

Tonia Di Risio, Parts and Labour, Toronto, Red Head Gallery

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Tonia Di Risio

← *Stacked and Panned*, 2014.

← *Quenelles*, 2015.

→ *Eclipse Lounge*, 2014.

→ *Sage Fascinator*, 2013.

Photos: courtesy of the artist

Tonia Di Risio

Parts and Labour

In what is considered his “textbook” essay on semiotic analysis, “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Roland Barthes examines in depth a Panzani ad featuring a simple photograph of a string shopping bag overflowing cornucopia-style with a selection of the brand’s packaged pasta and canned sauce alongside tomatoes, onions, and peppers. He argues that certain foods placed together signify an aura of “Italianicity,” automatically associated in the popular imagination with abundance, authenticity, and a “*mangia, mangia*” hospitality.

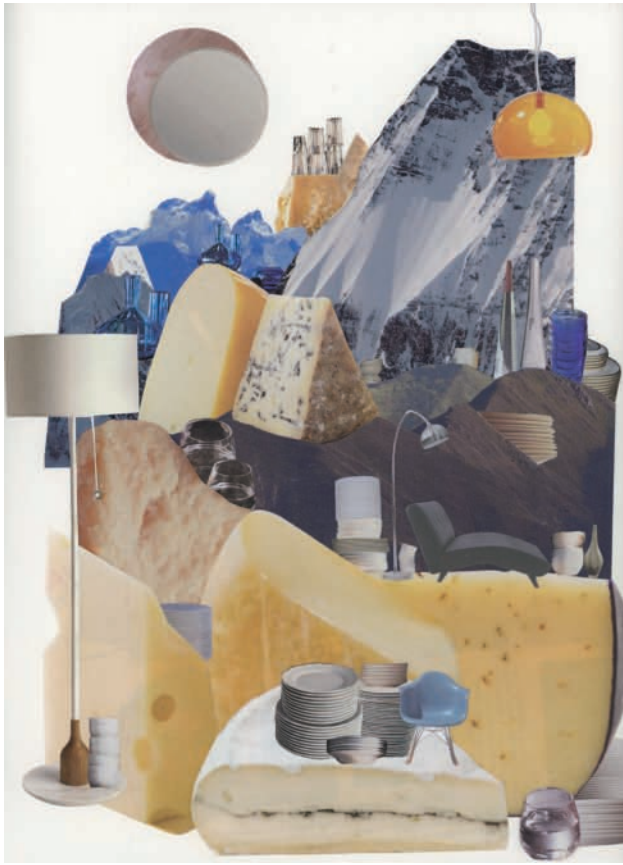
Tonia Di Risio both embraces and overturns these popular associations in her delightful exhibition *Parts and Labour*. Fitting within the current trend of artists working in collage (Paul Butler, Geoffrey Farmer, Elizabeth Zvonar, et al.), Di Risio has produced a series using photographic images cut out from food, design, and architecture magazines. Although she indulges in the pleasures of juxtaposing random elements with a surrealistic emphasis on chance and a formalist focus on line and colour, Di Risio’s “mash-up” project is also inherently grounded in studying the rich language of food as both subject matter and signifier. *Parts and Labour* playfully delves into the material culture and gendered history of food, with a penchant for Italian cuisine—one that includes family histories, show-and-tell recipes, kitchens, and domestic rituals, as much as it does tourism, lifestyle blogs, cooking shows, recipe books, and restaurants.

For Barthes, advertising offered a case-study template for semiotic analysis, as each of its components is strategically placed to have a specific signification. Di Risio takes a broader perspective, expanding beyond the fixed limits of meaning found in the commodity-focused communicativity of commercials. Eschewing the slick style typically associated with ads for an unpolished cut-and-paste aesthetic, she combines various items of mismatched scale in this

whimsical series of still lifes and landscapes: a Christmas tree decorated with dozens of pots and pans; farfalle in flight over a field of lettuce, artichokes, and asparagus; wedges of cheese rising as mountain ranges; a classical bust wearing a sage-leaf fascinator.

In her essay “The Nourishing Arts,” Luce Giard describes how, as an adult, she learned to cook—an act that she deems ultimately as one of creation: “The preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a fragment of reality, of knowing the joys of a demiurgic miniaturization.”¹ Di Risio highlights this creativity by conflating cooking with architecture, art, and design, literally linking these disciplines to food and its methods of preparation: a Tower-of-Pisa-type building is constructed from stacked cakes; Roman statuary is perched atop a pickle-jar plinth; a glossy pool of syrup becomes a polished table top; the noodles emerging from a pasta machine meld with a sculptural chandelier’s decorative chainmail loops. In this way, Di Risio creates direct parallels between the processes of cooking and art practices. The medium of collage lends itself particularly well to demonstrating this equivalence: the selection, combination, and transformation of seemingly incongruous “scraps” produce new “dishes” and, in so doing, prompt new tastes, meanings, and ways of engaging with the world. Further underscoring this potential for infinite improvisation and change in the cooking process, Di Risio notably uses repositionable glue rather than a more permanent adhesive.

Despite what Giard celebrates as domestic cooking’s inherent creativity, she points out that this traditionally female activity is typically seen as anything but creative; instead, it is often degraded to the “most unrespected level” and considered “devoid of intelligence and imagination.”² There is, of course, the well-known tradition of the male professional chef celebrated for his genius and virtuosity; in



contrast, women's daily work in the kitchen has historically been depreciated as merely physical, unpaid employment. With its tongue-in-cheek title evoking a car mechanic's itemization of services, *Parts and Labour* pays homage to the female work involved in domestic cooking, through the reoccurring trope of the hand executing activities that require confidence, technique, experience, and knowledge, such as the firm kneading of pasta dough, the delicate crimping of a pie crust, the skilful cleaning and preparation of seafood, and the intricate separating of an egg yolk and white. At other times, Di Risio evokes the merely mundane; one collage, for instance, shows a kitchen filled with pots piled into precarious columns—a reminder of the inevitable dirty dishes that follow a massive family meal.

Giard writes, "Alimentary habits constitute a domain where tradition and innovation matter equally, where past and present are mixed to serve the needs of the hour, to furnish the joy of the moment, and to suit the circumstances."³ Di Risio's series playfully shows how cooking, like language and culture, is alive and in constant development. This is especially notable within contexts of migration in which shifts in geography, availability of ingredients, contact with different gastronomic traditions, and other factors lead to ongoing innovation and variation in foods, recipes, methods, and styles. Unsurprisingly, then, many hyphenated-Canadian artists, who are interested in questions of nationalism, hybrid culture, immigrant identity, and autobiography, have explored food in their art practice—or, rather, *as* their art practice. Recent examples include Basil AlZeri's *Mobile Kitchen Lab* (2010, ongoing), Sarah Febbraro's *Kitchen in the Basement: Lessons from Italian Canadians* (2014–15), Richard Fung's *Dal Puri Diaspora* (2012), Shié Kasai's *Survival Japanese Cooking* (2008), Cindy Mochizuki's *Shako Club* (2015), and Karen Tam's *Gold Mountain Restaurant* series (2002–12). Likewise,

food has long played an important role in Di Risio's practice, which recently has included primarily socially inflected, collaborative projects that delve directly into domestic cooking and its gestures, rituals, and activities, while underscoring the culinary contribution of Italians to mainstream North American culture. In this new series, Di Risio continues to employ food as a potent lens through which to communicate and discuss such questions, but also perhaps as a possible metaphor for the artistic process itself, reminding viewers not only of the concrete pleasures of making something with one's hands, but also the unrecognized or devalued work that can go into art making.

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Red Head Gallery, Toronto,
April 29–May 23, 2015

1 — Luce Giard, "The Nourishing Arts," in *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, ed. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 158.

2 — Ibid., 156.

3 — Ibid., 151.