



MK Guth: Triggering emotions, memories with food

By John Motley | For The Oregonian/OregonLive

on November 17, 2012



Table for Twelve, MK Guth Walnut table with alder stumps and twelve chairs *Dan Kvitka*

For the past several years, Portland artist MK Guth has focused on the figure of the braid, a formal reflection of how her practice weaves together installation, sculpture and viewer participation. Of course, it also symbolizes the bonds that form community, which in her work of the past decade have ranged from fairy tales to a desire to protect the people and things we love.

Those themes intersected in Guth's project for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, "Ties of Protection and Safe Keeping," in which the artist asked participants to consider what is most worth protecting and record their responses on fabric scraps, which were woven into an evolving sculpture of synthetic hair braids. After stopping in several cities on its way to New York for the

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Biennial, it took shape as a collective portrait of what we, as Americans, hold most dear.

While Guth's new body of work, on view in "When Nothing Else Subsists, Smell and Taste Remain" at the Marylhurst Art Gym, leaves her signature braids behind, it remains trained on communal activity and shared experience. Here, the ties that bind are culinary and literary. Inspired by Marcel Proust's famous "madeleine" cake, which whisks away the narrator of "Swann's Way" to a vividly remembered childhood moment, Guth is interested in food as a vehicle for triggering memories, conjuring emotions and creating connections across generations.

In a pair of similar installations, both titled "Taste and Smell Remain," 2012, four tiny speakers dangle from the ceiling over a trio of low tree stumps, inviting visitors to sit and listen to recordings of people discussing their strongest memories of food and family. Nearby, a rustic dining table is surrounded by a dozen chairs and piled high with cookbooks, from "The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook" to "The Woman's Day Encyclopedia of Cookery, Vol. 1." This space allows Guth's meditations on the nourishment of reading and dining to come to life in the gallery, as she invites visitors, like dinner guests, to make themselves at home and stay awhile.

The remainder of the show is dedicated to a series of assemblages of books, utensils and flatware, and various sculptural embellishments, which appear on lacquered wood shelves. They operate like instructions for themed dinners, such as "Dinner for Getting Lost," which nestles beautifully irregular blown-glass cups and plates in a hollowed-out birch trunk, with titles of wayward exploration, such as "Robinson Crusoe" and "Through the Looking Glass," perched on top.

In these pieces, Guth offers a handful of uniform components and then arranges them in various permutations. Impressively, this modulation points equally to food and literature, as they function like ingredients in a recipe or the words in a single line of poetry.

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