes best," Renner said. "It starts you thinking. Later, happiness comes when you have assimilated the entire experience." A delayed response, McGraw adds, "one designed to raise our level of consciousness." And one perhaps to question what we so willingly accept and why, and confront what we would rather pretend doesn't exist. After sitting in the gallery/dining room, the odor of the decomposing and drying caul fat begins to dissipate or so one imagines. Have we become blasé the way one might sitting in front of a computer porn site or working on a meat packing kill floor, or is it tacit approval or even denial of what we find unpleasant such as American torture?

Renner doesn't resolve these moral conundrums; he just offers them up metaphysically and metaphorically for our consumption and consideration within his food art. Mostly, he says he hopes "my audience will have an existential experience and want to come again and view the show." Viewers will find the exhibition challenging enough with or without dinner as it features his characteristically symbolic and figurative imagery influenced by his close association with experimental Austrian "actionist" artist Hermann Nitsch.

Included in the exhibit is explicit video and stills of Renner's collaboration with Nitsch in their "Theatrum Anatomicum," which includes a blindfolded nude woman on a cross being engulfed by the carcass of a slaughtered pig – blood, intestines and all. Ostensibly, it is meant to ritualize and satirize the ethics and morals of atavistic religion and sacrifice. Certainly, once over the shock value, it gives one new insights into how we embrace the food we eat and hides we wear by virtue of sanitization, packaging and marketing. In fact, the entire meat industry serves as another source of inspiration for "The Omaha Diner," both dinner and show, as it comments on the area's history of feed lots, meatpacking and, of course, Nebraska, corn-fed beef.

Renner further packages this impression by book-ending the gallery with two original oil and varnish on photo paintings for the occasion, "Mythological Travelers" and "The Omaha Diner," a sort of before and after comment on the dining experience. The former is a veritable mountain of raw meat, a plate of wretched excess for carnivores that will never make it as a full page glossy in an Omaha Steaks brochure.

The latter depicts the striking remains, a pulpy mass of bone, tendon and torn flesh, sinewy and sensuous. One's viewpoint here is not unlike that of a lion returning to the kill in order to pick over the nightmarish leftovers of the carcass.

Three walls in the gallery are lined with additional conceptual and expressionistic paintings and prints that document past events and their themes. Some are more polished and poignant than others, particularly a smaller montage-oriented series with titles such as "Gas Night" and "Fertile Fat Breasts." Yet nothing is more imposing or portentous than his two large images reserved for "The Omaha Diner." As a last parting shot, the carcass in the show's title piece may be the diner himself and not the place or meal as first imagined. If it is true that we are what we eat, than evidently Renner is just as interested in what eats us.

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