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Pasta Baroque

# LAURA WHITE :

## PASTA BAROQUE

The coloured veined dough is formed into folds and twisted like the representation of fabric in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculptures. High art meets the everyday.

Pasta is one of a variety of dough-based foods used across the planet and one that takes centre stage in classic Italian cuisine. Dough can be boiled, baked, steamed, or fried, resulting in anything from Asian noodles, and Austrian Zillertaler Krapfen, to Spanish orelletes. When yeast is added to dough you get bread, but also an array of other rising doughs such as those for sweet Kenyan Kaimati dumplings, Indian naan, pizza, and flatbreads. Dough is handled in many different ways in many different cultures and so is a shared language across them, one that opens up empathy and social and physical connections between people.

I have made a fair amount of pasta over the years and have read enlightening books such as Rachel Roddy's *An A-Z of Pasta* and Marcella Hazan's *The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking* so as to teach myself a little of the art of making this astonishing food. I have learned how to mix and knead dough, how to form it into handmade shapes or how to use a pasta machine to roll out sheets as the starting point for a range of pasta forms, from tagliatelle to ravioli. I am now trying to let loose with the material: to unlearn and find my own way of making pasta. The thing is, whatever I make must be as much a visual and hand-touch experience as a taste and mouth-feel experience.

My art focuses on *process*, and how objects and things come into being, and so I emphasise a creative handling of materials. I work with both the stable properties of materials like ceramics and concrete, to the changeable materiality of clay, bread dough, salt, silicone rubber, and rusting metal. I explore and respond to the behaviours of different materials, and to my personal relationships with them, alongside my response and exploration of their unique historical and social contexts. It's important for me to be led by the materials and to collaborate with them, rather than imposing myself on them. I am drawn to materials and processes that challenge me physically: materials that are difficult to control; those that are awkward to stabilise, and those that resist being fixed. Working with unfamiliar materials and processes often involves learning new hands-on skills. One way I do this is by expanding my skill set. I have learnt skills in butchery; fishmongery; cheese-making, and in sushi and pâtisserie preparation. In addition to these, I have acquired other non-foodie skills involved with taxidermy, blacksmithing, shoemaking, and glass blowing, all of which have enriched my body-hand-material vocabulary. For example, skills I learnt on a professional pâtisserie course, and techniques I learnt from a chocolatier last year, have improved the dexterity of my fingertips. Thus, a skill essential for making pastry cases and chocolate decorations has resurfaced in my handling of materials in the studio. Up until now, my engagement with food – my explorations of handling, observing, and making food – has been key to my art practice – my making of artworks – informing the ways I engage with and think about materials.

Now, for the first time, my studio work is directly informing my making of food. It has become a two-way exchange between food and sculpture production, a shift I was hoping for but did not want



Opposite:

**Spurtive 3**  
2022  
Silicone Rubber  
152.4 x 144.8 x 83.8 cm

Courtesy of the artist





to force until it felt right. Being in Italy, this is the right time. I am here for nine months doing a fellowship at the British School at Rome where I have become immersed in the local food culture. I visit markets, salumerias, and delis and watch people prepare food, cut vegetables, slice and portion meat and fish. I eat in restaurants and on the streets. I work with food specialists and producers, and learn handmade-pasta techniques and cheese-making skills through the eyes and hands of food experts. Food is very much at the heart of Italian life and I'm enjoying being swept up in it.

Making pasta is a complicated, yet simple, process: the simplicity is in the coming together of two ingredients – flour (often semolina) and water, or else, flour (0 or 00 grade finely-ground wheat flour) and eggs, yet the basic act of mixing these two humble ingredients together forms the bedrock for the making of a multitude of pasta forms, shapes, and textures, each designed to complement all manner of sauces and condiments. I explore pasta's material qualities, its capacities to be rolled out thin, to be stretched even thinner, to be stuck together, and to be formed into all manner of shapes.

The boundaries between food and sculpture are, for me, becoming blurred. I shift between working on the floor (manipulating dough into unruly sculptures) and working on the table (to make tongue-size foods to cook and eat). I explore how my body moves and accommodates the small and large forms as I roll, stretch, and rip the dough.

On the floor, I use my legs and arms to stretch and manipulate the dough, while on the table, I use my palms and fingertips to spread and pinch the dough. It is as much a shift of the head as it is the hands – food into sculpture and sculpture back into food. These movements are accompanied by thoughts about context, value, consumption; about the inside and outside of the body; about

how a motion or an action – about how residues and reflections of a body, *my body* – can all be captured in a material.

My idea for making pasta (to eat) is to create an experience in the mouth of the other that captures my own enjoyment of eating pasta – from the sensation of it moving inside my own mouth – looping across and around my tongue; the sensation of biting into it – a range of textural experiences. This idea requires fairly large pieces of pasta, thin flaps of irregular shapes that fill the mouth so that soft and slithery meets moments of *al dente* bite. So I really need a pasta that is both gentle and giving and one that can be interrupted by firm resistance.

I'm not claiming to invent a new pasta experience here – there are many kinds of pasta that explore this range of eating sensations. For me, the work is a 'way in' to feel the material inside and outside my body, and explore my own pasta-dough relationship.

It has helped to make edible pasta in the same space where I make sculpture. This close connection has, for example, taught me to knead my sculpture dough for as long as I do for my consumable dough. The action of kneading exercises gluten in the material, making it more elasticated. This is important when rolling out thin pieces without tearing the dough. This has made a big difference when I roll out large pieces of dough on the floor for my sculptures. (I had not been doing this, so my sculptures were likely to rip when I stretched them.)

I feel a bit awkward referring to my edible pasta and my sculpture pasta as different things, as I don't really want to separate them, but I feel the need to, in terms of what can and cannot be eaten! I must also add that, in the case of my sculptures, I am combining other materials with my dough to make my sculptures more stable, adding a range of stabilisers – from basic salt to

Opposite:

Selection of Pasta Shapes  
2023  
Dough mix  
British School of Rome

Courtesy of the artist



more sophisticated binders – but I’m very careful not to add anything that compromises its doughy behaviour.

In my studio, I roll out small individual balls of pasta with a rolling pin on the clean table and then I stretch the results to make them thinner. The shapes are irregular and unplanned, some measuring up to twelve centimetres wide, some long and thin, others more rounded. Then, gathering them all up into irregular folds and creases, I pinch some of the ripples together to stick and to hold the shapes in place (not too much as this will make the pasta too thick, but enough to hold the gathered shapes). I then crumple up greaseproof paper and arrange the individual shapes on top to hold their sculpted forms, giving them space and time to dry.

When cooking a couple of my table-dried pasta forms a few days later, I toss them in a bit of olive oil, salt, and pepper, for a quick trial. I think *“Either they’ll lose their shape when boiled in water, or they won’t taste very good!”* BUT, to my surprise, the shapes hold and they taste delicious; the texture is spot on for the oil dressing to cling to them. I’m very careful not to over- or undercook them. Placing each one, one at a time, into my mouth, I slowly manoeuvre them around inside my mouth with my tongue. I postpone biting into them until I can’t hold back any longer. I think about my large dough sculptures on the floor as I eat: their inflated scale and physicality, like internal organs – throat, stomach, and colon – the digestive system that the pasta passes through inside my body.

Over the course of a few days, I accumulated a pile of my table pasta shapes and decided to cook for fellow award-holders at the school. What was I thinking!?! Cooking for one is not the same as cooking for twelve! How would the pasta hold together when cooked in larger quantities? Would it all stick together? And how to mix a sauce into the pasta without breaking the pieces up?

And what kind of sauce to make?!

I wanted a sauce that was minimal and would showcase the pasta, so I decided to do a very simple sage butter: sage from the School garden, good quality butter from the local supermarket, and a grating on top of pecorino cheese from the local market. I served it up in small bowls to a table of hungry residents. Someone made a salad and someone else brought a fruit tart for dessert, so, if all else failed, no one would go hungry. Asking everyone to give me feedback on their experience of eating my pasta, their responses were positive and very appreciative. My meal was served up to be a very sensual experience: to be a reflection on the slippery seductive textures of the surprising range of pasta shapes, and on the requirement for different fork actions to move it from plate to mouth.

The scale and individualised shapes of these edible pastas connect to a unique nature and language of sculpture. Perhaps they are multiples – small repeated objects in their own right – or maquettes for large sculptures. It has got me thinking of making even bigger pasta shapes to eat – big enough to fill the base of a serving plate – and to make a broth to ladle on top. Different cutlery manoeuvres would be required to eat these larger shapes, not the usual rotation and scooping method of using a fork.

The pasta dough on the floor of my studio is also growing and spreading, with multiple shapes and sizes occupying different surfaces. Shapes coloured with a range of food colourants open up their object and material associations. The coloured veined dough is formed into folds and twisted like the representation of fabric in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s marble sculptures. High art meets the everyday. The work becomes a reframing of pasta outside of the domestic sphere to see it anew.

Opposite:

**Disobedient Bodies**  
2023  
Dough mix and aluminium shelves  
238 x 80 x 145 cm

Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Roberto Apa





Gian Lorenzo Bernini  
**Apollo and Daphne**  
1622–1625  
Marble  
243 cm high

*Galleria Borghese, Rome*