

Food for thought? Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food, at City Gallery, Peterborough

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Lucy + Jorge Orta are the sort of socially conscious artists the world needs more of. Their collaborative practice examines the issues that challenge the 21st century's population; migration crises, water-pollution, plant and animal extinction, food waste – the list goes on. Based in a Parisian converted paper mill that is currently being converted in to a huge studio, laboratory, gallery, visiting artist's residence and archive, the pair employ a diverse media spanning installation, drawing, fashion, video and performance to engage with audiences and inspire social and ecological change. Previous projects have seen the duo set up a home-for-everyone commune in Antarctica, install water-purifying sculptures in China and create wearable shelters for migrants. It seems there is no topic they can't or won't tackle with their adept ways for thinking of helpful innovation combined with creative smarts and conceptual beauty, leaving one wondering where they get the time and energy. The pair have received the Green Leaf Award in 2007 for the unified artistic excellence and environmental message, presented at the United Nations, and Lucy is the inaugural chair of Art and the Environment for University of the Arts, London.

Working with Metal, an organisation set up to inspire and nurture thriving creative communities in Liverpool, Southend and Peterborough, Lucy and Jorge have created a survey exhibition at Peterborough's City Gallery that is culmination of 20 years work dedicated to the power of food and art. Across the years the pair have examined food security, waste, and species loss through interactive programmes of waste recycling units, mobile soup kitchens and open-air meals that all involve local communities coming together to address how they use food as part of their culture. This exhibition marks the end of an 18 month residency in the city, which saw them host a "social sculpture"; a meal for 500 residents cooked by a local chef, eating locally sourced ingredients. The event, called *70 x 7 The Meal Act XXXIX*, took place in the city's historic civic square, with seven initial guests invited, who in turn had to invite seven more, and so on, until it was full. The food was purchased from local auctions and donated by guests, and cooked by the local prison's inmates under the supervision of an award winning chef. The Limoges porcelain plates were designed by the artist pair, with diners invited to purchase theirs as a souvenir of the event. The work inspires civic pride, social cohesion and sustainable consumption in a truly innovative method that bridges performance and social enterprise project in such a way that has given the Orta team such ethical kudos.



Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food, '70 X 7 The Meal Series', 'Olive Branch' and 'Hortirecycling Shrine'. Image courtesy Matthew Booth.



Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food, 'Bread'. Image courtesy Matthew Booth.

The exhibition in City Gallery brings together archival work that helped shape the meal – motifs and symbols found throughout the research including seed diagrams and vegetable drawings adorn plates set amongst bespoke silk table runners the pair made in collaboration with local Suffolk weavers. They also cast over 100 loaves of bread that were bought along by guests in aluminium, thus making them sculptures of cultural commerce. These are set amongst structures that are slick metal trolleys, kitchen utensil hanging racks and storage storage boxes adorned with images of vegetables on wheels created; all created by the artists since 1996 when French farmers dumped an entire years harvest on to their motorways in protest against EU agricultural policy. The pair began collecting food waste and left over produce from markets in their mobile carts, recycling it in-situ, turning it in to jams and preserves that they then handed out to the community. This body of work, entitled *HortiRecycling*, brings together communities through sharing and taste, to cause the public to examine the sustainability in their food habits.

The third body of work that makes up the show examines bio-diversity and seed banks. Concerned with the rapid loss of seed species, the Ortas have presented over 100 new drawings, creating a metaphorical seed bank, inspired by close up photography of each species. With every purchase of a drawing, the owner becomes a custodian of the species, each allocated a small plot of land in the Amazon rainforest that the owner, if they so wish, can visit. These are accompanied by mind-blowingly intricate glass seed creations created by master craftsmen in Murano, Italy. Each form in its enlarged size seems alien-like in its beauty. These works highlight the social engagement necessary by man in order to sustain our planet, and inspire a search for solution on a personal level, whilst also highlighting the bigger picture.



Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food, 'Seed Bank'. Image courtesy Matthew Booth.

The show feels incredibly sincere – amongst a swathe of socially inspired vanity projects that seems to be on trend in recent years, the Ortas stand out for their genuineness. Every work is so minute in its detail, yet part of a whole landscape the pair have created which is reshaping the thoughts of those who come in to contact with it about how both individually and through being brought together as a community, the state of humanity can be improved for all.. There is no self-deprecation, or explosions of allusions of grandeur in the name of art; everything they have created is physically required for their process, and one has the feeling their real masterpiece is what happens after the show packs up and moves on – it's in how those who have been involved alter their habits and spread their new words. Their dedication is evident in their work ethic and humbleness, and if everyone could share a little piece of their inspiredness to help, one crinkly leaves the show with the feeling that anything could be possible.

Harry Seymour

Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food – Metal, 10 September – 4 December 2016, City Gallery and Museum, Peterborough,