5-2017

# Dinner

Daniel Reuben Baskin
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

DINNER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Daniel Baskin
Maryland Institute College of Art
Bachelor of Fine Arts in General Fine Arts, 2009

May 2017
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

_____
Bethany Springer, M.F.A.
Thesis Chair

_____
Dylan DeWitt, M.F.A.
Committee Member

_____
Jeannie Hulen, M.F.A.
Committee Member

_____
Michael Maizels, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Mathew McConnell, M.F.A.
Committee Member

**Abstract**

*DINNER* is an interactive exhibition which presents appropriated works of art collected and hung in a clustered salon style, as well as a fully realized recreation based on a 16th century Dutch banquet still-life, which presents guests with meats, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, breads, and wine to share and imbibe. Dining ware is provided for guests at the entrance to the exhibit, as are suggested topics of conversation, which are presented on slips of paper for guests to carry with them throughout their time in the space. Within the collection of wall-mounted works are references to ancient Greek and Roman marble statues, portraits of European elites spanning the 17th and 18th century, and more modern children's cartoons from the 1980s and 90s. The disparate references align into a singular motif by using repetition of color, pose, framing and material within the artworks. This installation explores themes of beauty, class, privilege, history, excess, and humor while providing a space for cultivating deeper conversations on said subjects through the act of sharing, looking, and eating.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend a special thanks to the members of my thesis committee for their immeasurable guidance and support. This gratitude is extended to Bethany Springer, Dylan DeWitt, Jeannie Hulen, Michael Maizels, and Mathew McConnell. A special thanks also goes to my loving family for their enduring support, Susan Weinstein, Bernie Baskin, Yvonne Quek-Baskin, and Meredith Baskin as well as to Ashley Lynn Byers, my partner in all things who continues to give me endless encouragement and inspiration.

**Dedication**

*DINNER* is dedicated to my late father, Jeffrey Lee Baskin, who taught me the importance of community, conversation, history, and humor. You would have loved it, Pops.

**Table of Contents**

**I. The Exhibition**

For the past three years at the University of Arkansas, I have focused on appropriation of works within the Western Canon of Art and creation of installations based on skewed reinterpretations of pre-existing information. The culmination of my tenure at this institution is a thesis solo exhibition, entitled *DINNER*, which presents an amalgamated version of a 16th century Dutch banquet still-life set within a salon style display. This exhibition thesis is written on the basis of breaking down the set themes and dialogues that are at play in this installation, as well as situating this work within the ongoing dialogue of the Contemporary Canon of Art.

*DINNER* was held at FEAST Gallery, an intimate gallery space in a serene, wooded area of Fayetteville Arkansas (Fig.1). The space is on a property with history that reaches back to the mid-1800s. The gallery itself was built in the early 2000s using a large timber frame and wide solid oak doors that recall a simplified, cleanly designed chapel. When opened, the space has three main gallery walls with the fourth wall being a view outward to gnarled trees and old worn stone walls. As guests walk down the dimly lit dirt path that leads to the gallery, they are slowly immersed in the surroundings and space, which seem so very distant and separate from the bustling city of Fayetteville, just a few minutes away. This immersion is intended to help the audience feel more a part of the experience of *DINNER*, to better facilitate participation and to create greater depth of ambiance and tone.

Inside the space, guests are greeted by walls crowded with art objects hung in a traditional salon style (Fig. 2). These objects include mainly portraiture based on historical art references and secondary cartoon characters from the 80s and 90s. Some works are soft sculpture portrait busts made from sewn fabric and house paint. Others are oddly disproportionate graphite drawings, showcasing flat brightly colored backgrounds trapped behind dusty ornate frames. Still other objects are found figurines, cheaply reproduced plaster and ceramic cast busts, and flea-market-found 'art items' which all fit within the same house paint color scheme as the fabric busts and drawings. The amassed objects are distorted and altered in a manner which gives them all a linked aesthetic, which strengthens a relationship already inherent in their pseudo-intellectual art historical irrelevance. This pseudo-intellectualist tone is achieved by making numerous and at times repetitive references to works of esteem such as the Laocoön Group or the Elgin Marbles which have vast research and histories surrounding them, but showing these works

with an irreverence as well as a flatness in tone that denotes an empty history and a disregard for credentials. Rotting fake gilded frames and cheap knockoff reproductions add to emptiness.

In the center of the space sits a simple large wooden farmer's table filled with fruit, bread, cheese, meat, and wine in the style of a 16th century Dutch banquet still life (Fig. 3). The food and wine is accompanied by flickering oil lamps and flowers, as seen in these same works. The large table is filled in an excessive manner with consumable items which guests are encouraged to take and imbibe. As the host and artist, I am seated on a simple wooden chair at the furthest foot of the table, kindly welcoming guests and offering them to join me at the table and take what they'd like from the bounty laid out in the space.

Similarly to past works made at this institution, such as the *On Loan* series (Fig. 4) that I completed in my second year, I use historical art references as a point of departure. These objects have then been installed to work directly with the space they are in. Guests are invited to interact with the works and installation in order to further the connection between the viewer and their art experience. In the *On Loan* series, this interaction manifests as a number of different plush fabric, life-sized statues that could be manipulated in a myriad of ways. Some works had moveable parts for viewers to experiment with, while others had objects meant for taking. *DINNER* is also similar in themes of material and level of interaction, as members of the audience are encouraged to dine within the space (Fig. 5).

The major themes in my work, aligning within the appropriated art historical works, the participatory nature of the installations, and the social practice involved within each project, deal mainly with the problematic hierarchical systems within the Western Art Canon and institutions. These hierarchies I speak of, which will be addressed in further detail later, are based in socioeconomic, racial, gendered, or otherwise biased thinking. Even while many institutions try to actively correct these archaic ways of thinking with progressive exhibitions, programming, and outreach, these issues are still pervasive. The percentage of women artists and artists of color in museums and galleries is aggressively lower than that of white men, even as museums and galleries address this issue with particular themed exhibitions or programming[1]. The largest group of museum visitors is consistently the white college-educated middle class, even though most museums and galleries have a 'free day' and outreach

1 (Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes," 1.)

programs[2]. Even as the art market moves towards an online presence where access is far more readily available, prices soar and many masterpieces stay within the walls of large corporate collections unavailable to the public for years and years. The manner in which art thrives in our culture is biased even as we take measures to prevent these biases. My work tries to address these themes with acts of participation, engagement, and social interaction not in order to fix the issues, but in order to address them in honest and open conversation.

**II. Systems**

For much of my work, I put systems in place in order to better facilitate the art making. The outcome of much of the work is based on these systems. For much of the reproduced works in *DINNER*, I have used a system of finding works noted in books and writings on aesthetics and beauty. These books range from art historical surveys to more in depth theoretical standards to essay collections. Most books are found at local book shops in the Arts section or from recommendations given by other artists and historians. I rely on looking through these books on the topic of beauty in order to find objects to recreate, similarly to the *On Loan* series mentioned above, in which I took works specifically from the Sculpture Hall West Gallery of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. I also use a time limit when making these works in order to calculatingly create less finished and rendered pieces. The outcomes are generally lumpy, somewhat distorted recreations, which instead of crafting with time and care, I am forced to create through a narrowed window that I've set for myself. These rules and systems create a fluidity in the making process that help to cohesively tie together each individual work for the larger installation.

Within these systems, there are smaller formal decisions that are made in order to create a visual and theoretical depth. The fabric used in the works are all of a particular style that relates to wealth in the home as tied to wallpaper design and the Industrial Revolution, in which places of work and home began to separate.[3] These ornamental designs are also placed within a history of Baroque design. This referential material is used to help guide the general tones of class and wealth issues in the work, but is also used to create a sense of depth when painted upon that is visually more complex. Using this fabric

2 (Farrell and Medvedeva, “Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums,” 8-12.)
3 (Lupri, *The Changing Positions of Women in Family and Society: A Cross-National Comparison*, 19-42.)

as a base to create objects becomes a system in which to consistently have these topics and aesthetics addressed in the work, even further than the subject matters already do. The layering of reference points strengthens the overall installation.

The portraits in the space often include the motif of blindness or amputation of limbs. This is based partially in the natural state of the artworks recreated, as many classical sculptures have degraded over time with limbs and other extrusions breaking off. This also is a representation of antiquity and serves as a metaphor for the archaic design of power structures in art and society that are still pervasive. The repeated motif of blindness works on a similar level. While the act of stone carving oftentimes produces a naturally hollow eye, the focus on this detail in the reproductions act both as a physical attribute of the works recreated as well as a metaphor for open interpretation. While the meaning can be taken a number of different ways by the audience, it is meant to represent an ambivalence or blindness to these power structures by greater institutions. Metaphors similar to this are repeated throughout the space on many occasions, including sinking or broken ships, dripping paint, broken or unbalanced frames, and obscured heads and faces. While these metaphors represent particular ideas, they are meant to be open ended for the audience. In this way, they can relate these metaphors to any number of themes or conversations they might be a part of while participating in *DINNER*.

Another formal element used as metaphor in the work is the changing from two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality and vice versa. When recreating a large sculptural work, two-dimensional means such as drawing and painting are used, flattening the figures and oftentimes trapping them within a frame and under glass. When recreating originally flat works such as cartoons, sculptural means are employed in order to give them new status and strength. This is a manner in which to skew the value of these works, which normally attribute drawing and flatness with far less worth than larger, heavier sculptural works.

This manner of changing value systems within the work is repeated in other ways as well, such as timelines of making. The works themselves have a time limit of five hours put in place for the actual making of each work. This limits the fine detailing that can be achieved so that a less finished look is attained in the end, which creates a naturally cohesive formal quality to all the work. It also creates a less valued art object, as much of our value systems are based on how much time is spent in the making

process. This time-based changing of values is also seen in the amount of time spent creating a meal. While the meal served at *DINNER* took two whole days to prepare, it was consumed in around two hours. The works on the wall, either found, collected, or somewhat quickly made, stay in the space for much longer yet the actual value of each individual work is less than the meal, which is consumed quickly and offered for free to visitors. The collection of these works together, however, is a much longer process than the cooking of the meal.

Other formal systems are present in the work as well. The color palette derives from a previous project, entitled *In Sickness and In Health* in which I took skin tones from my father and myself and had paint created from those skin tones in order to showcase the difference between a healthy body and a dying body (Fig. 6). The color palette that was created has been the immediate source for all colors used in my work since, as they all relate to one another well and are intimately tied to my own personal history. Using this particular color palette on each item immediately helps to tie the individual works together into one mass installation, as well as making an easier color system for me to navigate, as I struggle with colorblindness. These systems help to create a structure in order to better work on a larger installation that ties together thematically and visually. While these systems are generally put in place at the beginning of the making process, the larger themes of the work can be more thoughtfully and particularly worked upon as the work is made. In the coming chapters I will address the larger themes that the work addresses.

**III. The Dinner**

While the bulk of my time has been used to create and collect the objects adorning the walls of this space, the main focus of my thesis show is the eating, drinking, and shared conversation. The surrounding works and the manner in which they are placed are tools used to give the audience a particular experience and set a particular mood. Food and wine are a part of the installation but are also presented to be consumed and shared by visitors. Along with plates, glasses, and silverware, slips of paper with multiple topics of conversation are also presented to the audience to take in order to better interact with the space during the exhibition. These aspects work in tandem to form the overall experience

of the audience. There is a long history of performance, installation, and time-based works in art that I am responding to with the DINNER installation.

From a history of Dadaist and Futurist performance, and the performative work coming out of the Bauhaus, a number of groups began to take into account art as action, including the action painters of the Modernist era, the Gutai artists, and more particularly the performance artists of the 1960s. This all coalesced within the Happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s that Alan Kaprow began at Black Mountain College as well as the Fluxus movement that oftentimes dealt with art as a passing moment within a singular time and space, an interaction between audience and surrounding, which then ceased to exist afterwards, other than remnants of documentation. The works of John Cage and George Maciunas highlight this kind of work particularly well.

From this long and interweaving history came a new movement of artists that use interactions of participants as their medium. Relational Aesthetics, coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, is meant to categorize artists and artworks that deal with the viewers experience as the main point of the work. In a similar manner to Happenings, the artists that fall in this category set up a situation in which the audience interacts with. This interaction is to be thought of as the art. Kyle Chayka described, “the goal of most relational aesthetics art is to create a social circumstance; the viewer experience of the constructed social environment becomes the art.”[4] Artists categorized in this movement include Rirkrit Tiravanija, Carsten Höller, and Tino Sehgal.

The history mentioned above is paramount to reaching the place in which I am with my work, but my work certainly does not belong to Fluxus, Performance, or Relational Aesthetics. To use my own phrase, I have been interested in the idea of Dinner Party Aesthetics, which is a collaboration between objects in space, particular installations of these artworks, and audience interaction within these spaces for a particular purpose. The title of 'Dinner Party Aesthetics' is used as a metaphor for the manner in which hosting a successful dinner party relies on creating a proper setting and mood in one's home, giving the proper activities for the attendees to enjoy (or serving the correct meal), and hosting the event with a sense of purpose and ease in order to facilitate strong and meaningful conversation between

4 (Chayka, “WTF is...Relational Aesthetics,” 1.)

guests. In other words, many aspects are relied upon for success in a dinner party, as with a work of art, including surrounding content and context, audience member participation and action, and artist actions in which to lead audience members in said activities. Even in the case of a marble statue in a major museum, the surroundings of the museum and the set path of experience produced by the museum staff act as co-artists in a way, as these decisions and actions all create a whole art viewing experience for each work that is viewed. The relationship between viewer and artwork is not surrounded by an impenetrable perfect crystallized moment. That relationship is encroached upon by personal histories, surrounding works and interpretive content, parameters of the particular space the work is housed in, and other viewers and discussions in the space at that time. As with any dinner party or artwork, the host (i.e. artist) cannot possibly be in control of all the forces working upon this interaction, but certain measures can be taken in order to achieve at least a closer proximity to the initial intention. Visual aesthetics, relational aesthetics, and particular roles and tones may be worked upon and tweaked in the hopes to create a setting and an experience that is singular and moving for each audience member, and one which cultivates conversation. This is done by providing audience members with conversational prompts written on slips of paper (Fig. 7), as well as providing a shared experience in the form of a meal. These things combined with the particular space and amassed works on the wall create a singular experience for the audience that deals with both visual and relational aesthetics.

These conversational prompts consisted of simple questions or phrases written on slips of paper. Some were single words such as, “Dumbness” while others had more pointed questions such as, “What does gold represent? What does it represent now as opposed to 100 years ago?” Some prompts were light-hearted and dealt with favorite 90s cartoons or color schemes, while others were about much deeper topics such as race or class. Some conversations lasted thirty minutes to an hour while others were less than a few sentences. Some involved all of the guests in the space while others were between two people. Throughout the night, it became apparent that most if not all guests used the conversational prompts to further their experience, and while particular works on the wall were discussed less, the themes surrounding the works were discussed at length and long into the night. The prompts acted as a means for guests to continually engage with the work, past the initial act of looking and even past the act of eating.

By using the phrase 'Dinner party aesthetics', I am also referencing a long history of food and art together. This history may seem to correlate most easily with the history of still life paintings, especially since it is this history that is referenced in my thesis show, but the act of using actual food in art and performance is also particularly important for this work, as sharing food with another person is a symbolic act of trust, which allows for more open dialogue to be shared between visitors.

An exhibition and subsequent book of essays, titled *Foodculture*, on the link between food and art was curated and edited by Barbara Fischer in the late 1990s. The exhibition, which took place at the University of Western Ontario, dissected the different manners in which food and art coincided in postmodernism and beyond, bringing together artists such as Elaine Tin Nyo, Jamelie Hassan, and Millie Chen. Obvious ties to food and relational aesthetics can be seen in Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Tom Kah Soup* series, in which he served Thai soup to visitors of the Grand Palais in Paris. Beyond this, many other artists have used the act of consuming and sharing food as an art form including Janine Antoni, Diane Borsato, James Lee Byars, Sophie Calle, Judy Chicago, Pancho Lopez, Antoni Miralda, Carolee Schneeman, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Michael O'Malley. Even before our Postmodern era of freedom, James Whistler held famous Sunday breakfasts, the Futurists had a cookbook, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec published his *The Art of Cuisine*. Another major example of this intersection between food and art is Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant FOOD which he ran for three years in the early 1970s. This was a space established in order to share meals, conversations, and experiences with other diners. Famous artists prepared meals, using the food as medium. The restaurant allowed for free and open exploration into this intersection of food and art, and is thought to have inspired a tremendous amount of artists to further investigate this idea.

The ties between art and food are vast and expansive, and thus the purpose of adding food into art becomes similarly extensive. The main purpose in the case of DINNER is twofold; to help direct a communication and camaraderie between visitors in order to better facilitate the dialogue and conversation aspect of the installation, and to reference a sense of bacchanalia, of freedom and excess that aligns with degrading the seriousness of art. The art historian and curator Jennifer Fisher said, "Eating in the white cube of the gallery space disturbs the modernist paradigm of a purely visualist 'taste'. Just as tasting art messes up a purely scopic consumption, it exceeds conventions of aesthetic

propriety."[5] While the disheveled recreations of art upon the walls of DINNER act as irreverence towards their original predecessors, so too does the consumption of food in their shared holy space, and as the food is in actuality a recreation of a painting, the act of consumption upon that painting leaves a mess of bones and stems behind as an even further disheveled recreation, this time lessened in value by the visitors rather than myself, the artist.

**IV. Appropriation**

Within the history of sculpture, especially the history of Classical sculpture, reproduction has always been a large aspect of the work. Sculptures are passed from generation to generation, from culture to culture with the use of recasting and plastering processes, or reusing a mold to create multiple casts. Johann Winckelmann addresses this history in his book *The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks*.[6] This reproduction has brought about a de-valuing of works, as they become more saturated visually and marketably. The late John Berger discusses this saturation on a conceptual level in his Ways of Seeing series. As the works become less original and more outwardly available, both for purchase and viewing, they lose their individuality. They lose an authority that they once held as the only one of their kind in the world. Buying a full size replica of The Pieta for your personal garden is completely possible these days, which lessens its personal history, just as someone's dead father's pocket watch versus the same pocket watch bought at a store inherently is given different sentimental attachment, and thus value.

This act of reproduction subverts inherent power structures in works of art, while also showing reverence to the original. This can be devastating to the original, even if it is meant as humble compliment. The history of the porcelain figurine illustrates this idea quite well.[7] Initially, these portrait figurines showed portraits of kings and queens (or wealthy members of the Medici family), and was made at a smaller cheaper scale than massive marble pieces in order for family members to show their pride in their royal bloodline. As secondary and tertiary family members began to want similar portraiture for their home, the figurines became easier to find, cheaper to make, and far less valuable. As constituents of the

5 (Fisher, *FoodCulture*, 29.)
6 (Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks,* 361-74.)
7 (Jones, *Shapely Bodies: The Image of Porcelain in Eighteenth Century France,* 1-35.)

royal family began to place these figurines in their home, as homage or false bragging rights or simply to stay fashionable, this value lessened even further. Soon other characters not of the royal court began to be made in the fashionable objects. Other cultures began to collect these figurines and new, less precise manufacturers began to sell the figurines. Some were replicated from other artisans and thus lessened in value. Some companies made the same figurine thousands of times over, some were more rare. The labor of making these figurines switched from country to country, depending heavily on colonization and trade agreements, lessening the value even further. From elite collections to middle class homes to lower class homes, the tradition of housing these figures passed from one class to another, lessening in power and elitism at every step. In this way, the ceramic figurine showcasing vague Elizabethan characters became easily found for less than $2.00 in thrift stores and flea markets in the U.S. and has almost come to be obsolete, other than using them with an ironic tone.

This irony and recycling of materials, appropriation, is a Postmodern strategy of making. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write that “In Postmodernism, the sense that everything has been done before gives way to relentless quoting and remakes, a context in which the only way to get noticed is to be ironic, to quote-not only words but also clothing and appearance styles.”[8] Linda Hutcheon also writes about this in her essay, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern” in which she discusses the long history of irony and nostalgia, linked by a, “secret hermeneutic affinity” as well as both sharing, “affect and agency—or, emotion and politics”. She goes on to say, “Our contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic; some parts of it--postmodern parts--are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony.”[9] This link of nostalgia and irony in postmodernism has direct lineage to appropriation in modern and contemporary art.

The history of taking and recontextualization of imagery, which perhaps started as singularly nostalgic is now so heavily connected to irony in its use within art, that even innocent non-ironic remakes of historical works can only read as ironic or completely recontextualized. This skewing of meaning that happens defines it not as remaking, but of appropriation, as the work conceptually now belongs to the contemporary maker. We see this in the work of Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Elaine

8 (Cartwright and Sturken, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture,* 321.)
9 (Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”, 22-34.)

Sturtevant and countless others. My work continues in this tradition by recreating the works of art, but manipulating these objects and works formally and conceptually in order to create a new catalogue of meaning for them. I use their nostalgic quality within the Postmodernist irony in order to further break down their value and power.

My use of irony and re-contextualization is mainly a manner in which to shift and open conversational aspects of the work to discuss issues such as class, power dynamics, and interpretation. It is not just a manner in which to make fun of art or the history of art. Similarly to Lichtenstein's use of cartoon characters was not simply a way to make fun of said characters. It was a manner in which to engage a contemporary audience while using a familiar language.

**V. Ancient History**

This familiar visual language largely takes from classical Greek and Roman works of antiquity, such as the Laocoön Group, which has long been a prominently discussed and debated work throughout history, as well as being used as a base model for discussing beauty.[10] Appropriating works such as this for my installation in particular gives me a base of ideas to work within. These Classical works are also continually discussed in Western Art History books as the epitome of idealism, beauty, and refinement. A manner in which I choose some of the works to replicate is to sift through art and theory books that deal with beauty and aesthetics and to choose works that are noted or mentioned by the authors. In this way, I point out things that I've been told are beautiful, rather than choosing beauty for myself. To use these particular books on beauty rather than books about African or Asian Art history is to point towards what I have been taught in American art schools. Almost my entire academic career has been dedicated to art, even in attending an art magnet middle and high school. The art historical information I received throughout my education has been based very particularly in this 'Western' Canon rather than others. It is an education that was written and dictated by wealthy, well-educated white men, which speaks to the class, race, and gender divides that continue to be a significant problem, especially in the contemporary political climate. In his essay *"Just Like Us": Cultural Constructions of Sexuality and Race in Roman Art*,

10 See Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.*

John R. Clarke discusses the problematic issues that are within this history of Roman study, and questions the links to modern and contemporary art practice in America to ideals that are presented in this history.

Molefi Kete Asante discusses further issue with this idea in that the massive and extensive Greek culture was anything but 'Western' in the sense that we know it. Greek civilization stretched from Asia to the Middle East and Africa, trading and learning techniques and aesthetic approaches from a vast amount of cultures. Asanti discusses this overarching falsehood of Westernization in his essay, “De-Westernizing Communication: Strategies for Neutralizing Cultural Myths”. Homi Bhabha also discusses these ideas of Globalization, fighting against ideas of 'The Other' and more in his book, *The Location of Culture*. These ideas are pervasive in contemporary art and artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson, and even in works by artist Pamela Rosenkranz, who discusses what it means to be and feel human in her work. Standards of beauty and aesthetics are biasedly based in race, culture, and gender; topics which are important to discuss in a more open and direct manner with the distinct and uncomfortable rise of nationalism and a continued rise in race, gender, and religious inequality that this global political moment has given fuel to.

Using these broken, old things found in art, making them dumbed down, silly, and restrained by frame and line, usurps the power of these ideas discussed above; the wealthy white masculine history that is intimately wrapped within 'Classical Western' works of art. The cheap, falsely gilded frames which are covered in dust and chipped, along with the cheap knockoff recreations used on the walls of the DINNER installation help to solidify the antiquity and falseness of many perceived histories inherent in my art education. I also place this Greek and Roman work as a generalized base of my art education next to another aspect of my childrearing and less formal art education: cartoons. Placing cartoons in the same context as priceless, heavy, marble sculptures of antiquity lessens the value of the Classical works and heightens the value of the cartoon work, furthering the debasement of the ancient history and the values that it evokes.

**VI. New Irrelevance and Irreverence**

The monetary and intellectual value of Classical Greek and Roman sculpture is obviously quite high. It is an unquestioned value that is based in historical importance, material, talent, rarity, and many other things. Cartoons are far lower in value as they are newer, extremely commonplace, fairly reproducible, and have given rise to far less theory and postulations on life and the world. To place these two distinct categories next to one another draws class lines between them immediately. They both operate in the same space and within the same dimensions and color schemes in the *DINNER* installation (figure 8-10), thus shifting values between high and low art. Their relationship begins to grow closer, as the stories of gods and their misgivings or eccentricities align with the goofy trials and tribulations of cartoon characters who can do anything in their fantastical worlds. Originally, many Greek and Roman marble sculptures were gaudily and brightly painted, which recalls a modern cartoon sensibility.[11] The skewing of the classical figures and the changing in anatomical scale and proportion aligns with a similar distortion in cartoon figures. This juxtaposition points out class lines and value systems for the audience to work through.

Another connection between the two categories is their antiquity and irrelevance. The cartoon characters that I use in my work are ones from my own childhood, some that are completely irrelevant to popular culture today and thus seem far removed from now, discarded and antiquated. This antiquity obviously relates to the dusty marble forms nearby, although there is a vast shift between the rates at which that antiquity is acquired. The irrelevance is also a connection, in that most contemporary artists are not making marble portraiture of gods. While there is certainly reference to Classical sculpture now and these works have a large place in the building blocks to get to where we are now in art, they are no longer popular modes of making, similarly to 1990s cartoon characters being strongly influential to cartoons and even contemporary art of today, but less visible and often completely forgotten. There is a uselessness and a sad distance that the two types of portraiture share. Reference of these subjects is beginning to become more popular in contemporary art, now with the unabashed irony and nostalgia of

11 See Colpitt, *Chromaform: Color in Sculpture*, 1999.

Post-postmodernism. Contemporary artists such as Katherine Bernhardt, Anna Valdez, and Sarah Peters all work within a similar conversation.

By using these references and distorting them, these artists along with myself are using humor in a myriad of ways to discuss different topics. This humor is found in the distortion itself. Simon Critchley writes, “Humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke,”[12] or in this case, the artwork. This relates to the incongruity theory of Francis Hucheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter.*[13] By taking works that already exist and are known to be a particular way and showcasing them in a completely different way, and a particularly less refined way, we create the humor in the work. This humor is a manner in which viewers can metaphorically enter the works more readily, as audiences are comforted and appeased by a humorous tone rather than a derogatory one. Rather than sounding too authoritative and reprimanding, works with humor welcome conversation and thoughtfulness to heavy subjects that would otherwise be intimidating for a viewer to reflect upon. Henri Bergson states, “There is nothing disarms us like laughter.”[14]

As the physical attributes of the characters are skewed in such a way to suggest a sense of bodily vulgarity, we will define this work as physically humorous. This physical, bodily humor in the work relates very directly to the grotesque, which Mikhail Bakhtin has written upon in *Rabelais and His World.* Bakhtin discusses this in context of the Carnivalesque which relates back to particular class divisions (which were discussed earlier in relation to the history of Classical sculpture), community (which was also discussed earlier in the act of eating and sharing food) and excess, which is another major theme in the *DINNER* installation. This excess is seen both in the amount of works placed upon the walls in a salon-style hang, but also in the amount of food and drink presented in the recreated Dutch still life placed in the center of the installation.

This excess can be seen in Dutch still life painters such as Willem Kalf and Pieter Claesz but the grotesque enters into Dutch painting when the still lives are accompanied by human subjects, reveling in bacchanalia. Jan Steen paintings are a perfect example of this. As the *DINNER* installation invites visitors

12 (Critchley, *On Humour*, 1.)
13 (Hucheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter,* 49-51.)
14 (Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, 67.)

to dine on the recreated still life, they become the subjects and thus the installation shifts from being a recreation of a Dutch Banquet still life by Claesz to a Bacchanalian scene painting by Steen.

When looking at Dutch Bacchanalia scenes by artists such as Steen, Frans Hals, or Pieter Aertsen, there is a distinct visual connection to the work of Zap comic artists S. Clay Wilson and Gilbert Shelton. These grotesque, overtly sexual, and excessive comics were an immediate predecessor to the 90s cartoons referenced in *DINNER*. John Kricfalusi, creator of the popular Ren and Stimpy Show, is perhaps the easiest to correlate to these works, but other cartoons of the era such as Cow and Chicken, Spongebob Squarepants, and Animaniacs also show an obvious visual connection. In fact, this connection to the grotesque and the carnivalesque can be seen in most animated cartoons, from the beginning of Loony Tunes, even to the connected history of comics and the French caricaturists such as Honoré Daumier and George Cruikshank.[15] These interweaving histories placed inside of the DINNER installation grow a tone of excessiveness in the work and within the space.

**VII. Creating a Space**

As the works and references within the DINNER space grow and overlap, a mood begins to form. When first entering an antique store, one can usually get a general sense of the owner's taste. For instance, some antique stores are based mainly in tacky couches and old workout supplies. Other antique stores are filled with old mahogany things and wicker baskets. Still others are full of chandeliers and old farming equipment. They are rooms filled with countless objects of all kinds but they give a distinct mood upon first read, as the objects are viewed in accumulation. So too does the space of *DINNER* read. With the particular color palette, objects of art history, dusty frames, and flickering light from oil lamps illuminating a baroque feast, viewers immediately are given an intimate, falsely antiqued setting. As with everything, each individual person will react and treat this mood that is given differently. Some might find it relaxing and welcoming while others might find it unsettling and off-putting. Either way, the tone is consistent.

15 This history can be found in: Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, 1875.

This creation of tone and story is important in curation and creating a successful installation. A master of the new curatorial practice, Hans Ulrich Obrist, discusses the exhibition as, “a mass medium and a ritual. The curator sets it up so that it becomes an extraordinary experience and not just illustrations or spatialised books.”[16] In this statement, we see that curating is more than just selecting, it's an act of selection and placement and care based on creating particular experience with the use of historical context, manipulation of space, and many other aspects. It's not simply putting things in a room together or making formal decisions. It is creating an experience through selection.

Part of my art practice includes the act of curation. While my thesis show requires me to select artworks to replicate, food to serve, and other choices to be made based on a final experience of participants, there are other manners in which curation inundates my larger art practice. I co-direct and curate a gallery space adjacent to my place of living. This space, entitled FEAST, is a place for visitors to both view and participate in artistic installations. It is not only a box for viewing art, but a space to interact with works that are placed in a distinct manner, that are chosen with a specific theme in mind, and served with sound, food, and conversation that is all based around larger ideas that I, as a curator, have directed. Other than being held within its walls, FEAST is not officially part of my thesis, but it does inform my art habits tremendously. As a curator of this space, I am not only concerned with the works on the wall. I am concerned with aspects that surround and direct the viewers and even in some instances the viewers themselves.

My curatorial work is very much linked to my studio practice. In both curatorial and studio work, one informs the other. In a manner similar to the art practice of Fred Wilson, I use works that already exist in the world. This is true of both my curatorial work and my own work, the only difference in my own work being that I take the existing works and remake them, change them into my own aesthetic before placing them in a context with other works. In both practices, I use the placement of each disparate object in order to relate to all other works in the space. This relation is done fluidly, as if structuring a painting. By using elements and principles of design to start the process of hanging or placing the works, I can begin to activate the space. I begin by hanging larger works such as the stuffed fabric busts, blocking out major

16 (Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 22-36.)

sections, then fill in those spaces with smaller found objects and drawings, all while balancing the colors and forms on all sides. I also use the gaze of each subject and tilting of frames and objects to delineate movement throughout the space. By using the objects as strokes, and the walls and floors as planes (or canvas), I begin to create balance or rhythm or movement within the space. I then build on this structure as I go. I don't build a space with meaning in mind, but rather with formalism in mind. The meaning comes from the natural relationship of these things in a space. I have chosen works that relate to each other already and the manner in which they hang functions as added association after they are up. Fred Wilson has discussed his interest in making beauty by arrangement as well. He has described beauty as the "ultimate visual experience." but has also stated that "[beauty] can hide meaning".[17] That is to say that sometimes the relationships of these works are powerful in their interaction solely on an aesthetic basis. It becomes difficult for the viewer to manifest the true meaning of their juxtaposition, making viewers unsure of the artist's intention. This hopefully creates a door in which a viewer can enter into the work, creating their own assumptions of what the works mean together.

By straddling the lines of curator and artist, I become Artist-as-curator as described by Joseph Doubtfire and Giulia Ranchetti: "Typically involved in the process of creating, the artist-curator uses space, objects and thus the exhibition as medium with its own agency, curating in line with his/her ideas, interests and most probably with his/her own visual or artistic practice in mind...When exhibition becomes medium, employed as a material through which to think, and through which to speak, it is often discussed as something that overshadows the artworks it encompasses. The curator, or in this case the artist-curator, in the process of bringing works together, creates new narrative through and with existing narratives, present within the work composed by the work's maker."[18] Doubtfire and Ranchetti suggest that the space as a whole is more dominant than the individual works. While I care for each individual work in both my personal practice and my curatorial practice, the work is strongest when viewed in relation to one another, set in a particular space in a particular way in order to give the audience a more whole experience, as Obrist discussed.

17 (Wilson, "Art21 Exclusive," 2014)
18 (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, "Curator as Artist as Curator," 1-3.)

**VIII. Conclusion**

This DINNER installation acts as an overview of many of my interests in art, which have grown throughout my life. My father was a librarian. I grew up surrounded by books and the act of reading. But the idea of a library is much more than just reading. It is where community happens. It is a place of learning, of performance, of social engagement. It is a public place where everyone is welcome and encouraged. It's a place to find information, help, conversation, and perspective. These are things that have permeated my life and I strive for them. Not only was my father a librarian, on the weekends he was a book binder and an antiquarian book dealer. My world was not only surrounded by community and learning, it was surrounded by craft and history. The importance of these three things; community, craft, and history were illustrated to me for my whole life.

In my thesis show, I strive for these things. I surround the viewer with craft and history, art objects made from reproducing other artworks that have been addressed in the Western Art Historical Canon. These objects give way to further investigation by the audience. I provide a place for community; by including comfort in the form of refreshments and mood, I invite the viewer to sit, look, decide their own views, and share with others around the banquet table. I am less concerned with the individual art objects than I am with creating a space to cultivate conversation, introspection, and comfortable inclusion.

While these aspects of the work are based within the context of modernist and postmodernist works of the past, they are also in line with the conversations happening today. The ease at which we can interact with history and information is maximized by the internet. This also changes the manner in which we act as community, as our interactions are no longer fully based in face-to-face interactions, but rather in easily manipulated and falsified pseudo-spaces. Jennifer Chan discusses this in her essay *Notes on Post-Internet.* We are also in a very contentious moment of our history in which discussion with others that do not share our beliefs becomes a difficult and murky situation. Political sides are growing further apart in a post-Trump era and the ideas of community and conversation become something more and more important to understand. It is also an era of falsified facts, news, and looking towards the past for credibility (or non-credibility). By using ancient works to bring up issues of today, and by setting up comfortable spaces with which to interact with others, a more poignant and respectful conversation can occur wherein each party is open to the other's ideas, concerns, and opinions. My work is contemporary

because I am contemporary. I learn and research and make within a post-internet, post-Trump model. I find sources swiftly through these means and I take them with leisure as my own in a similar fashion.

With *DINNER*, I will bring together a culmination of ideas that I've dealt with throughout my tenure at this institution including historicity, the Western Canon, manipulation of material, installation and manipulation of space, and viewer interaction. I hope that with this solo exhibition, my creative endeavors are clear and thorough and that my voice is particular and resonant within the works. In the future, I will continue in a similar manner and use of materials, space, and interaction in order to further my artistic pursuits.

**IX. Works Cited**


Asante, Molefi. “De-Westernizing Communication: Strategies for Neutralizing Cultural Myths.” in *De-Westernizing Communication Research: Altering Questions and Changing Frameworks.* Edited by Georgette Wang. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984

Barnes, Donna. *Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life.* New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing.* London: BBC, 1972

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* New York, NY: Dover Publications,1998

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture.* New York, NY: Routledge, 1994

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998

Cartwright, Lisa and Marita Sturken. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009

Chan, Jennifer. “Notes on Post-Internet.” from *You Are Here: Art After the Internet.* edited by Omar Kholeif. Manchester, England: Cornerhouse Publications, 2013

Chayka, Kyle. “WTF is...Relational Aesthetics.” *Hyperallergic* February 8, 2011

Clarke, John R. “'Just Like Us': Cultural Construction of Sexuality and Race in Roman Art.” *Art Bulletin.* Vol. 78 Issue 4, December 1996

Colpitt, Frances, *Chromaform: Color in Sculpture.* San Antonio: University of Texas at San Antonio Art Gallery, 1999

Critchley, Simon. *On Humour.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2002

Doubtfire, Joseph and Giulia Ranchetti. “Curator as Artist as Curator.” from *Curating the Contemporary* April 30, 2015: https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2015/04/30/curator-as-artist-as-curator/

Farrell, Betty and Maria Medvedeva. *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums.* Washington, DC: The AAM Press, 2010

Fischer, Barbara. *FoodCulture: Tasting Identites and Geographies in Art.* Toronto, Canada: YYZ Books, 1999

Fisher, Jennifer. “Performing Taste.” *FoodCulture: Tasting Identites and Geographies in Art*. Toronto, Canada: YYZ Books, 1999

Hutcheon, Linda. “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.” Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998

Hutcheson, Francis *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon the Fable of the Bees.* Glasgow: R. Urie, 1750

Janson, H.W. *History of Art.* New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1962

Jones, Christine A. *Shapely Bodies: The Image of Porcelain in Eighteenth Century France.* Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2015

Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1962

Lessing, Gotthold, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984 (Originally published 1766)

Lupri, Eugen. *The Changing Positions of Women in Family and Society: A Cross-National Comparison.* Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1983

Obrist, Hans Ulrich. *Ways of Curating.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014
Pierre, Jose. *Futurism and Dadaism: History of Art*. London: Heron Books, 1969

Reilly, Maura. “Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes.” from *ArtNews.* May, 26 2015

Trimingham, Melissa. *The Theatre of the Bauhaus: The Modern and Postmodern Stage of Oskar Schlemmer.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2011

Winckelmann, John. *The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks.* Trans. G. Henry Lodge. London: John Chapman, 1923

Wilson, Fred. *Art21 Exclusive*, Episode #197 Feb. 7, 2014:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEPTJKLSpRo

Wright, Thomas. *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art.* London: Savill, Edwards, and Co. 1875

**X.Appendix**

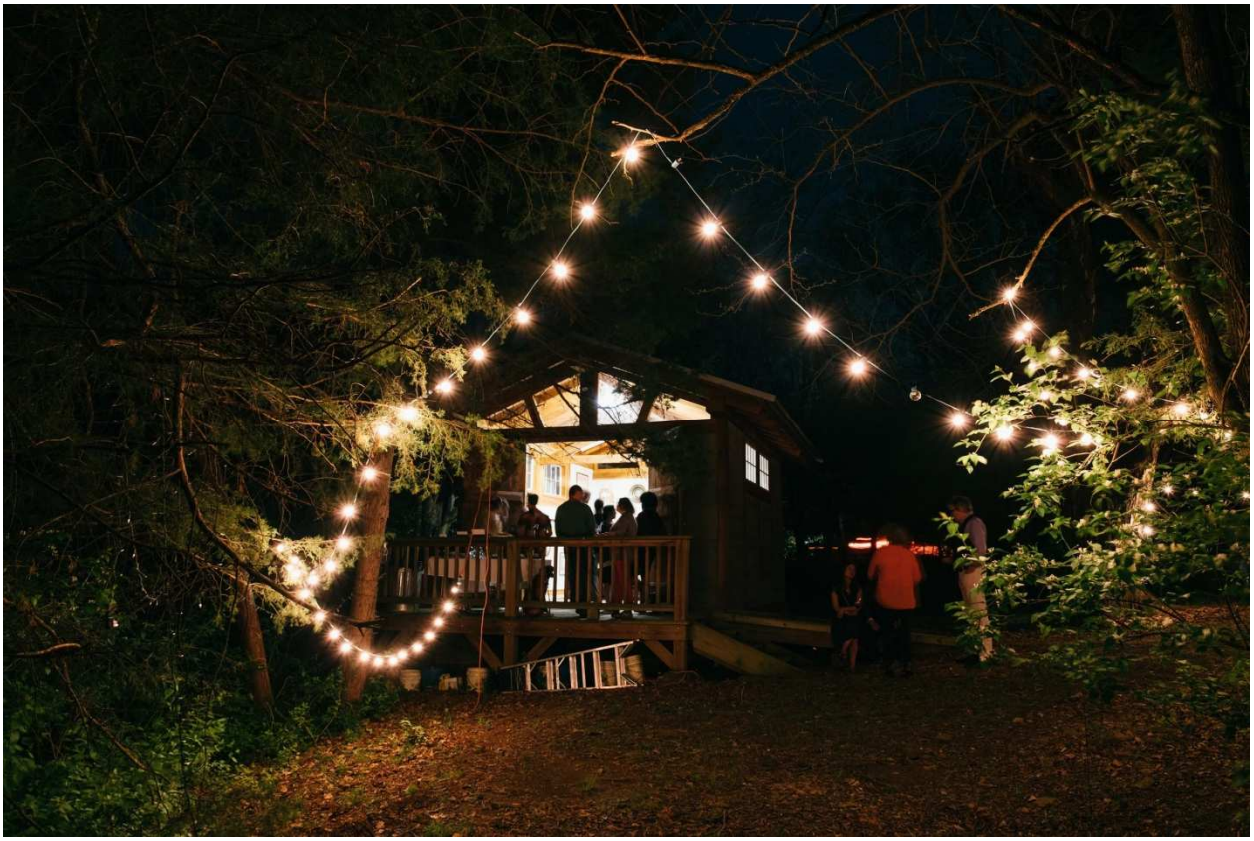

Figure 1. FEAST Gallery. Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

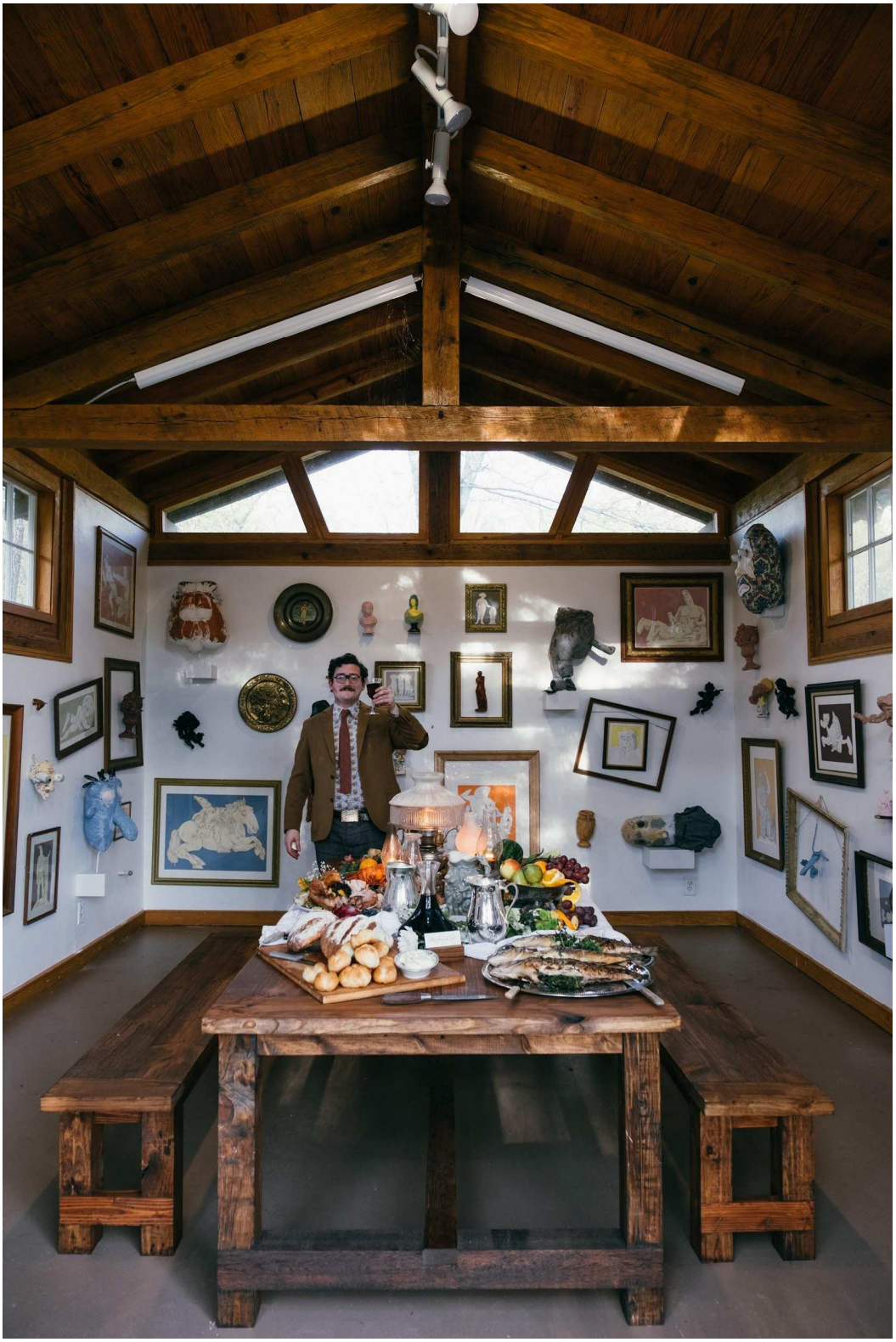

Figure 2. Installation view of *DINNER*. Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

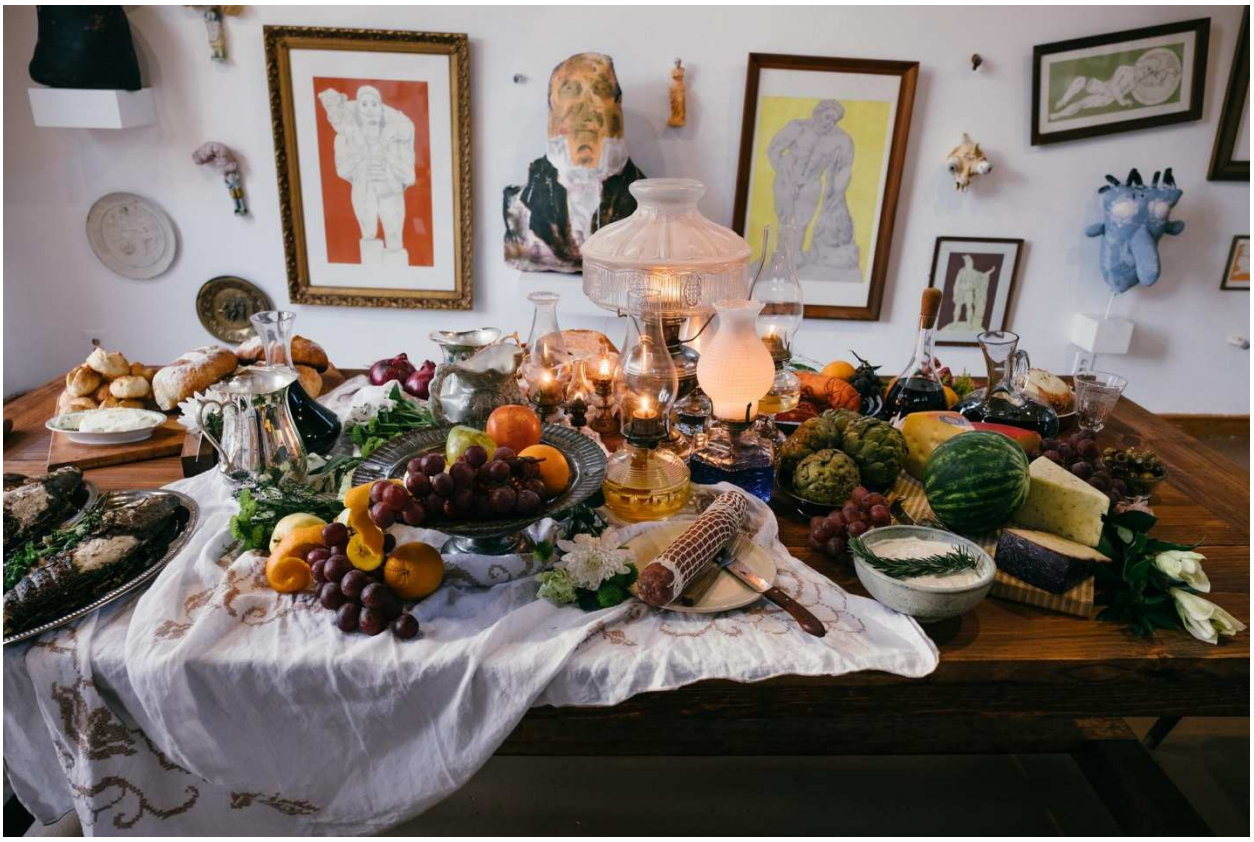

Figure 3. Installation view of *DINNER*. Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

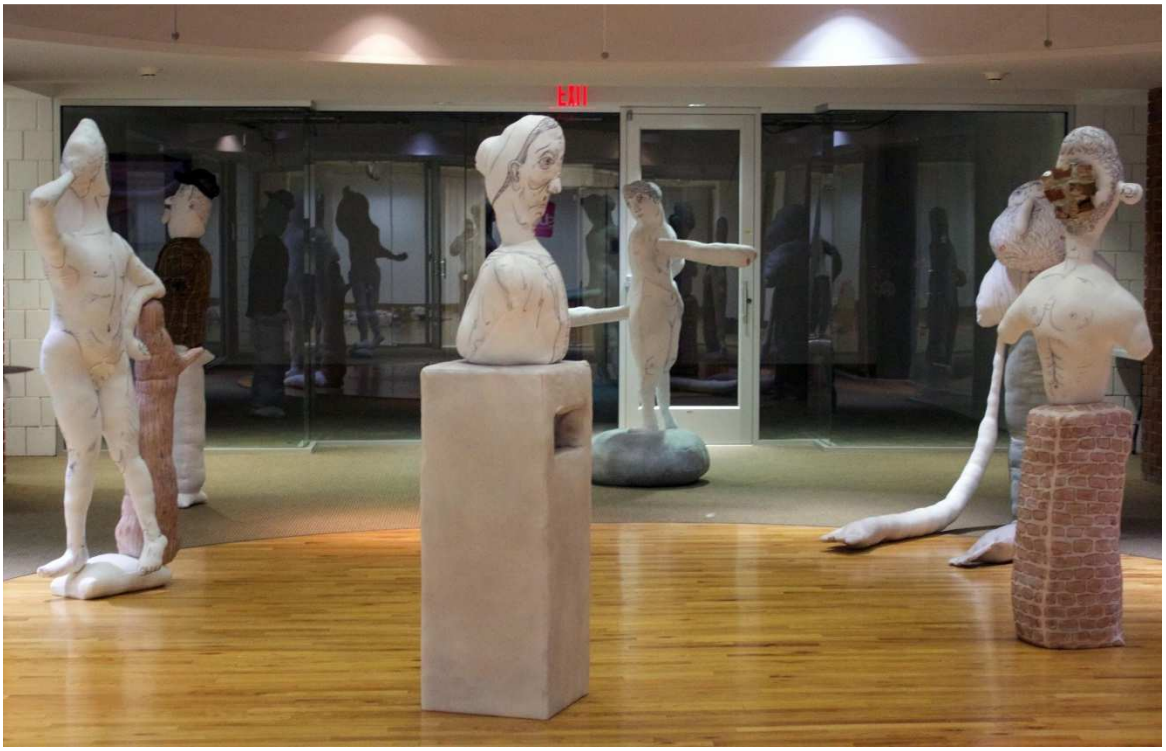


Figure 4. Installation view of *On Loan*. Image courtesy of the artist.

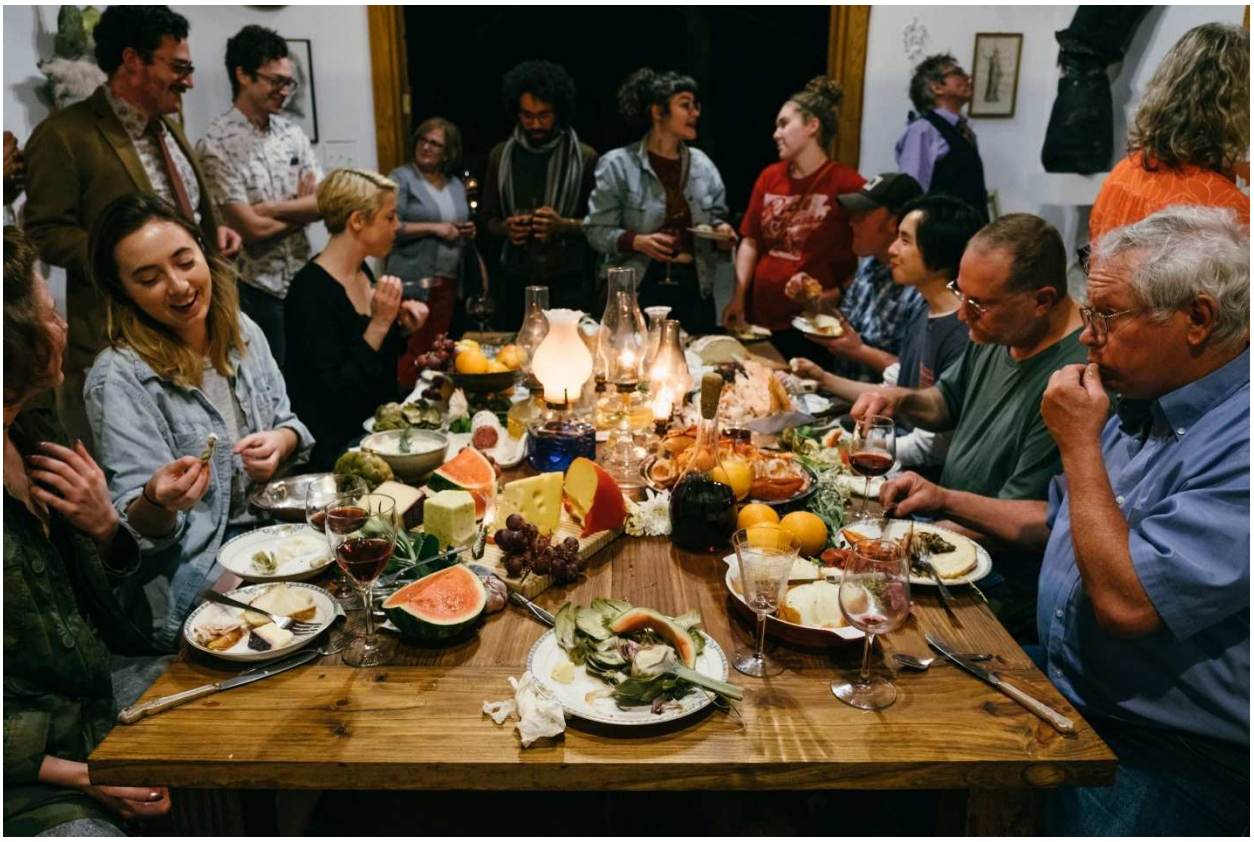

Figure 5. Installation view of *DINNER*. Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

Figure 6. Installation view of *In Sickness and In Health.* Image courtesy of the artist.

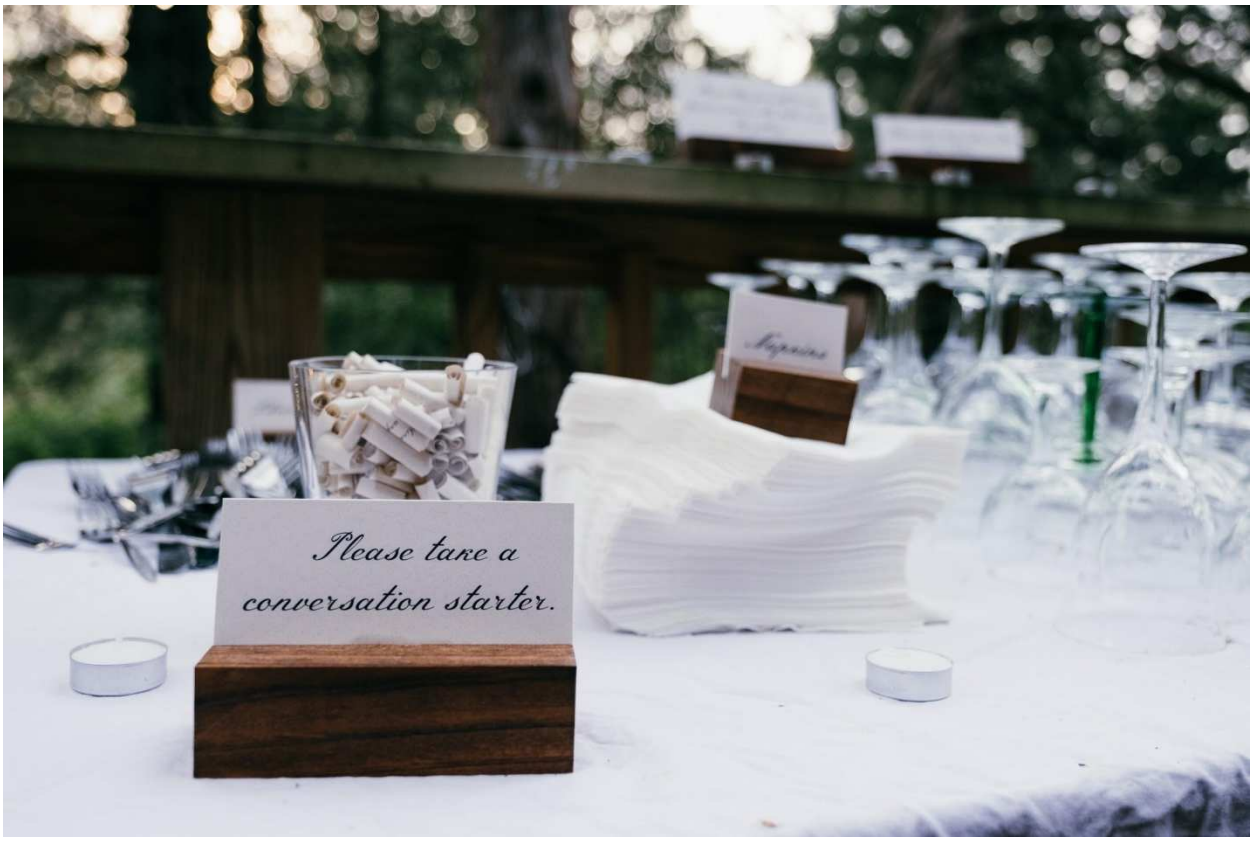

Figure 7. Installation view of *DINNER.* Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

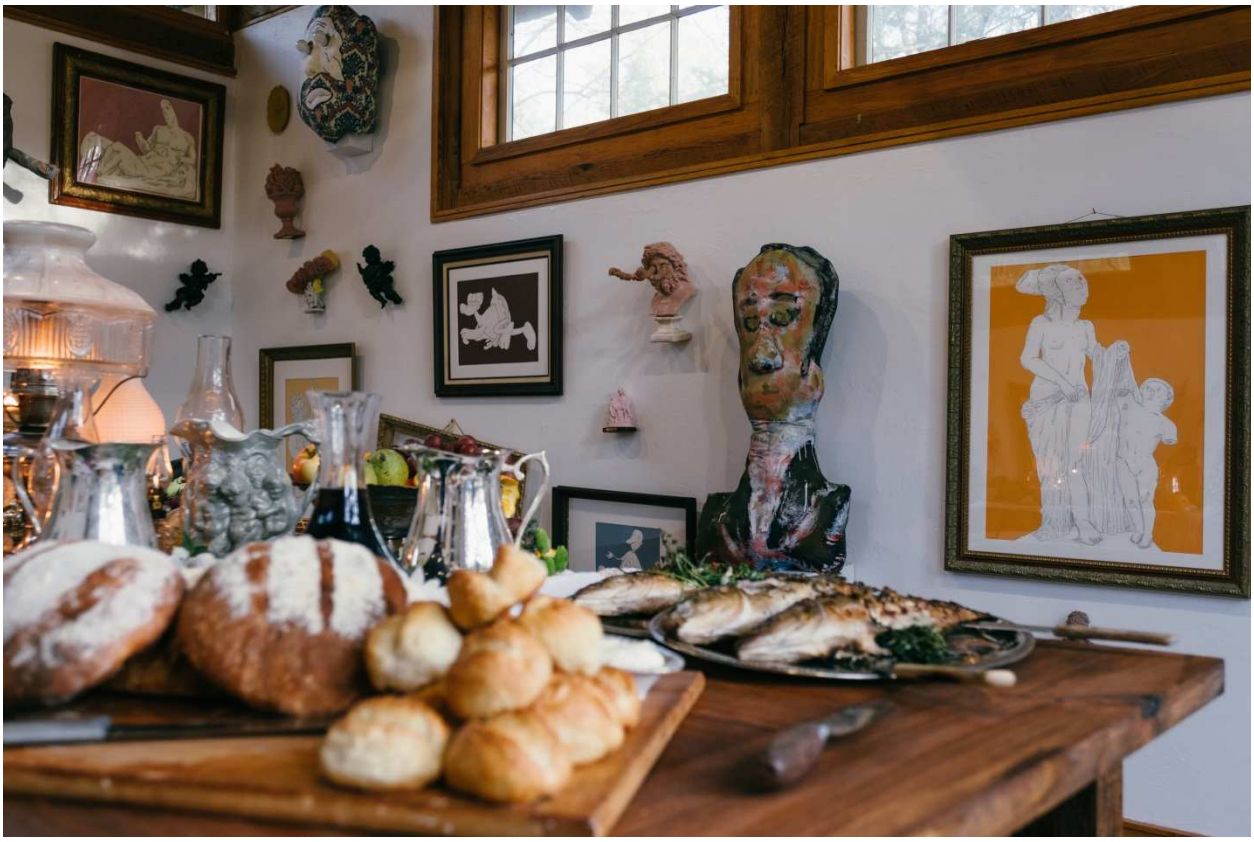

Figure 8. Installation view of *DINNER.* Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

Figure 9. Installation view of *DINNER.* Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.

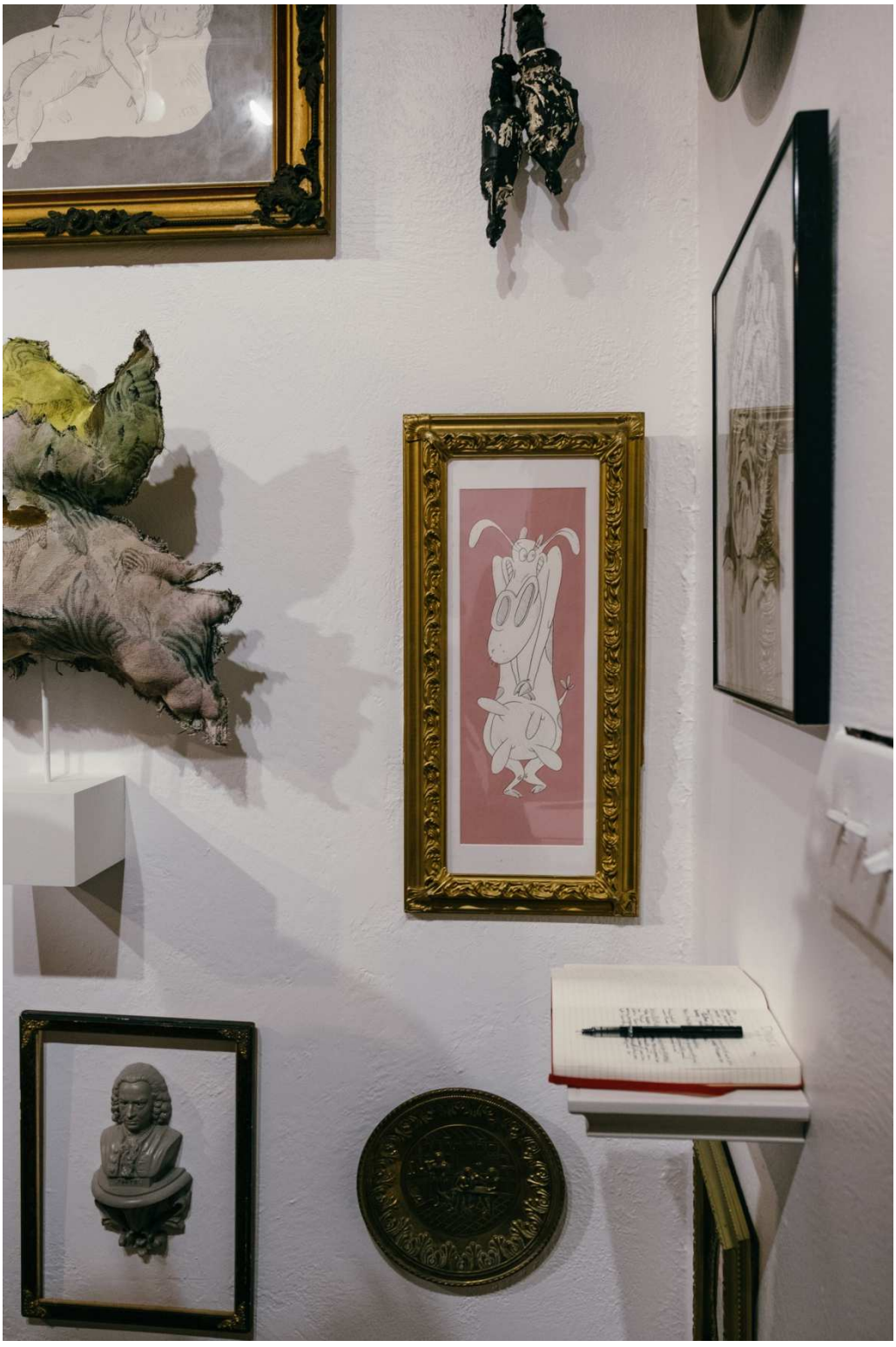

Figure 10. Installation view of *DINNER*. Image courtesy of Esther Nooner.