

Pumpkins, Grottoes and Cold Allotments

A pumpkin is a pumpkin except at Halloween when it becomes a jack-o'-lantern. In the world of Nadege Meriau however, a pumpkin becomes a cave, a dwelling and a connection to the primaevial nature from which we all evolved, and of which we are all still part.

It's not just pumpkins that Meriau transforms. In her project *Au Centre de la Terre*, Meriau transforms bread, melons and chicken carcasses into hollowed out sculptures that resemble grottoes, caverns and complexes from the underworld.

Post Ocular is a picture of a carved out pumpkin, its top cut off, its side split open and its fibres hanging down. At first glance, it looks like a cavern with a starlit sky shining through a hole in the roof. The fibres look like vines or tree roots and the moist floor like an underground stream meandering into middle earth.

As a photographer of fruit and veg, it might seem that Meriau is a photographer of Still Lives, but she doesn't see things that way. "These don't fit the idea of still lives," says Meriau, who recently completed an MA at the Royal Academy. "During my studies, a lot of my research looked at how we objectify nature through the still life genre; we objectify food, plants, the organic. In French we call a still life *nature morte*. This means dead nature but of course nature is not dead. In a still life you freeze life and movement. But this is not the way we live, nor the way we used to live. In ancient civilisations everything was alive and you were a part of it."

In Meriau's world view, "we are made of the same organic material as the food that we eat. We feed off the world around us and the world feeds of us." It is this idea that she sought to reproduce in *Au Centre de la Terre*, rejecting the Cartesian view of the soul (and the mind) as a nonmaterial entity elevated from the natural world. *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations on their Habits*, a book by Charles Darwin on earthworms and their burrows provided the initial spark for the project.

"In *Au Centre de la Terre* I was thinking how you can make food more animate, how you can make it a space so that you can enter it. I started making pictures that showed this on my MA course at the Royal Academy after I read a book by Darwin on the behaviour of worms and how when the worm feeds it builds its own burrow through feeding."

"I wanted to extend this connection between architecture, dwelling and food, so I started to take pictures of vegetables on allotments, getting right down to the level of the vegetables. But one problem was you could see what the vegetables were. I felt there was something missing and then it started to get cold outside! So I began to photograph in the studio."

The everyday nature of what the photographs actually are (fruit, vegetables and old meat) acts as a canvas for the visceral, primaevial associations that are conjured up by the photographs. The stark reality of what is being shown is amplified by how the pictures were made; using film on large and medium format cameras, allowing large hand-made prints to be made for exhibition.

"These are really to be shown as prints," says Meriau. "That's why it's all shot on 5 x 4 film and hand printed. I print them big so you can enter the picture and are almost consumed by the food. The scale is important."

The evolution of *Au Centre de la Terre* is evident in Meriau's *Solanus Tuberanus*, an ongoing project on potatoes, with the potatoes barely recognisable as they are stripped of their familiar context.

In *Solanum Tuberosum 1*, we see a dried up potato with tubers running off it. A mass of small shoots come off the main potato like tendrils of fire reaching out into the black background. This is a potato that still has life, that is reaching out to find new sources of water and nourishment. But set against its black background dotted with white pinpricks of light, the tuber looks like a Hubble Space Telescope picture of an exploding supernova.

The connection with the celestial is not accidental, nor are the pictures where the potatoes take on a more organic extraterrestrial edge or look like the aftermath of an alien feeding frenzy; all spilled guts and open brains. The potatoes are made visceral, and by making them visceral, Meriau wants to connect us to the animal side of our lives, a dark, archetypal side that is often hidden away under make-up, clothing and the formal superficialities of our technologically mediated lives.

"The pictures were taken underwater. I like to disorientate myself and the viewer so you don't know where you are. I wanted to see it as something alive with its own intriguing process. That's why they look like organs or aliens. This is to show the potato as something that is alive and has a life of its own, something that lives a life unseen beneath the soil, but makes connections through hidden, secretive processes."

The darkness of the potato also formed part of Meriau's research and fed into the project. "I looked at the history of the potato. When they first came to Europe they were considered to be evil because they weren't mentioned in the bible. In Italy people stuck pins in them and used them as voodoo dolls. And they used to be poisonous so that adds another layer of darkness."

"I think it's important to remain connected to the body. We live in our heads and spend so much time in front of the computer that we end up being disconnected. We live through our eyes and life is a spectacle. I want to return to a more embodied perception of the world, one that is experienced through taste and touch, through remembering what we are and that we engage with the environment. I want us to get in touch with the animal side of us."

It doesn't matter how good our manners are, how smooth our legs, how perfect our teeth, how clean our hair, Meriau seems to be saying; underneath we're down there with the insects and the ants.