

COOKING WITH JOHN

A John Nixon lunch is soup, reheated on the stovetop, with a different recipe from week to week. It is “only two olives left, one for me, one for you”. It is red capsicums in a pink bowl and green cucumber on a blue plate; an assemblage of colour and form like a constructed painting, which sometimes shares the lunch table. On other occasions, a pie or a sausage offers a departure from the usual routine. Occasionally there is cake, always there is bread. Enacted almost as ritual, our weekly lunch provided a pause in the day’s work. With John, the table was a site for eating, working, and talking, just as the food upon which it was served offered more than a form of sustenance — at times, it too became a new material for his practice. For John, food could also be used as an analogical tool for discussion on art and life. “Show ten loaves of bread, okay, we understand what you do.” Cooking with John takes its cue from a selection of John’s food analogies, recorded by his most recent assistants, Amalia Lindo and Jacqueline Stojanović. The exhibition is a testimonial to John’s teachings through the presentation of new works by the artist friends and mentees from Nixon’s wide circle who have also had the pleasure of sharing John’s table. We present *Cooking with John* as an “anti-cookbook” wherein the analogies are the recipes and the artworks are the ingredients.

The head chef has left but the kitchen remains open.

Amalia Lindo + Jacqueline Stojanović
2021

FOYER (clockwise)

1.

Some people like the orange cake, some people like the chocolate cake.

Justin Andrews
Dynamic Pattern Refraction (Abstract Painting for JN)
2020
Acrylic on canvas over plywood panel
Courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne
POA

Some people like the orange cake, some people like the chocolate cake. I hear his intonation every time I think about this. It’s classic non-judgmental John, but also highly observant John. Practical in the kitchen and a generous host at all times, it’s such a beautiful statement. I love it. There are also historical associations. Chocolate brings that wonderful 1980s era of John’s career to mind, when he was making openly constructivist pieces that employed roughly cut and painted materials with symbols and objects attached in matter of fact ways to create works of artistic revolution. Orange evokes that 90s reduction that occurred in his work, those wide open panels of gloss enamel juxtaposed with other brightly painted elements, so formal yet familiar at the same time. Pristine, resonant, economical and deeply committed work. So inspiring! Sitting outside on a golden Sunday morning last August, one of the last conversations that I had with John involved how happy he was to be home, which was so wonderful to hear. When John asked what I had been doing, I made very quick mention of some newly made custom drawing tools that allowed me to rule the same angle in multiple orientations quickly in an improvised manner. I figured that it was a good use of a precious moment - to talk about how simple processes, which if applied in an exploratory manner, can be used to achieve a whole world of possibilities. To my relief, John expressed great interest in the topic. The process of painting was always a favourite subject of ours. He concluded the discussion by saying that it was a good idea, and that I had to “...see where it takes you”, he said. “This is the very nature of an experimental art practice, Justin. You just have to try.” With that principle in mind, and to see where it does in fact take me, I have been using the same technique to develop my work ever since. John’s words have never rung so true. This painting is a symbol of my continuing commitment to that final conversation.

2.

You have got a lot of fish in the water, you have to catch one.

Hayden Stuart
71st
2021
Veneered plywood, Pine, Tasmanian Oak
80 x 60 x 60cm
POA

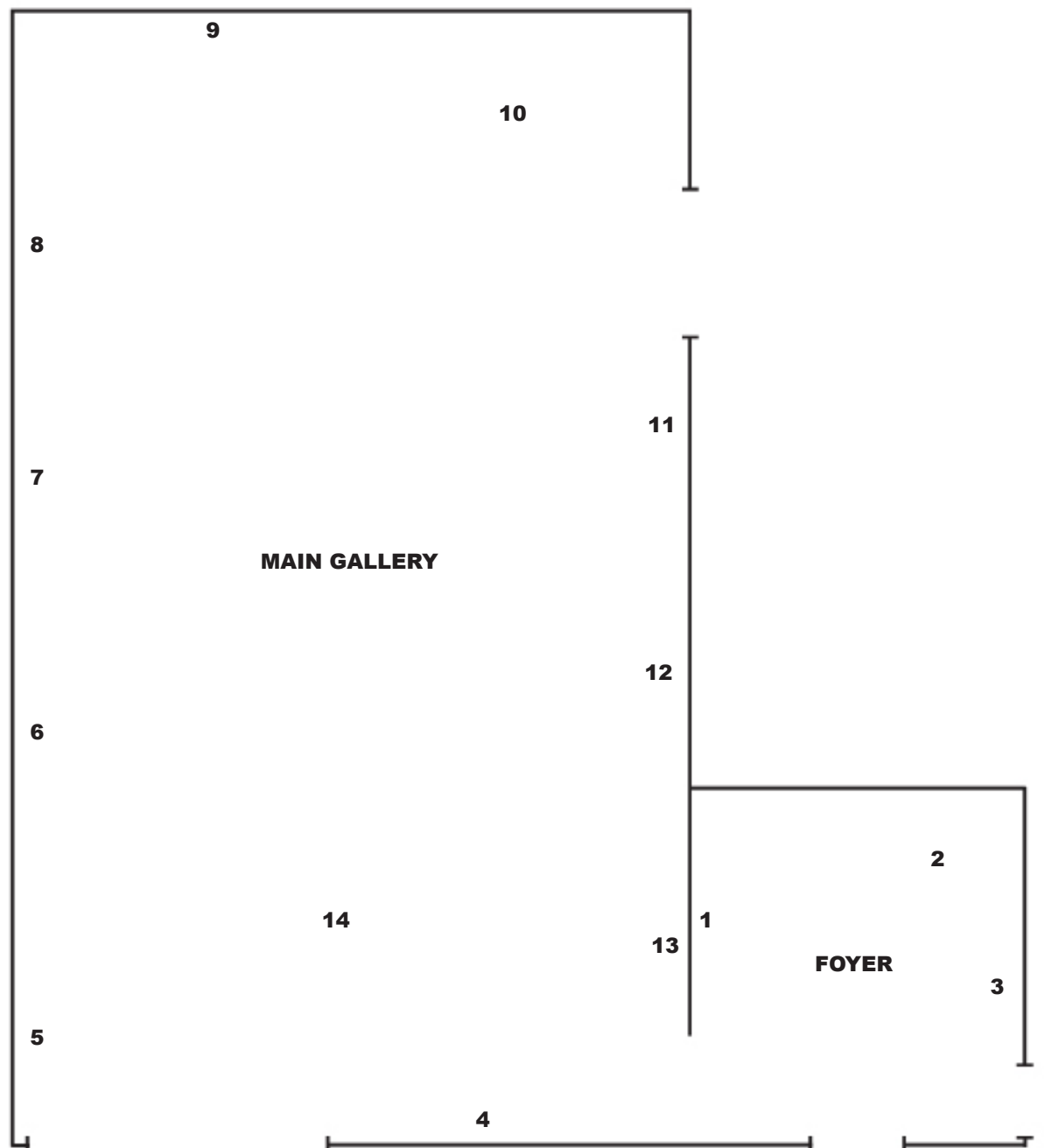
The inspiration for a shift in my practice came from a Japanese LP titled ‘Today’s Latin Project’. The cover depicts a brightly coloured oblique illustration of an outdoor lounge chair by a pool, and a drawing of this chair featured on the Christmas card I sent John in 2019. I had previously designed a version of this chair to be made in steel. Originality wasn’t my interest here; instead my focus was on the translation of the illustration to a sculptural form, mirroring the translation of South American Bossa Nova beats played by a Japanese band. This new chair came from reconsidering the design into a dining chair and shifting the materials into something more homely. Learning as I went, I tried to incorporate the structural elements as part of the aesthetic design. Hand cut timber keys provide the coloured plywood panels with structural integrity while also transforming the sides of the chair into constructivist style ‘paintings’. I had planned to make a chair for John on his 70th birthday knowing how much he enjoyed these new works, although he didn’t seem interested in a grand celebration (instead suggesting we celebrate his 71st). The project was put on the shelf while other work occupied my time, until I was invited to show in this exhibition. One of the last things John said to Amalia was ‘*tell Hayden he needs to make more chairs*’. There were a lot of designs swimming around in my head, and this is one I caught.

3.

If you want to make a cookie, you have to bring all the ingredients.

Stefano Condello
Big Yawn Poster
2019
printed digital collages
29.7 x 21cm
NFS

Working with John, I learnt a lot about working to limitations. We’d push ideas as far as our technology, know-how or any other limiting parameters would allow. This was particularly the case with *The Donkey’s Tail* posters, recordings and videos that I would help create with John’s highly specific instruction (font, size, direction, etc). Therefore, when it came to needing to make a poster quickly for the group that I play in I borrowed very heavily from the work I had done with John. Using some found objects and some very simple text, with some tweaking in a basic image/photo viewer Computer program, the end result was very quickly and easily achieved. John’s way of working has been very important to my own creative process throughout the years with these posters being only a small indication of how formative my years working with John were.



MAIN GALLERY (clockwise)

4.

Just because you are known for your cakes, doesn't mean you should make a croissant.

Gerard Kodde
Bicolored apron
2019
Cotton fabric
83 x 86cm
From the collection of Jacqueline Stojanović, Melbourne

the art or process by which food is cooked
or the process by which food art is cooked

5.

They come along like mushrooms.

Laura Delaney
The Tail-less Donkey
2021
Collectively made interactive installation, found board game, B&W adhesive print
Dimensions variable
NFS

Just a few weeks after John died, I found a cardboard box of discarded books and board games on the sidewalk while taking a walk in my radius. One of the games was Pin the tail on the donkey. The cover read: TAIL-LESS DONKEY. That's me now, I whispered. That's me without my friend John. Without our band The Donkey's Tail. I carried home my loot and texted Amalia to show her, "Just when I feel sad because I feel happy that it's spring but he's not here...I find John in a box of free books on the sidewalk," to which she replied, "Your work just made itself". I invite you to take a tail, close your eyes and spin to play *The Tail-less Donkey*.

6.

You don't eat two meals, you eat one meal. Who is butter chicken, who is vegetable?

Rachel Schenberg
AUSTRALIAN SUMMER FRUITS
2021
Found cardboard, steel pins
36 boxes, 3.7 x 5.6cm each
POA

I think it was the time we drove to Shepparton to see his collection of pottery last year in February, that John handed me a clear box with six dice in it. The box was sealed with tape and read, RACHEL. Some weeks before I had told him that I'd been curious about making dice, first in wax then cast in bronze. Though when scraping out the little holes for numbers one to six, I wondered whether I would change the weight of each side and unbalance the luck of each face. John chanced upon this box in an op-shop and said he thought it might be useful to my research on chance. This work is a series of 36 boxes made out of found fruit boxes to the dimensions of the small box of dice gifted to me from John.

7.

That is not even putting the cheese in the sandwich. It's one tiny piece of lettuce.

Rudi Williams
Wind creature
2020
Pigment on acrylic
14 x 19.5cm
POA

I am interested in the extent our bodies can adapt to respond to our environments, and the people we share our surroundings with. The spider is a predator that attracts its prey with the silk structures of its intricate web. I observed an orb weaver spider that lived outside my house over the course of a week in April 2020 and became interested in the spider web as an extension of the spiders senses, instead of a net or weapon for hunting. I visited the spider in its newly constructed web each night, for seven nights, until it rained and its rhythm moved to a different location. I began to see this intricate and impermanent spider-web as an articulation of the frequencies in the air. The delicate structure would move as the wind blew each night and I watched the spider adjust its legs, and the tension of its expanded mind. This experience made me consider the spider-web as a metaphor for the daily process of calibrating to our surroundings, of adjusting to the changes in the air we all breathe, and the diaphanous messages that can be transmitted through the air, by way of thought executed with intention. Thank you John, the creator of an intricate web of connections with unbinding ties.

HAYDENS

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8.

You wouldn't give me two burnt cookies, would you?

Amalia Lindo
4 of 60,480 (Red)
2021
Photographic paper on dibond, aluminium frame, aluminium pipe, steel flange
Dimensions variable
POA

I have carried a reel of 16mm film from studio to studio for the last five years, titled 'Papua New Guinea Report 1971'. I remember the day that John gave it to me. It was the autumn of my Honour's year and we would meet for lunch every other Tuesday. He said, *I found this and thought you might make something of it*. I have been waiting for the "right" tools to digitise the film ever since, but was hesitant to make the investment. For several years, I shared John's table for lunch, discussing ideas and plans for artworks. Having now lost those generative weekly discussions, I have reflected more than ever on his teachings. He would ask, *you wouldn't give me two burnt cookies, would you?* A gentle reminder that there was no need to overcook the method. Over the past summer, I spent some days manually unravelling all 60,480 frames of the film. The report reflects the social and economic conditions of Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s and presents forty-two minutes of formal interviews and panoramic representations of life during this time. In one particular scene, a man carries palm fronds on his back through a busy marketplace. Through the crowd a woman stares into the camera and in front of her, a red object glides across four frames. In 0.2 seconds, it is gone. There was something unique about this passing moment. It was a kind of abnormality that is common to iPhone culture where mistakes or accidents are easily edited or erased. Here, the passing red line interrupts a pivotal scene and is so instantaneous it could be easily missed. Using the most simple recipe, I found it; a split second of abstraction in 4 of 60,480 frames. And I thought of John.

9.

Some people like the strawberries more than the chips.

Stephen Bram
Untitled
2021
Acrylic on canvas
250 x 200cm
Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
NFS

I think most of these references to food in John's conversation and teaching came after my student days. Back then the food was in the work, not the conversation, at least not that I remember. He did once (late eighties?) remark to me of a work incorporating a cupboard full of (self?) bottled cherries and photographic documentation of various studio (exhibited in Rene Block's Sydney Biennale, and also at the ACP in Sydney) that: "The work is like an orchard" and he was as diligent in tending it as any farmer. In the mid 90's I remember him comparing an exhibition (or a work?) to a meal, in this case to illustrate that the exhibition was missing basic ingredients, only meat, no salad (or something like that). That was the first time I remember hearing a food metaphor. I guess the chips/strawberries statement is self explanatory: some people prefer stuff that's not junk. I can imagine John saying that. An expression of mild frustration or disappointment and a reminder that good things exist.

10.

She's made a cake, but she is not a baker.

Rose Nolan
Two Armchairs (print version)
2020
Offset print, Ikea Perspex frame
Variable Edition of 35.
45 x 55cm
Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
NFS

Two Armchairs (with cushions)
2021
Foam core, sewing pins, PVA, felt, Ikea cushion insert
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
NFS

'She's made a cake, but she is not a baker' is not a food/cooking analogy that I'd heard John propose. There had been many others – direct, disarming and unwittingly funny - a perfect means by which John cut-through to offer his reflections on an art work's merits. After the laughter subsided, there was always a truth in what John had said that was undeniable. She's made a cake, but she is not a baker elicits an open, surprise response. It conjures up a sense of trial and error; success or failure; of something attempted and unexpected. I liked the freedom offered within what I would call this room for error. It could go either way. In taking the cake analogy literally, Clement Meadmore's 1975 publication *How to make furniture without tools*, provided the recipe for two utilitarian, modernist armchairs destined for use in the home. Their functional success (or failure) relying worryingly on the precise placement of pre-cut plywood components and the type and strength of the glue used. Perhaps as a way of eschewing final judgement on my abilities, my *Two Armchairs (2020-21)* are instead fabricated from lightweight, foam core and mostly pinned together. They look pleasingly like Meadmore's examples but through a shift in their materiality and fabrication have been rendered completely non-functional as furniture. So yes, I did make a cake and I am not a baker.

11.

You put two peoples' food on one plate, it looks wrong.

Alinta Brown
Halleluiah
Falls Creek 2018
Single channel HD video, colour
46 seconds
NFS

My solo choreography is drawn from the study and practice of Eurythmy, a method originating from Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers within the early 20th century movement of Anthroposophy. Blending moments of silence and stillness, inner and outer, movement and lyricism, I use the gestural language of Eurythmy to convey small narratives in a specific time and space. This video was filmed in the winter of 2018, in the same month John and I collaborated on an Art and Movement performance at Anna Schwartz Gallery. This moment captures a silent prayer of 'Hallelujah', which starts and ends with the sound H, the first H understood as exhaling and the last inhaling. The process we know at the end and beginning of life. On reflection, this was an inspired time. Working with John was highly influential and expansive. When I think of collaborating with John I am warmed by the memory of his enthusiasm, thoughtful consideration and an unwavering sense of joie de vivre. I am forever grateful to have been able to call John a mentor and friend.

12.

It's a whole fruit shop.

Isabella Darcy
Untitled (coop/strand/stripe/bauhaus/netto)
2021
Plastic bag over canvas
26 x 20.5cm
POA (sold individually)

Each work resembles a plastic bag gifted by John. A significant part of our friendship was centred on collecting and sharing materials for creating work. Plastic bags became important objects within our relationship and repertoire. In 2016, I began my own collection. When I shared my interest in starting this collection with John, every week he would bring me 'new' bags that he collected from museums, galleries, supermarkets and the streets of the cities and countries where he often travelled: Berlin, New York, Japan, Switzerland, Denmark. John undoubtedly played the largest part in shaping my collection, as most of the bags are from him. Each time he gave me a bag it came with a story, marking a time and a place. These bags are a map of John's favourite spots and shops, reflecting the importance of ritual in his life. The bags offer a glimpse into John's world, while symbolising the interchange of his generosity and support.

13.

I have to deal with what is on the front of the stove.

David Palliser
Steep
2021
Oil on canvas
138 x 107cm
POA

I began *Steep* in early August 2020, another painting in what seems the endless chain of paintings. As John's condition and predicament became more serious and the hope of recovery less and less likely the painting picked up its own stream of energy and evolution. It became imperative that its colour and form become as saturated and clear as possible. A container for all the variations held in John's series of colour/sound paintings and convoluted together in the spatial sequences I seem to be addicted to. His positivity and matter of factness was a driving force in trying to find a singing resolution and an affirmation of our friendship, music, his life and art.

14.

If you have lots of orange trees you don't need to show one million oranges.

Jacqueline Stojanović
Yesterday's Bread
2021
Flour, water, two trestle tables
Dimensions variable
NFS

I began baking bread in 2018, after being gifted a portion of mother dough to care for in Sicily. I toiled to keep it alive under ever changing conditions and eventually transported it to Melbourne where every week I baked a loaf attempting to perfect the practice. The successful loaves would always accompany me to the Briar Hill studio on the days John and I worked together, to be shared at the lunch table. The unsuccessful loaves were reserved for me alone to critically deconstruct. Both at the tables, for lunch and for work, we talked about bread. These conversations meandered through the political and proletariat to the spiritual and ritualistic associations of bread as matter and metaphor, and in discussion John introduced me to the personal history of bread artworks by friends in his circle. But mostly, I felt that bread for me was as potatoes were for John, a symbol of labour commonly understood and consumed. *How different is making a tapestry and baking a loaf of bread?* The successful loaf harnesses all essential elements of life: earth, water, air and fire, with *good timing*. In 2019 I made an exhibition titled *Bread + Games* after the metonymic phrase referring to superficial appeasement. As part of this exhibition I painted my bread and displayed it on the wall. John didn't mess around with any superficial appeasement, and spent weighted words with me about the bread, the paint, the wall. *It's everything it needs to be left plain on a table*. So, bon appetit John; a table for lunch and a table for work, and a second chance for yesterday's bread.