

# JILL POYOUROW

May 16 - June 13, 1998

Essay by Chris Kraus

POST

1904 East 7th Place

Los Angeles, California 90021 USA



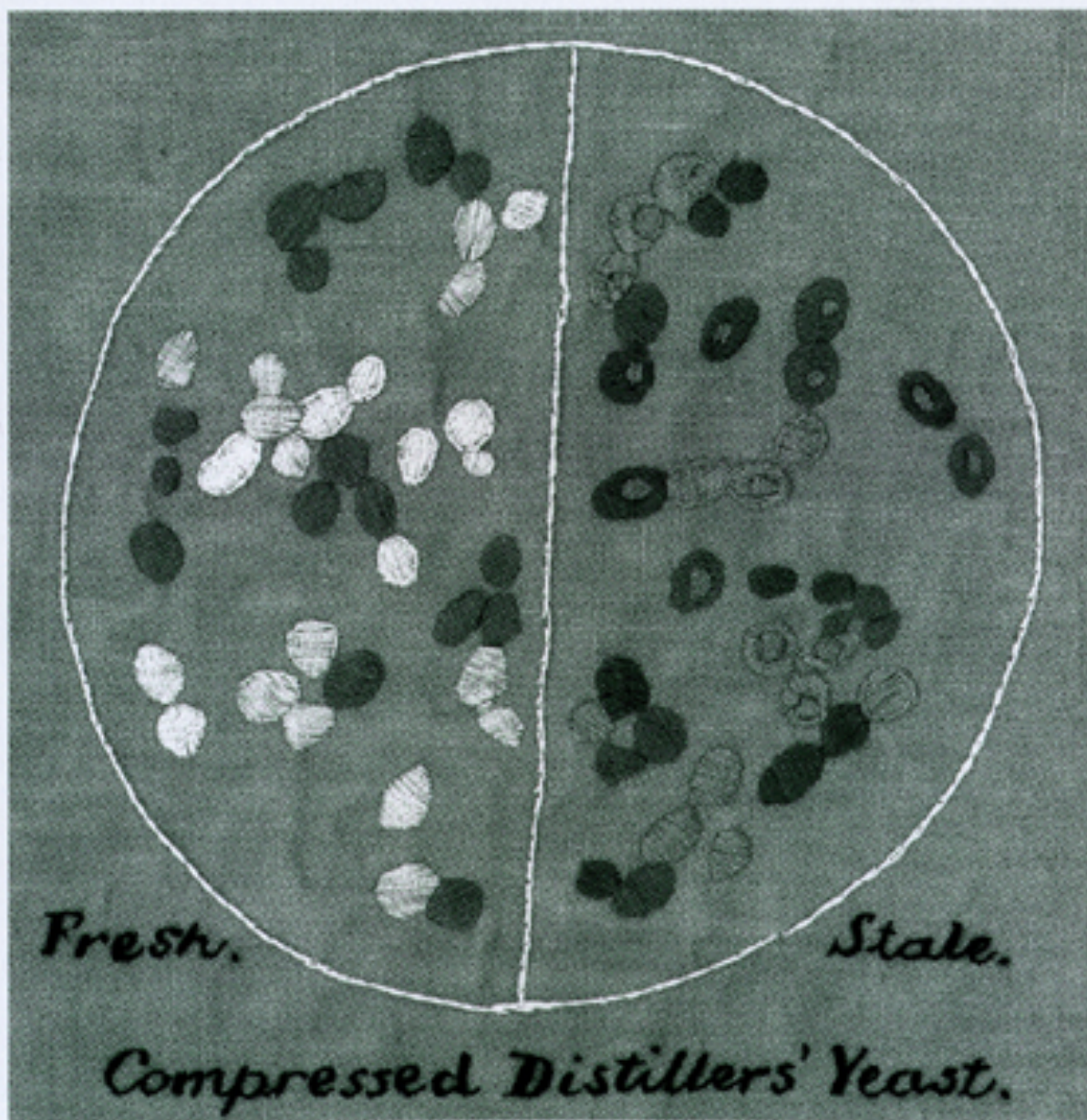
# JILL POYOUROW

May 16 - June 13, 1998

Essay by Chris Kraus

POST

1904 East 7th Place  
Los Angeles, California 90021 USA



*Various Commercial Yeasts*

Detail

1998 cotton floss on linen

## ASK ANY VEGETABLE

"The independent farmer is the foundation of freedom."  
Thomas Jefferson

Jill Poyourow is a painter with a very clear eye.

Like Laurie Anderson's performances in the late 70s and early 80s, her paintings are looking at people and things from a very wide angle and wondering how they got where they are. As a painter, Poyourow's committed herself to a vast social studies project and her total lack of affect or self-conscious irony about doing this makes her work very strong. Artists of the WPA purported to depict social subjects, but in reality they were painting polemics, working class heroes no one believes any more. And all that work of the East Village 80s. Civics Charts and Science Fairs, bombs aimed at a very broad target, American childhood, reimagined as kitsch. But unlike these ideologues and ironists, Jill Poyourow is a scientist. She has the nerve to take questions as seriously as they are.

At present, Poyourow's painting is concerned with the social origins of food. Like the humans who consume it, food has traveled vast distances this century in time and space. How did food become a disembodied signifier?

As Eileen Myles has written about Shulamith Firestone's magnificent deadpan chronicle of public mental institutions, "In the century I'm most familiar with, the 20th, the explosion was never-ending, the pieces tinier and tinier. All of us are vanishing in a century of institutions that take and take until everyone has gone away and there's no one left to shut the door."

To find out how food contributes to this fragmentation, Poyourow traces food back to it's (and her own) roots. Many of the images in this show come from a Time-Life book, *The Cooking of Germany*, published in 1969. By then of course the interest in this food was purely ethnographic and nostalgic, charting the disappearing strains and traces of European peasant life. Everybody knows that by that time food came from packages and cans. Yet still, in 1969 somewhere in the remote villages of (most probably, East) Germany, a solitary woman with her young son was picking cabbages for market and Frau Klaus was hauling loaves of bread to the village oven. As a third-generation American Jew, Poyourow is unusually attuned to what binds and separates her from her European ancestors. There's a great deal of content in these deceptively "bland" images of food: Not history, but historiography. The painter looking backwards to a subject through the screen of its interpretation. And it's this seriousness and quality of concentration that lift the paintings from the flatness of photo-derived representation and give them the most mysterious energy, warmth and glow. *The Cooking of Germany* arrives at a true poetics of didacticism, style arising from an action: the elusiveness of any subject when it's looked at hard.

Poyourow's work suggests we reconsider the discredited ethnographic notion of "The Family of Man" sans it's mid-century imperialist agenda, from a curious and childlike point of view.

In *Sade Fourier Loyola*, Roland Barthes talks about mad rationalism and it's drive to classify. Jill Poyourow's methodically conceived and executed art insists there might still be some usefulness in classifying phenomena, if not experience. There are families of humans. There are families of food. But vegetables are mute.

In earlier paintings, Poyourow has studied the mid-decade, mid-American fascination with food as fantasy, food as an artistic medium of expression for the culturally-deprived homebound Wife. One particularly disturbing set of paintings was called *The Betty Crocker Centerfold*. In a culinary analog to *Playboy*, Centerfold depicted a Corbusier-stacked city of petit-fours and marzipan. Sumptuous folds of airbrushed frosting pertly crowned with cherries, sugar leaves...

From my diary:

*Los Angeles July 1996: The more you think about food, the more impossible it becomes to eat. My heart and stomach flip while waiting at the gourmet deli. Say Cheese, Say Choose. Canned baby peas in mayonnaise, 9.98 a pound. Cheeses wrapped in plastic behind refrigerated glass like so many sad specimens. Where did this food come from? Was it touched by anyone who cared or understood it? Tiny chunks of artificial butter wrapped in plastic shells. Refrigerated lettuces. Food stripped of all its color, smell and nutrients and then reconstituted. Like my expensive hair. He loves it. Like suburban small-town cunts drenched in Massengil. To question food is to question everything. To question food is to recognize the impossibility of home.*

What is the distance between ourselves and our ancestors? *Yeast and Yoga* suggests that maybe the pre-toxic past can be reclaimed through spiritual practice, the New Age, in an era where the irreducibility of fact and cabbage fields has been replaced by *choice*, the globalized unconscious. But are there any links between real and artificial food?

One set of pieces in this show suggests the most surprising and unsettling answer. *Embroideries of Yeasts and Starches* proclaim that the trans-edible concoctions of Betty Crocker contain, at their most molecular level, the same properties as food. Could the same be true of us transhumans? Like the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Poyourow accepts the fact of "biological chaining." *Embroideries* might well have been constructed for a 4-H Fair. It's an art-historical double flip, and could be easily dismissed as restated domestic-feminist critique. In fact it's science. *Embroideries* allows us to see ourselves, inhabitants of modern cities, carrying chromosomes inherited from worlds left far behind.

-Chris Kraus

Grateful acknowledgement to Fred Dewey for his conversation about Thomas Jefferson and suggestion of the quote.

## Bibliography and Exhibition History

Lives and works in Altadena, California

### EDUCATION

- 1991 MFA California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA
- 1986 BFA California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA
- 1982 BS Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

solo:

- 1998 *POST*, Los Angeles, CA "Paintings, Drawings and Embroidered Works"
- 1993 *The Metropolitan Momentary Contemporary Museum*, (Los Angeles Art Project, in conjunction with Art/LA'93), Los Angeles, CA "Imperfect Intentions"
- 1987 *Orcas Center for the Arts*, Eastsound, WA "65 Color Photographs"

group:

- 1998 *Otis College of Art and Design*, Los Angeles, CA "In the Polka Dot Kitchen"
- 1997 *Annika Sundvik Gallery*, New York, NY "The Leisure Sector"
- 1996 *Thomas Solomon's Garage*, Los Angeles, CA "Skin Deep"
- 1995 *Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions*, Los Angeles, CA "The 1995 LACE Annuale (At)tempting Compound Dissociation"  
*Los Angeles International Biennial Invitational Track 16 Gallery*, Santa Monica, CA "Eats"
- 1994 *Patricia Shea Gallery*, Santa Monica, CA "Winter Invitational"  
*Biblioteca Rispoli of the Comune di Roma Piazza Grazioli*, Rome, Italy "Pagine Tessili, tr.The Woven Page", traveled to Quarrata, Udine, and included in 1st International Fiber Art Biennial
- 1992 *Foundation for Art Resources*, Los Angeles, CA "FAR Bazaar: The Old Federal Reserve Building"
- 1982 *Tacoma Art Museum*, Tacoma WA "Photography Annuale 1982"

### SELECTED TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1995-1998 Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA Instructor of self-designed course "Portraiture and the Family: Behind the Snapshot" & Grad Meetings
- 1996-1997 Cinesite, Los Angeles, CA Drawing Instructor at Kodak Digital Effects Studio

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1998 Kraus, Chris. "Ask Any Vegetable," Exhibition Essay
- 1996 Knode, Marilu. "Documenta: The California Years", Huntington Beach Art Center, Huntington Beach, CA Essay from catalog for "Documenta" Exhibition.


Copyright ©1998 Jill Poyourow and Chris Kraus

Design: Rose Freeland, Big Concepts, Inc.

Special thanks to: Todd, Habib, Chris, Ricky, Rose, Jamie, Joan, Joe, M.J, Laura and Suzanne. This show is dedicated to the memory of Nathan.

Printed at Graphics Etc, California USA NAMASTE





Inside front and back:  
Details from *The Farm Wife*  
1996 oil on canvas  
48 x 60 inches

Back cover:  
*Old Man*  
1997 India ink on paper  
30 x 40 inches

