

Wetterling Gallery

Earth's Rich Bounties

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"Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"

Henry David Thoreau

Mother Earth is the title of Nathalia Edenmont's new exhibition at Wetterling Gallery and earth is indeed at its core. Earth as the source of bounty and giver of life, but also as the receiver of death and purveyor of decay. This body of photographic portraits extends the theme of earthly paradise that Edenmont has previously explored using models arrayed in lavish costumes of flowers and foliage, both living and dead. Now plants have given way to fruits, vegetables and even soil, arranged as elaborate garments in these compositions which fuse portraiture and still life genres. The titular work *Mother Earth* depicts a handsome, unmade-up woman in her thirties wearing a dress of soil which, with its dark patches and rugged texture, resembles animal skins. There is something fierce, primeval in her stare, pointing to her role as maternal protectress and nurturer down the millennia. She is the ancient Greek goddess Gaia, the first to spring from chaos, who was known in Roman times as Terra Mater and appears as Erda, the all-wise mother of the universe, in Wagner's operatic Ring Cycle loosely based on Teutonic mythology. "Mother Earth is four different cycles of seasons. She gives us different moments of fruition and fruitfulness," says Edenmont, explaining her inspiration behind the exhibition. "You have to put seeds in the earth, then it will grow a tree and the tree will give flowers and after that fruit. Then you have to harvest the fruit and it all starts again. It's amazing what Mother Nature does."

The image *Mother Earth* has a close visual parallel in the work *Full of Life*, a self-portrait of the artist herself attired in soil. However, whereas in *Mother Earth*, the soil garment appears lifeless, reminiscent of a fresh grave, in *Full of Life* Edenmont's dirt dress is literally alive, teeming with pink earth worms, which slither down Edenmont's arms, mirroring the orange tendrils of hair that snake down her neck from her elaborate seventeenth-century coiffeur. The artist's face remains deadpan, inscrutable, betraying no hint of her phobia of these invertebrates. *Full of Life* could be seen as a wry dig at the legend of Eve, worms having replaced the serpent to whom Eve supposedly succumbed in eating the apple, thereby causing women to be forever cursed with the pain of childbirth and guilt for her sin. Edenmont has toyed with notions of Eve since early in her practice. Her unsettling 2005 portrait of her

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muse Carolina, who would become her friend and alter ego, shows the nine-year-old child with pointy prepubescent nipples, looking squarely at the camera, her russet hair piled on her head and a white snake coiled around her neck, presenting a combination of innocence and knowingness beyond her years.

On another level, *Full of Life* has a deeply personal resonance for Edenmont. In aligning the images of the artist and Mother Earth, Edenmont reflects her acceptance of her role as creator (or mother) of art rather than of children, having come to terms with her own infertility after several miscarriages. “This series is about fertility, which is bad for me but good for others,” she tells me. “My fertility is my artworks. If I cannot be fertile in the area of life, then I make it in art.”

Edenmont’s grief over her childlessness has found graphic expression in several works showing models cradling lifeless foetal forms. I am reminded of Tracey Emin, who has also given voice to the raw pain of longing for a child in her art. Her scratchy monoprint drawings and embroideries are particularly poignant in this regard but as she has come to terms in maturity with being a childless single woman she, like Edenmont, has channelled her energies into her art, viewing her creative output as her offspring.

Edenmont has included two self-portraits in this show, which stand in stark contrast with the other portraits showing models basking in a gorgeous profusion of fruits and vegetables of every hue. These women represent plenty and motherhood because, she explains, in the Soviet Union where she grew up there is a commonly held belief that if God gives you children, God will give you the wherewithal to provide for them. Besides *Full of Life* showing the artist in a sack cloth-like dress, the artist’s other self portrait *Propaganda* depicts her in a ballooning gown that recalls the eighteenth century rococo hoop skirts worn by the aristocracy - the main difference being that this one is composed of potatoes! Yes, that common tuber, and not just any potatoes but 700 kilograms of old ones that are have sprouted long purple sprigs. *Propaganda* encapsulates two specific memories for Edenmont. On one hand it harks back to her childhood. “We were always eating potatoes, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There was not so much food but the Soviet government said we were very rich and the best country,” she says. Hence the state manipulation suggested by the title. On the other hand, the work makes comical reference to an incident when the artist, then nineteen and dressed to the nines, was approached by a Russian man who asked her age. “You are still young,” he said, “but in two years you will be like an old potato.” Decades later Edenmont remembered the encounter and thought, “Oh, that’s what happened to me, I’m like an

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old potato.” However, as she gazes defiant and poised in her potato-costume, an artist in her prime, she has the last laugh.

If this series is about fertility, the underlying motif is female empowerment. Whereas her 2016-17 show at Dunkers Kulturhus “Through the Eyes of Nathalia Edenmont” included a male model evoking the fertility god Priapus, complete with erect member thrusting upward from his leafy raiment, this current exhibition features women exclusively. Edenmont endows her models with strength and fruitfulness. In the aptly titled *Fruition*, Edenmont’s muse Carolina appears clad in clusters of green grapes; *Down to Earth* shows a model radiant in tumbling rosy red tomatoes which bulge around her stomach with the promise of young life. *Dolce Vita* presents an otherworldly white-blond nymph with pale, almost luminous skin, surrounded by petticoats of luscious strawberries and leaves, while in *Prosperity* a flame-haired model out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting wears a rippling garment of ripe grapes in every shade of purple. So ingenious are these designs that they are often unrecognisable as foodstuffs, particularly in the case of *My Mind’s Eye*. Here we find a model resplendent in a flouncy purple and green hat and gown made from cabbages in a nod to Russian folkloric tales of babies hidden under these prosaic vegetables, equivalent to the idea of the stork in the west.

There is something traditional about Edenmont’s images that reflects her way of working. For a start, she intuits her images already fully formed in her head, without analysing their meaning or symbolism. Her compositions are staged with meticulous precision and shot with a large format 8x10 camera. Not for her the post-modern sleight of hand and optical tricks available with Photoshop and digital camera technology. Her photos have more in common with the carefully constructed Dutch still lives of the seventeenth century. “I paint using the photo lens,” she says. As the Dutch masters often did, Edenmont employs a plain black backdrop, locating her subjects out of time. “It’s like in the middle of nowhere. A deep black sky at night without stars, or deep black sea. The emptiness of the universe,” she explains. The theme of Vanitas threads through all these works: a photo shoot requires several hours to set up and a team of assistants but once the truck arrives bearing crates of fruit and vegetables, it’s a race against the clock before the taut perfect surface of the organic matter starts to shrivel and pucker. The camera gives artificial longevity to these visions of beauty but beneath the surface lies decay and even suffering.

Although absent from the series, men feature indirectly. *Vulnerable* presents a young woman arrayed in pink and white bulbous radishes, her hand resting on her throat in a gesture of modesty as if to fend off an onslaught from these sperm-like root vegetables with their wriggling tails. Some of the titles like

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“Hot”, “Juicy” or “Tasty” allude to the chauvinistic language men use to describe women as delectable food for consumption. With tongue in cheek, the artist reclaims these terms and turns them into powerful symbols of femininity and female sexuality. So *Hot*, for instance, depicts an ice-cold blond glowering sternly above a strapless flowing ball gown of shiny red peppers. Advance if you dare, she seems to say. *Tasty* depicts a young woman in an off-the-shoulder green number comprised of cabbages, peppers, beans, watermelons and flowers interspersed with asparagus, poking out like thin penises. Woman as an embodiment of masculine and feminine. This idea becomes more pronounced in *Juicy* in the dazzling phallic display of carrots shooting out at all angles in the puff-ball skirt of the model and is taken yet further in *Erect*, where white shafts of asparagus and Japanese mushrooms form a sensual penis-charm necklace around the Lolita-esque teenage model. This last work finds a visual echo in Edemont’s 2010 photographs of naked young girls wearing necklaces composed of myriad condoms and of tampons.

Viewed in the context of Edemont’s oeuvre, this current series could be considered as comparatively wholesome. Much of her earlier work has been concerned with the messiness of the human body, exploring taboo themes such as menstruation and miscarriage. In her practice death and sex, innocence and cruelty loom large with operatic melodrama that at times pushes the boundaries of western notions of taste. Oversize children suckle on the full breasts of barely adult girls, a woman in white night gown holds a dripping raw cut of meat swaddled in baby clothes, a little girl in communion white holds a revolver in her mouth. This is characteristic of Edemont’s almost baroque love of excess. Passion, ecstasy, agony, tragedy. Bernini versus Raphael. Medea versus Mimi.

Abundance is integral to Edemont’s vision, which has much to do with the experience of scarcity growing up under Soviet rule. “It’s Soviet thinking, from not having enough in childhood,” she says. “So now when I’m in the west and everything is here, I want to do everything big. Too much is not enough.” This penchant for monumental scale in her use of fruit and vegetables belongs to a lineage that spans the British artist Anya Gallaccio, who came to prominence in the 1990s with her grid-shaped installations of flowers, South African sculptor Roelof Louw, with his 1967 pyramid of thousands of oranges *Soul City*, and goes all the way back to the Italian Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, creator of surreal portrait heads made from foods.

Edemont’s sumptuous costumes underscore her skill as a colourist, the ardent reds of the peppers, opulent purples and greens of the cabbages and vibrant oranges of the carrots, displaying a cornucopia of

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produce as never seen before. These portraits of women adorned in nature's bounty inescapably call to mind the rich iconography around the Garden of Eden. Edenmont's own name encompasses that famous earthly paradise after all. The startling profusion of plump fruit and vegetables in these compositions recalls in particular of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, whose fantastical central panel shows men and women cavorting with oversize blackberries and peaches or of Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Adam and Eve*, in which the pair stand beneath a tree of knowledge heavy with red juicy apples and around whose trunk twine luscious grapes. Yet the artist rejects readings of Eve as a wicked temptress or guilt-ridden penitent. Instead she offers us a series of powerful, intelligent Eves, from whom ripe fruit and vegetables cascade in fecund abundance. However, inherent in these images of beauty is the awareness of their transience. As Shakespeare reminds us, "Fair flowers that are not gather'd in their prime, Rot and consume themselves in little time."