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MAY WE FEED THE KING

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THE PALACE

After a few months of surviving on pretty small, not overly compelling jobs, I received a commission in my inbox. A medium-scale installation to commemorate the 750-year anniversary of a former palace, now a historic house open to the public. I would later learn that no one had actually ascertained whether this anniversary marked the laying of the first foundation, the day it welcomed its first inhabitants, or the first time it appeared in local records. When a site badly needs a cash injection it is incredible how irrelevant such details can become; a significant date is chosen, special events are put on, footfall increases. Sometimes the brief visibility afforded by marketing means film or TV scouts will stop by and be enchanted by the well-appointed rooms and breathtaking gardens. A block booking of a month or two, a significant fee. Then it is not a palace with a history, but the location of filming for such and such, and people come for tours, filling the café and gift shop. The email didn't say these things explicitly, but in these places – unless the roof is about to cave in – money tends to be spent only

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with the anticipation of making more back. Feed the horse a sugar lump and hope it shits out a nugget of gold.

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I have been deciphering archives and curating semi-permanent scenes (domestic, culinary and otherwise) in medieval buildings for the past twenty-two years. When you see a replica feast scene in the great hall of an old building, I am the person who placed the pomegranates beside the pie, and for a very good reason. When you come upon a room, cordoned off with red rope, beyond which you see an open book on a desk, a chunk of bread picked hollow, and a quill in an ink pot that is empty of ink, I am telling you something about the person who lives in that room. The ink may be purple, and even though no one can see it in the straightforward sense, one in a thousand people will sense it. Ultimately, I want my work to communicate with everyone, but it is those people I really hold in my mind.

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WE HAVE LONG ADMIRED YOUR WORK

The head office staff wanted six scenes in specified locations – the King's chambers, the kitchens, the Queen's parlour, an Attendant's quarters, something that showcased the medical paraphernalia and practices of the time (in a location deemed most appropriate by me once I knew the site) and a feast scene in the great hall. They also asked whether I would consider, for an additional fee, taking part in some activity on the anniversary weekend itself. I would have some part to play in shaping what that looked like, but they envisioned a 'Meet the Experts' day on the Saturday, during which members of the public could visit me, along with other experts, naturally, and ask anything they liked. They also wondered about a short, informal talk on the Sunday, to coincide with some media activity.

I would think about it, I told them, and give an answer as soon as possible.

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As commissions go the requirements were clear, not too restrictive. The fee and budget for materials were decent. The house also had its own records, which were kept on site – detailed ledgers of the Kings and Queens who once resided within, and accounts of the habits and customs of the court. Archives of this kind are near enough unheard of.

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At this point, certain things had happened in my life. I was ready to immerse myself.

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ORDER AND DISCREPANCIES

There is a website dedicated to the provision of plastic replica food to people like myself, as well as to other professional curators, purveyors of historical re-enactments, drama teachers, amateur dramatics groups, showrooms (kitchens, furniture, etc.) and so on. The index starts with 'barbeque', then 'biscuits and cereals', followed by 'bread', 'cakes, gateaux and meringues', running through to 'fruit', 'historical foods', 'vegetables – prepared'.

Almost anything you can imagine, or at least could feasibly need.

I know this website back to front, can navigate its pages like a map I barely need consult. I could tell you, for example, that the gherkins are with the celebration food and not the vegetables, that a rustic loaf is in historical foods but nowhere to be found in the bread section.

The delicatessen section offers six pages of various cured meats, sausages and pies. A pork joint covered in muslin is £45, yet a

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single parma ham slice costs £14. A half oyster shell, the exposed flesh shining as if with the freshest brine, is £31.25 for a single piece; but a full, cooked, vividly red leg of venison is not much more, at £55. These discrepancies in price are often baffling and unexplained, but, I trust, justified; it is my opinion that we should never presume to know the intricacies of another person's craft. The pork joint is a particularly interesting piece, the muslin itself also being a replica and completely rigid, yet still appearing as if brusquely wrapped by capable hands mere moments before: one illusion inside another.

The dairy section is a heaven of creams and whites, cheeses and butters portioned into squares and pats and rounds. Emmental in not-waxes of red and yellow. The Camembert is the best of the cheeses, slightly trumping the Edam for attention to detail with its tactile powdery skin.

Apple green. Apple red. This page bursts with primary colour. Just £3 each; a fruit bowl made cheaply.

There is the most beautiful ham slice, with a pollen-like bread-crumbed perimeter. Slices of white lard curling almost imperceptibly at the edges, as if cut and left on the side to dehydrate.

The new potatoes (boiled) look like nothing more than beige lumps, overly shiny – disappointing, given the utter lack of complexity of a potato – but the small potatoes (unwashed) are so faithful you can almost feel the fine grit of them in your mouth.

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The chicken leg (whole, cooked) is one of the few items I consider flawless. It is, unlike so many other items, perfect for those rare installations with no barriers or ropes, in which the items and the viewer will be in thrillingly close proximity. Once, quite without warning and close to the deadline, the dwelling of a witch-hunter was added to a large-scale commission I was working on at a living museum. I crammed his desk full of well-burnt candles to show that this was a man with zealous commitment to his work, and that he'd pore over evidence in the dead of night like a wolf over a pile of bones. I wanted the windows spotless, the curtains always pulled aside. The rats remained cowering in the corner, not daring to approach, so chilling was his aura. The reins for his horse hung by the door next to a worn-out whip. But the food – the little I would allow him – I put off thinking about until the last moment, because I knew I had no choice. The budget was spent by then, and all I had available in my stock to suit the time period was the whole chicken leg. Every fibre of my being cried out against giving it, this perfect meal, to this man. But in the circumstances there was no alternative – he had to eat.

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The website's artichokes lack adequately defined scaliness – they are altogether slightly too smooth – but they have real spirit to them. From a distance they pass, but they would never survive scrutiny. In some cases, this is no bad thing. It all rests on the context.

The beef tomato – 'low in stock' (i.e. discontinued) – is a joke and may as well be a squeezy ketchup bottle. This I know without

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having seen one in the flesh. I have wondered in the past about writing to the supplier about this particular item, which in my opinion is so crass that it risks letting down their entire outfit. This is something I would have been more inclined to action a few years ago, before my great lesson in perspective.

The chewet – a small meat pie – appears so real you could pick it up and take a bite – I actually sniffed the first order I received. Even now, when manipulating its position in a scene, I step back to observe its new placement and find I am smelling the hand that just touched it, quite without realising.

There are nine options for replica eggs. They include the coveted double yolk (fried), a neatly folded golden omelette and a perfect whole fresh brown egg. A poached egg, with a cloudy film of white across the yolk, looks perfectly done (£15). This is possibly my favourite page, glowing yellow like a farmhouse kitchen. Perhaps not coincidentally, my relationship to eggs, of all the foods, has been most affected by my work. What I mean by this is that they are the only item for which the replica has eclipsed the real thing, which I now handle in a cavalier manner. I expect brown eggs to bounce. After cracking the shell, I often anticipate that the yolk and albumen will slip out white, flat, already fried. The desire to penetrate the white belly of a poached egg on a friend's plate with my finger is often close to irresistible. But it does not yet fully overwhelm me – when it does, I will take it as a sign that I have lost my grip.

The herb section is scantly stocked and the greens dim, but I would never use replica herbs in my work anyway, when real ones add

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such scent to a room. I have yet to experience a soundscape which truly brings life to a space; when you can unquestionably hear the clanking of pots and the cleaving of bone, the cook shouting for more flour, your brain is not compelled to fill those gaps. But scent – scent is depth, and depth is a dark pool we may dive into.

I often deploy the 'fresh herb' test to gauge the success of a scene I have created. It is thus: if the herbs betray that the replica food is an illusion, it is a failure, and I start again.

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As for spices, people might think historic diets consisted only of cloves and maybe black pepper, but the reality is that the rich had access to pretty much anything. Ginger, cinnamon, saffron, bay and anise were hugely popular, the food richly spiced, the recipes elaborate and complex.

More than once, doing the rounds of historic buildings of particular importance or interest to me, I have observed what could have been a breathtakingly elaborate kitchen scene dressed with no more than some potatoes, a slab of meat and a pile of vegetables, as if the wealthy lived like the poor. This is what happens when people don't call in the professionals.

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MY GREAT LESSON IN PERSPECTIVE

Around three years ago, while visiting a stunning property, I observed on the periphery of a distinctly mediocre kitchen-table scene three grey plastic fish lying perfectly parallel to one another in a rectangular ceramic dish. The fish looked like something from the chew-toy aisle of a pet store – one-coloured, a seam visible at the belly, their fins not distinct entities but part of the same mould as the body. Their eyes were utterly dead, but not as eyes which had once held life. I waited until the room was empty, then I removed the fish and walked away with them in my bag. This was during what I now think of as my past life – towards the end of it, in fact. And I can admit that the bluntness of this solution reflects something of my state at that time. My situation, the pain of it, was something I had no choice but to exist within. But the fish, how unacceptable they were in the scene, *that* I could do something about. So, I curated. Back at home, I took the fish out of my bag, observed them lying lifeless on my bed, and put them away in a drawer. I uncovered them some weeks later and moved them

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again, to a less visited cupboard. But the fact of their presence in the house persisted, like a low hum. Eventually I gifted them to the child of a friend – they were disproportionately huge in their play kitchen, and the friend seemed somewhat horrified by the scale of them, but the child was delighted.