

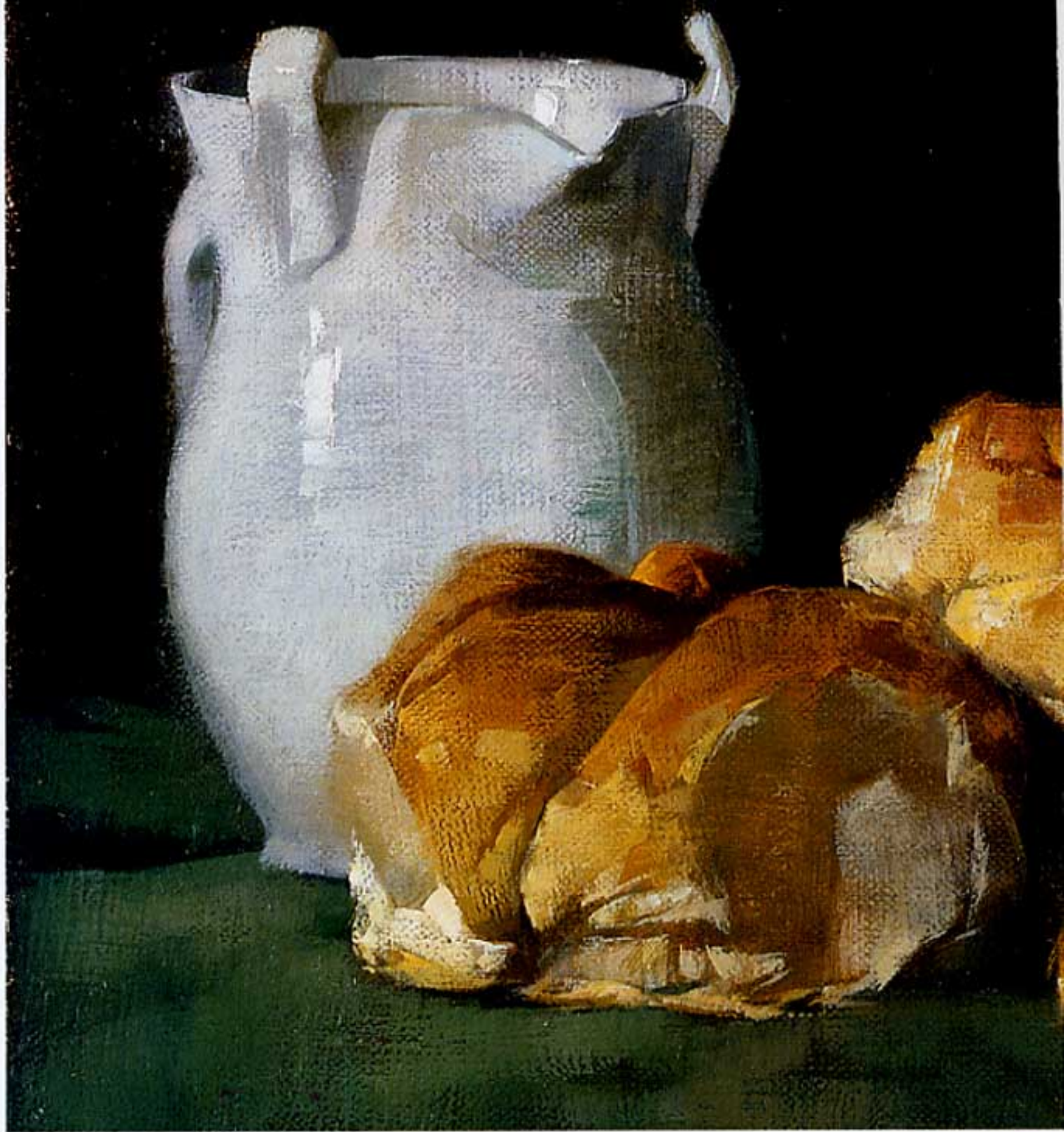
LOS ANGELES' BURGEONING CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE

art & antiques

Taste Sensations

Food in Contemporary Painting

"Big Mac"
BY TOM GREGG



Feast for the Eye

Contemporary still life painters add new spice to recipes concocted by illustrious predecessors. **BY DICK KAGAN**



Colleen Barry, "Bread with White Pilsner," 2006, oil on linen.

Some are hung up on hamburgers, others dote on donuts. Whatever pleases their palates and ignites their imaginations, contemporary still life artists are drawn to the kitchen like mosquitoes to a picnic. For some, foodstuffs are a persistent preoccupation; others, like polite guests at a cocktail party, take an occasional nibble.

Freshly hung game, cascades of fruit and even mounds of butter and cheese, of course, were among the subjects that set paintbrushes awhisk in the heyday of 17th-century Dutch and Flemish still life painting. French Impressionists scurried to their larders for roseate apples, comely peaches and pike ready for poaching *avec herbes*.

In the 1960s, American artists like Claes Oldenburg and Wayne Thiebaud poked around the pantry: The former limned pie slices, both pizza and the à-la-mode variety, while the latter painted desserts recalling the plasticized simulacra seen in windows of downscale diners.

A brace of museum exhibitions this past

year indicates that the tradition of depicting food and drink in art is still on the front burner. "The Food Show: The Hungry Eye" at New York's Chelsea Art Museum, which ended in February, featured riffs on modern eating by some 50 artists, including Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. "Feast" at the Chrysler Museum of Art, in Norfolk, Virginia, (through June 17) whets the appetite with both 19th-century still lifes and ritual vessels from ancient cultures.

Other examples of artists' fascination with edibles and potables also can be found in a number of New York galleries. Dennis Wojtkiewicz, who shows his paintings at J. Cacciola Gallery, renders huge, solitary slices of lemon, lime and watermelon in such photorealistic dazzle that the fruit appears to be magically illuminated from within. His "eureka moment" came the day he noticed how a ray of natural light "caught a sliver of lemon. It was almost like a prism, with an explosion of color," says Wojtkiewicz, who finds his "best models in the produce section at Kroger."

Roberto Bernardi's luminous depictions of ripe berries and succulent plums have a

classic quality that might put one in mind of Caravaggio's celebrated "Basket of Fruit," circa 1599. Bernardi's works at Bernarducci.Meisel.Gallery evince an affinity for reflective surfaces, whether an array of spirits bottles on a glowing chrome bar or a bunch of shiny glass jars filled with sugary gumballs.

The late Carolyn Brady was not only a wonderful cook in her own right but had

an appreciation for beautifully presented food. This was expressed in her large-scale watercolors of glistening table settings replete with fine china and shimmering glassware. In commemoration of a memorable dinner at a Thai restaurant, she produced a series of watercolors in 2000 highlighting the exotic fare. These paintings, now at Nancy Hoffman Gallery, were based on photographs Brady "took

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Dennis Wojtkiewicz, "Apple Series #2," 2006, oil on canvas.



Tom Gregg, "Big Mac," 2002, oil on panel.

James del Grosso, "Como Pear" (below), 2005, oil on canvas.



as each course came to the table," notes director Sique Spence, who attended the dinner. "She reproduced each dish faithfully; she didn't improvise."

The term "flesh tones" takes on a literal meaning in the small paintings by Colleen Barry that were shown last fall at Frost & Reed. Her quiet, naturalistic, unadorned oils do indeed get to the meat of the matter. "I started about two years ago," Barry says, "when I went to a butcher's shop to buy a pig's head, because I wanted to study skin tones." She then segued to other comestibles, ranging from breads to slabs of meat, a subject that at times diverted Goya, Picasso and Soutine.

Tom Gregg prefers his meat chopped and cooked, namely in the form of hamburgers on a bun. His stylized, Pop-like "Big Mac," 2002, poses the emblematic sesame-studded bun and burger against a vibrant background of psychedelically bright orange and green. "I wanted it to be attention-grabbing," says Gregg, who concedes that he uses slightly more subdued colors in other still lifes, ranging from elegantly twisted knots of fabric to rotted apples, which are featured at George Bilis Gallery.

Onions in the raw have appealed to John Recco. An avid gardener whose paintings are shown at Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, Recco feels "there's a certain power to an onion; it's a very concentrated vegetable with a strong flavor. They also can be very animated; their tall green stalks almost resemble gesturing arms."

OK Harris represents a buffet of artists who focus on foodstuffs, among them James del Grosso and Tjalf Sparnaay. The former works in a classical tradition of very controlled still lifes that range from fruit anointed with dew-like droplets to a sumptuous arrangement of crusty bread, foil-wrapped Gorgonzola and Genoa salami. The latter does hyper-realistic, idealized oils, with enamel-like surfaces, that might include a fried egg with barely crisped edges or a wedge of apple-raisin pie crowned with a swirl of whipped cream.





Paul Gauguin, "Still Life with Oysters," 1876, oil on canvas.
David Bates, "Oysters and Beer" (right), 2006, oil on canvas.





Colleen Barry, "Meat and Milk," 2006,
oil on linen.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Peter Anton. www.peteranton.com

Bernarducci.Meisel.Gallery
New York. 212.593.3757.

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Va.
757.664.6200

DC Moore Gallery, New York.
247.247.2111

George Billis Gallery, New York.
212.645.2621

J. Cacciola Gallery, New York.
212.462.4646

Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery
New York. 212.644.7171

Mary Boone Gallery, New York.
212.752.2929

Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York.
212.966-6676

OK Harris, New York. 212.431.3600.

Frost & Reed, New York. 212.717.2201

"Cakes and sweets seem to be a perfect stand-in for everything one desires," says Will Cotton, whose oversized paintings of delirium-inducing desserts have been exhibited at Mary Boone Gallery. Up to 12 feet wide, these canvases, with their hillocks of ice cream slathered in chocolate, look like landscapes out of Oz. Cotton isn't concerned about ice cream melting, "I have a good recipe for fake ice cream made with powdered sugar, Karo syrup and Crisco," says the painter, who occasionally adds a toothsome nude to his candyland fantasies.

If you were to put a Cotton canvas in the same room with a wall piece by Peter Anton, it might induce sugar shock in the viewer. Anton's huge sculptures of open boxes of

chocolates are confectioned from wood, wire, paint and plaster. "I just keep adding layer upon layer of paint and varnish to my pieces so they get the silky glow of real chocolate," says Anton. "I have a passion for chocolate and like the way it stirs up people's emotions." A show of his work continues through May 18 at Galerie Terminus in Munich.

Oysters have a certain claim on the artist's eye; both Manet and Gauguin painted still lifes of them in, respectively, 1862 and 1876. In a recent show of David Bates' paintings at DC Moore Gallery, an oil of the saline bivalves was exhibited along with haunting portraits of Gulf Coast natives in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Bates' bold brushwork, with its characteristic

strong black outlines, befit "Oysters and Beer," 2006. "The paint is thick and gooey; oysters have that same tactile quality," he says. "Remarkably, there was a bumper crop of them last year."

As much as anything else, by highlighting seemingly mundane food and drink in their work, artists can evoke a sense of place, a feeling of comfort in even the most straitened circumstances, and the more accessible pleasures of ordinary daily life. ☞

ART & ANTIQUES New York correspondent and veteran "100 Top Treasures" reporter Dick Kagan is a terrible cook but a frequent patron of the city's more accomplished takeout food shops.