



LAST SUPPER

by Megan Fizell

The plates, often hung in a mass upon the wall, assume the non-confrontational, blue and white appearance of the medium's most popular color-combination. Julie Green's (www.greenjulie.com) "The Last Supper" series features the illustrations of final meal requests by death row inmates in the United States. The menus, gleaned from newspaper clippings and websites, highlight the final wish and desires of those condemned to death. What do these foods say about the people who choose them? From the lingering taste of fried chicken to the birthday cake for a man who never had

one, The Last Supper plates humanize a sect of society typically disregarded by the general public.

The series title is heavy with religious connotations, recalling the story of Christ and the final meal he shared with his disciples before the betrayal by Judas. In the book of Corinthian, Paul the Apostle recounts Jesus as stating of the meal, "Do this in remembrance of me." Green has framed the last suppers of the inmates as a form of remembrance and in parallel to Jesus' experience, the prisoners approach the meal knowing it is their last. Green produced the project "to prod and to encourage discussion on capital punishment" and her use of a provocative title clearly highlights her anti-death penalty stance. She continues the religious comparison by painting the plates with the color reserved for the mother of Christ. Pope Pius V standardized liturgical color coding in the 16th century and due to the rarity and cost of the color blue, it was chosen to honor the Virgin Mary.¹ The color of the mineral paint she uses works to further humanize the inmates, reminding the viewer that each meal was consumed by a person, someone who had a mother.

From the Persian tiles in the mosques of the Middle East to the Chinese porcelain of the Ming dynasty and 18th century European



1 Installation detail of the 2006 exhibition “The Last Supper” at the Art and Design Gallery at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. *Photo: Robert Hickerson.* 2 Installation view of the 283 plates as part of the 2008 exhibition “Criminal,” at San Francisco State University in San Francisco, California. Video collaboration with Colin Murphey. *Photo: Andrew Bird.* 3 Installation view of the 2008 exhibition “The Last Supper Table” at Reed College Arts Week in Portland, Oregon. Twelve painted plates, menu place cards, chairs, tablecloth, video.

Delftware, the blue and white pattern has been appropriated and modified globally and historically. By using this general palette, Green establishes universality throughout the collection, linking the meals of varied individuals. She directly references the decorative patterns of the Chinese porcelain when painting the larger menus “18th century Chinese ceramics inspire me; some of those designs look so contemporary. After seeing these, now I often divide big meals into sections, instead of an overview or receding foods.” Historically, the blue and white palette began with the Persians who developed cobalt as a glaze and used the blue tiles to represent heaven in their mosques.² The religious context established by the title is carried through into the coloration of the plates.

As forensic science develops, over a hundred innocent inmates have been freed from death row convictions. The reference to heaven provides an element of hope for the souls of the individuals who have been wrongly convicted and subsequently executed.

Green explains that the color has many meanings, “The blue in The Last Supper refers to the blues, blue-plate specials, heavenly blue, and old-style prison uniforms and mattresses of navy and white striped fabric. Also there is something cartoon-like and absurd about blue tacos, blue pizza, blue ketchup, blue bread.”

Green paints the menus of The Last Supper series on appropriated dishes she collects from shops and stores. The plates range from delicate white porcelain to heavy cream crockery and the foods from each menu inform the choice of dish, “For dinner food, a heavy plain plate would be appropriate. If the meal is lasagna and shrimp, that might call for a fine porcelain plate.” The size of each menu affects the shape of the plate—an excessively large meal is painted on a platter whereas the four olives and berry flavored water requested by the Texas inmate was painted on a small and narrow dish. Additionally, the irony of the large meals is not lost—within the prison system the last

1 Louisiana 7 January 2010, Fried sac-a-lait fish, topped with crawfish etouffee, a peanut butter and apple jelly sandwich, and chocolate chip cookies.

2 Georgia, 26 June 2007, Four fried pork chops, collard greens with boiled okra and "boiling meat," fried corn, fried fatback, fried green tomatoes, cornbread, lemonade, one pint of strawberry ice cream, and three glazed donuts.

3 Texas 22 January 2009, Twenty-four hot dog chicken wings, two cheeseburgers with everything, four slices of pizza with jalapeños, three slices of buttered toast, one sweet potato pie, rainbow sherbet ice cream, and twelve cans of Dr.Pepper/Big Red.

4 Indiana, 5 May 2007, Pizza and birthday cake shared with fifteen family and friends. A prison official is quoted on the plate.



meal is often referred to as 'The Big Feed' and these extensive menus live up to the name.

By illustrating the meal upon a plate, Green enables the viewer to visualize the inmate's final meal; placing the viewer as the prisoner with the meal set before them to consume. The use of the plate makes each work self-referential and more accessible. The depictions of these meals not only humanize the inmates, they enable the viewer to identify with the prisoners through their vantage point and the familiarity of the foods.

The collection has been displayed in a number of configurations in the past decade, from a mass group hanging upon a wall to a tabletop installation; the presentations communicate different aspects of the series to the viewer. The crowded, chock-a-block hang at San Francisco State University highlights the sheer number of these executions in the recent years. The exhibition at the Art and Design Gallery at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, featured ordered rows of plates, mimicking the structured order of the penal system. Often Green includes an empty chair to "reference the wooden electric chair."

The chair is also found in the table setting installations of Reed College Arts Week and Spencer Museum of Art. In these

configurations, each place setting with the empty chair and plate establishes the physical space in which the inmate would have consumed the meal depicted. The absence of the inmate is omnipresent and both the self-referential qualities of the painted food on each plate and the shared vantage point of the viewer and prisoner are further reinforced.

To continue the dialog produced by *The Last Supper*, Green hopes that entire collection will be put on permanent public display, perhaps in Texas. To date, 450 plates have been completed and Green intends to paint an additional 50 plates per year until the death penalty is abolished.

Green conceptualized the series through an article in an Oklahoma newspaper that stated in full detail, the final request of an executed inmate, "His right foot, clad in a blue slipper shook nervously. . . . After officials began administering the drugs at 12:09 a.m., Johnson blinked three times and let out a breath through puffed cheeks. His foot stopped shaking. His eyes slowly dimmed, became glassy and closed to a crescent. . . . He asked for a final meal of three chicken thighs, ten or fifteen shrimp, tater tots with ketchup, two slices of pecan pie, strawberry ice cream, honey and biscuits, and a Coke."



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Looking at the series as a whole, the development of Green’s mastery of the medium is apparent, the paintings have become more detailed and complex through the years. Mineral paint is a difficult pigment to handle; the thick and oily paint calls for a skilled hand to effectively layer the pigment on the fired ceramic surface.

When she began the series, Green planned to “make the plates institutional-looking and awkward, intentionally lacking in richness” as an aesthetic conceptual point. As *The Last Supper* progressed, her familiarity with the medium allowed her to become more expressive. Comparing a menu of grilled salmon requested in 1999 by an Arizona inmate to a fried sac-a-lait fish requested in 2010 by a Louisiana inmate, Green’s technical development is evident. Her later plates are more expressive and include text—either printed with a set of rubber stamps or in a script applied with a paintbrush.

Gazing from one plate to another, a culinary portrait of the United States begins to emerge. The most beloved menus from each region are singled out to be the last earthly delight of a condemned inmate. From tamales and enchiladas in Texas to boiled crawfish in Louisiana, the regional menus give a sense of the ethnic background of each prisoner.

According to Green, “when considering the humble requests, it is important to note that most states limit final meal expenses to twenty dollars. Some states, like Texas, further limit choices to foods found in the prison pantry. If you request steak in Texas, you get hamburger.”

The public response has been as varied as the menus and, although she has not received a direct response from death-row inmates regarding the series, Green has learned through attorneys and prison staff that many inmates have seen the project. Ultimately, she hopes to turn the collection into an illustrated book. In the words of Samuel Pepys, it is “strange to see how a good dinner and feasting reconciles everybody.”

End notes: 1. Finlay, Victoria, Colour: Travels through the Paintbox, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002. 324-325. 2. Ibid, 328.

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