

Mixed Emotions: Cutting and Pasting through Loss, Detritus, and Forced Isolation During COVID-19

WHEN THE PANDEMIC BEGAN in January 2020, my husband (a doctor) insisted on seemingly drastic steps to ensure our health: groceries delivered to our doorstep, compulsive virus tracking, masking, sanitizing, and social distancing. We implemented our own shelter-in-place regime weeks before it was suggested or mandated by any government health official. As an artist, I experienced mixed emotions about having to stay home. In those first few weeks, the lockdown felt like an extended artist's retreat: a chance to play and explore new techniques and media. But with galleries shuttered and art fairs canceled, the audience for my food-themed jewelry dwindled, as did the creative spark to build new inventory.

Instead, I began doom-scrolling the news on social media, and the pervasive dread descending on the world seeped into me. I learned of friends and family whose parents were dying, yet the pandemic kept anyone from traveling to bedsides or even funerals. Seeing pictures of the isolated elderly wrung me with despair as I reflected on my family's mortality and my own.

The pandemic left in its wake a tumult of shattered households, full of once-important and cherished "stuff" holding little meaning for the inheritors. One of the great tragedies of the pandemic is this surfeit of abandoned goods with no destination, and the loss of the hopes and memories they once evoked. My friends lament that no one wants to eat upon the delicate china or drink from the fine crystal their parents had left for them. Younger generations are less attuned to traditions of large family meals in formal dining rooms. Most auction houses won't even bother with crystal stemware or dinnerware sets. Sterling place settings are melted for scrap silver. Recipes are more accessible from an electronic device than read from a book.

I was gifted with a myriad of abandoned items and wanted to honor the memories of their former owners. As a culinary

historian, I have collected Victorian-era cooking implements and cookbooks for decades, occasionally using both for special dinner parties, so I was thrilled when a friend bequeathed me a 1909 edition of *The White House Cookbook* that had been her mother's. First published in 1887 by Mrs. F.L. Gillette and Hugo Ziemann, what I received was essentially the innards: sans cover boards with disintegrated binding, the brittle, yellowed pages crumbling in my hands. The book was originally compiled by Gillette through interviews with former First Ladies and White House staff and co-authored with Ziemann, the White House steward.

Fully titled *The White House Cookbook: A Comprehensive Cyclopedic of Information for the Home, containing Cooking, Toilet and Household Recipes, Menus, Table Etiquette, Care of the Sick, Health Suggestions, Facts Worth Knowing, Etc.*, this bygone household compendium is replete with antiquated phrases and ingredients. Measurements come in teacupfuls or winecupfuls; baking temperatures and timings are mere suggestions, such as "in a slow oven until brown" or in "a moderate oven from one and a half to two hours." It was a handbook for an era when maintaining the kitchen fire was crucial to keeping the house warm. The book conveys a comprehensive trove of domestic wisdom beyond the kitchen, with therapeutic guidance ranging from lancing a boil to removing an ink stain from a carpet to how best to preserve fine walnut furniture. Nineteenth-century etiquette may seem old-fashioned, but guidance not to go "into society" unless one can "be genial, animated, sympathetic and cheerful" is more relevant than ever.

Like so many cookbooks from that era, this is not just a list of cooking recipes, but an expansive trove of household knowledge—the kind of wisdom that would have been passed down from elder to youth. My own parents have been gone

for over a decade, and I met my maternal grandmother only two or three times during my childhood. I fantasized a Norman Rockwell relationship with a grandmother who would bestow upon me her best recipes and kitchen tricks. Slowly, as I traversed through the pages of the book, she gradually began to manifest.

Transfixed by the font and feel of the pages, I resolved to use the very words from the book—quite literally, as “clippings” from the page, hearkening to recipes my mother cut from magazines—to bring these old recipes to life. A contemplative tranquility descended as I cut and cut and cut. In reflecting upon the sentiments of nineteenth-century domestic life, I performed a Duchampian act of re-creation by festooning discarded, vintage kitchen utensils with these words. The meditative act of gluing each strip of yellowed paper was deeply satisfying and calming.

Words are symbols, but the printed text is itself an object. In combination with the utensil, the physical word is transformed into the act. Each piece might evoke different memories or longings in viewers. For some, they might recall living

memories of grandparents: perhaps a grandmother sipping tea from a delicate china cup or a grandfather grasping an antler-handled carving knife to slice the Sunday roast. For those of more recent generations or other cultures for whom those memories are lacking, these pieces might awaken curiosity about or even longing for a slower-paced, more genteel era. It is my hope that the plate bedecked with multitudes of the word “serve” invokes an act of pulling out a chair, sitting down at a large table set for a feast, and eating home-cooked food from a loving, communal kitchen over lively conversation.

As an artist, it was my intent to use single words or instructions, repeated upon utensils and serving items, to create a pattern on the object and a mantra in the viewer’s mind. Instead of a reference point for a mental image, the word itself becomes the physical reality. Upon obsolete kitchenware, I reimagine the original intent of the objects with the new sentiments now applied. In homage to all the grandmothers lost during the pandemic, I commemorate their recipes and honor the culinary heritage of the feasts they prepared with these old implements and vessels. 🍷









