



THE HILL END TABLE

FOOD FIRE ART

Lino Alvarez with Kim Deacon
Brandl & Schlesinger
2017 hardback, 310 pages
illustrated ISBN 9780994429742

Review by Gay Bilson

In a marvellous essay from 1973, Octavio Paz wrote about the relationship between creativity and craft. This essay is included in a collection of his writings, *Convergences*, published by Bloomsbury in 1987.

The essay is entitled *Seeing and Using: Art and Craftsmanship*, and Paz (Mexican himself) quotes the Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who wrote in the 17th century: 'A woman's hand is white and beautiful because it is a thing of flesh and bone, not ivory or silver; I esteem it not because it gleams but because it grasps.'

Paz argues that our modern perception of art has been 'transformed into an intellectual operation' where seeing, and understanding the signs that emanate from the work, are an end in themselves. Art has become something that ultimately has been separated from the senses. And the beauty of industrial design, Paz writes, 'is of a conceptual order; if it expresses anything at all, it is the accuracy of a formula.' 'The handmade object does not charm us simply

because of its usefulness. It lives in complicity with our senses. ... The pleasure that works of craftsmanship give us has its source in a double transgression: against the cult of utility and against the religion of art.'

The hand of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz that is beautiful because it grasps is central to Paz's argument in favour of the handmade. And I would suggest that this argument also applies to cookery, and that what is truly missing in industrial food (as in industrial design) is not only flavour, freshness or nutritional value, but the fact that it has lost all sense of the human.

The central line from Paz's essay for me is: 'In its perpetual movement back and forth between beauty and utility, pleasure and service, the work of craftsmanship teaches us lessons in sociability.'

We who appreciate food, handle it and take care to prepare it to its fullest potential. So too the potter might transform

Ovenware (photo Peter Adams)



raw materials into something necessary for the table, with all his skills, and with an eye for form. The aesthetic matters in both pottery and cookery but is, in the best possible sense, the inevitable outcome of where things began. The aesthetic of a useful bowl or plate, decorative or not, is grounded in what use that bowl or plate is to be put to. The receptacle has already been handled. It is, in Paz's terms, already sociable.

Reading and looking through *The Hill End Table* precipitated yet another re-reading of Paz because what Paz posits in *Seeing and Using* is what the Hill End authors practise. Is it accidental that both Paz (a Nobel prize winner) and Alvarez are Mexican?!

What a lovely book it is. Gratitude should not only go to Lino Alvarez and Kim Deacon, but to their publishers, Brandl & Schlesinger, and to the artists whose works are reproduced. Everything about the book acts as an antidote to the ego-driven cookbooks that flood bookshops.

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Because, yes, it is a cookbook (half of the book is devoted to recipes and photographs of food presented on Alvarez' ceramics; the other half to the history of their local enterprise and the circles of friendships that grew), despite first appearances and my misunderstanding that it would be a book about the pottery.

The recipes are good, the finished dishes look good, and there are none of the painstakingly artful garnishes that kill any splendour that might translate from the pages of chef-driven food. As the great crime writer, Michael Dibdin, wrote about the food in a Calabrian restaurant in his clever novel, *End Games*: 'The food they served not only tasted good, it was in good taste.'



Lino Alvarez and Kim Deacon
Photo Peter Solness

It wasn't only to Paz that I turned because of being made to think by *The Hill End Table* (Levi-Strauss's famous dictum is that food is both good to eat and good to think). Richard Sennett, a sociologist and author of many books, published *The Craftsman* in 2008. Everything that Sennett addresses in *The Craftsman* has relevance to the ethos of *The Hill End Table*. Food, fire and art are all addressed in one way or another. Sennett writes that 'Gastronomy is a narrative, with a beginning (raw ingredients), a middle (the combination and cooking), and an end (eating)', and you could transpose this narrative to pottery: earth to hands to kiln.

I haven't said a lot about *The Hill End Table*. I simply applaud its publication. The artworks that are so beautifully reproduced are marvellous examples from some of Australia's best artists. The book abounds in a sense of generosity, which is to say that it is not a book centred on self-advertisement.

Octavio Paz should have the last word, and although he is referring to useful objects rather than food, he does also write about food in *Convergences*, and anyway, there is a profound and natural link between a clay vessel and the food we take from the earth: 'The work of craftsmanship is the pulse of human time. It is a useful object and also a handsome one; an object that endures through time yet meets its end and resigns itself to so doing; an object that is not unique like the work of art, but replaceable by another object similar yet not identical. Craftwork teaches us to die, and by so doing teaches us to live.'

Gay Bilson



Left: *Winter Still Life 2015*, oil on canvas
Rosemary Valadon