

# GUT INSTINCT

## Art, food and feeling

Artists: **Marina Abramovic, Sonja Alhäuser, Domestic Godless, Elif Erkan, Fiona Hallinan, Siobhan McGibbon, Abigail O'Brien, Thomas Rentmeister, and Neil Shawcross.**

Gutted, gutsy, gut feelings, gut wrenching, butterflies in your tummy, go with your gut - are all expressions used in everyday language, art and literature to portray a raft of human emotions. How we feel is driven by both emotional and visceral signals and while neuroscientists by training are conditioned to think of what is happening above the neck in terms of the regulation of our emotions, research at the APC Microbiome Institute is literally turning this concept upside down as scientists begin to realise the importance of gut function and the food we eat as critical to our mental well-being.

Food has long been the subject of works of art. In recent times, artists have also examined eating behaviours and the mechanisms of consumption as a way to comment on contemporary society. From artworks that explore the materiality of foodstuffs to creative provocations that test the boundaries of good taste and revulsion, **GUT INSTINCT: Art, food and feeling** draws on cutting edge research by John Cryan, Professor and Chair, Anatomy and Neuroscience, UCC, and his colleagues at the APC Microbiome Institute, to explore how digestion relates to our mental and emotional states.

This emotive connection that we have to what we eat is captured in Neil Shawcross' paintings. His depictions of tins of soup, bottles of ketchup, packets of cake mix and various foodstuffs are less about the brash consumerism of Warhol's Pop Art and more about conveying the mixed emotional responses we have for particular comfort foods and products. The correlation between these two 'brains' – the state of gut and the state of mind – is captured in artworks that blur the distinctions between mind and body. In Siobhan McGibbon's sculptures, pristine white legs emerge from enlarged organs while her drawings – seen through medical like viewing devices - depict microbes merging with simplified human forms.

Curated by **Chris Clarke, John Cryan and Fiona Kearney**  
in association with the **APC Microbiome Institute, UCC.**

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## **GUILTY PLEASURES**

Elif Erkan employs an unusual approach to her materials, 'feeding' vitamins such as St. John's Wort and Omega 3 into abstract plaster forms to reveal unexpected juxtapositions of the organic and the synthetic. The infusions either disappear into their materials or slowly, visibly, rot and decay. Named after the mythical Lotus Eaters who became addicted to the narcotic fruits of the lotus tree, Erkan's sculptures are instead treated with natural medicines and herbal remedies.

In Thomas Rentmeister's Untitled, we encounter a vast, painted field of densely textured Nutella spread. Just as the scale of the work overwhelms the human viewer, the sheer amount of inedible sweetness is both enticing and revolting. In Rentmeister's other work here, a rounded mound of rich brown resin recalls a giant sweet, a globule of chocolate that may have plopped down from his nearby painting – or could this too be something unappetising, a dropping of a different kind?

## **ACQUIRED TASTES**

Our sense of taste can carry a powerful emotional charge, recalling past memories and stimulating new associations. Marina Abramovic's film *The Onion* offers a uniquely physical take on language and identity. The artist eats a raw onion while recounting a litany of complaints, as the camera offers an unflinching portrayal of her discomfort and disgust.

Sonja Alhäuser's detailed drawings can be both intimate and monumental in scale, combining anatomical diagrams and processes of ingestion to examine the rituals of eating. Her portrayals of feasts and harvests, figures and foodstuffs considers the importance of how we eat for our mental and bodily states.

## **DINNER IS SERVED**

The wider cultural associations of food, its significance in the rituals and routines of everyday life, are featured in several works. Abigail O'Brien's installation comprises sculptures, video and photography that reveal the role bread plays in our shared culture: metallic loaves are arrayed across a series of tables while, in her photographs, images of kneading and baking dough are named after her female artistic peers.

In Fiona Hallinan's installation, plate-like platforms are suspended by cords and pulleys to create an interactive site that serves as both a sculptural arrangement and a space for public events. Food is not simply a means of sustenance: instead, it serves to encourage conversation, communication and conviviality. In the work of Domestic Godless, performative events introduce participants to strange – and often repulsive sounding – new recipes. Here, they have created an installation which explores notions of disgust and digestion and that includes custom-made toothpastes and suppositories.