

'Why I Paint Cooks': Musings of William Balthazar Rose

I began painting the series I call the 'Cooks' in 1991 and have continued to add to it since that time. The first examples were painted on small wooden panels and usually included a larger figure sitting to one side. Since childhood I have been fascinated with the spirit of cookery and in particular the chef; the figure that is so often dressed in white and has a tall hat and checkered trousers. I have always loved the costume of the cook—it seems magical and theatrical, and suggests at times the robes of a priest. The film "The Cook, The Wife, The Thief and His Lover" made by Peter Greenaway also influenced me in the 1980s. Needless to say, I also love eating! I have been intrigued by what the cook does as a creative individual and am aware of how often the cook creates more vastly than any other figure in the arts.

As a boy I remember feeling a huge mysterious appreciation upon seeing a fully uniformed cook for the first time. The cook appeared dignified and superior like a king or a magician as compared to the banal figures around him. The white costume seemed to glow amongst the drab members of the room, and there was a sense of ceremony and importance to his gait. The first cook, whom I remember was perhaps even rakish and proud, and was holding a cleaver and a silver tray, commanding attention.

I am still filled with tremendous awe when I glimpse a chef, and grow slightly wobbly at the knees. I tried cooking at the age of eight in emulation of this visionary person and I created a watery chocolate-flavoured sludge of a soup filled with carrots, tomatoes and sweet corn, absolutely disgusting, but enjoyed by myself and my junior friends because of my overflowing enthusiasm for the activity. However I realized quickly I had not the ambition, talent or even the generosity to really become a cook.

I think cooks serve and that they are almost like medicine men. They can be manic in the kitchen; overworked and pressured, producing wonderful food but suffering to do it. There is a discrepancy between the nirvana they bring forth in the dining room and the tense world in the kitchen-- there seem to be two worlds each masking the other. My paintings have been an attempt to speak of this world which is to some degree my evoked fantasy of a world I do not know in its depths, but rather guess at.

The sense of violence in the paintings is related to the incessant cutting and chopping that a cook has to do in the act of food preparation, yes, there is an element of truth in this. The knife is in fact a very important symbol to me. The role of the knife in life is to separate. Many of my paintings with cooks deal with this issue. The fact that cooks have to cut and chop non-stop throughout the preparation of meals begins to suggest to me the intensity of their psychological involvement with the knife. Whereas the knife in the cook's hand leads to social benefit, it nevertheless remains a sharp instrument capable of murder. There is an inherent sense of danger and violence in a cleaver. At any moment, a cook in the kitchen can strike.

In my mind Man has now become cook, for man must, like the cook, eat what he creates politically, environmentally, personally. Man is now responsible for the quality of his own food. The cook is the creator of all meals, and responsible for what we eat, good or bad. You are what you eat and bad cooks make foul food...and good chefs cook divinely. One thing remains certain: the cook is in charge of his own meals, and the meals of others.

The cook has become my vision of humanity. Le Corbusier had an athlete-artist, Balthus had an awakening nubile, Cecil Collins a Christ-fool.

You will take note that cook appears in a context which one might think of as a non-context, a blank, a usually dark and undefined place with no furniture, landscape, door or window. a place of non-place, non-context, and yet this really is the context of humanity; our place is a place of not knowing, and darkness with some light (like Plato's cave) for we are held in the dark and not allowed to see beyond the dim edges of birth and death.

Our condition is really to be outside of form, though we journey through a world of forms which are in a sense illusions and symbols. Our real essence is the state the void, that which is universal and beyond the limitations of this world. Having established a true context, the first step is to introduce our tragic-comic cook to the scene.

My favourite painting in Michel Roux's collection would be 'The Red Shoe' because it is a complex painting and yet appears straightforward. It is also very humorous and has multiple interpretations. I am delighted that Michel Roux relates his own experiences with Michelin Guide reviews and it is a logical one: a collapsed cook is held by others while a larger than life authority figure looks on, detached. The pose of the collapsed cook being held in the compassionate arms of other chefs was inspired by a medieval painting of the deposition of the crucified Christ. The comic quality to the painting despite its origins in religious iconography speaks of humanity's eternal role as actors on the stage of life, sometimes playacting with great humour and other times acting out the gravest of tragedies.

The cooks are often performing or entertaining others. I have been deeply affected by the expression of the human condition as communicated by the theatre arts. In a sense, the Cooks Series are little stage sets in which scenarios are acted out. Often I am quoting indirectly scenes from play: for instance, in the painting 'Nowhere to Go' there is



homage to Samuel Beckett and to the final endings of a Shakespearean tragedy where what remains is complete devastation. The humour of this painting however, lies in the fact that these cooks may merely have made a bad meal and are now out of work. These paintings ask one to observe a spectator within the painting as well as participating as a viewer oneself. Similar to looking into a mirror and seeing an image of oneself, I strive to ask the viewer to consider his role as judge, audience and actor in the events unfolding around him.

The Red Shoe
from the Michel Roux, Jr. private art collection