

## Digital File 'Cockaigne Text Portfolio.doc'

### Cockaigne

Gayle Chong Kwan

Text by Fiona Candlin

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In the Land of Cockaigne all work is forbidden and the rivers run with milk, honey and wine. Road chickens drop from the air onto empty plates, cooked geese declare themselves all hot all hot and the pigs have knives strapped to their bellies so that anyone can take a slice of pork. The fences are made of sausages, the roofs are covered with pasties and the hills are dumplings.

Gayle Chong Kwan's new series of twelve photographs are the latest contribution to the Cockaigne myth. Each photograph depicts a utopian or mythical landscape constructed entirely out of a single foodstuff. In Eboracoe the hills are potatoes, in Briggadon they are made of oats. Viewed as a whole, each photograph seems part of the same imaginative space, as if each image is simply a different aspect of one fantastical panorama. This sense of coherence is reinforced through the use of back-projected skies which create a realistic and dramatic backdrop to each scene. Despite the ham and cheese, the skies and composition as a whole place the series firmly within the genre of landscape.

Yet, simultaneously, most of these beautiful images are constructed from foodstuffs which are verging on the repellent. The bird of *Alex Abardo* is beginning to sweat, the cheese in *Recor* looks plastic and slimy, the dried meat in *Ababel Infectious*. The personal and global politics of food has been a major focus of Chong Kwan's work to date and here one is reminded of butter-mountain, sheep factory farmed products and BSE. Given the references to tourism and paradise, these images also carry connotations of western excess at the expense of the global south.

Themes of inequality, hunger and excess have always featured in the Cockaigne myth. In the Dutch medieval poem it was a peasant's fantasy of food and justice, in England an anti-clerical satire. The seventeenth century Swedish emigration ballad *The American Song* still sings of chickens flying onto the table and money growing wild, while simultaneously in America they dreamt of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* where little streams of alcohol come trickling down the rocks and all the cops have wooden legs. These fantasies are always double edged. In telling us about people's dreams they speak volumes about privation and hunger, lives of labour and no reward. What is surprising is how little is asked for: food and drink, sex, warmth and no arguments. Even the medieval not *karstaus*, sausages rather than raw grass. These are not the aspirations of the nobility but of the peasants and immigrants, it is the paradise of the poor man.

Likewise the food in Gayle Chong Kwan's contemporary version is more reminiscent of Monsoon's than the delicatessen at Harrod's. Yet, because there are significant variations in how individual photographs function at the levels of reference and artifice, they do not make clear statements as a series. For instance, *Babel* and *Alex Abardo* explicitly allude to the history of art, in this case to Bruegel and Casper David Friedrich. In both of these images the foodstuff has been principally chosen for its suitability as a building material and there is no relationship between Bruegel and meat, or Friedrich and lard. In contrast, the specific use of oats in *Briggadon* is important. When MGM studios wanted to film the story of a mythical Scottish village they couldn't find a sufficiently Scottish landscape so used a studio set. Here, then, the use of oats creates a landscape which is ludicrously Scottish.

There is also a wide variation in how convincing the photographs are as landscapes. In *Briggadon* the oats have been successfully transmuted into vegetation and similarly the *Tale of Voyage to the World at the Centre of the Earth* conveys its hills, Luddlow and New Americas are pleasing landscapes first, rice and chocolate second. At the other end of the spectrum

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