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Hungry Eyes | Aesthetics of the Impossible  
Reliquary Confections | Kitchen Studio  
Keesic Douglas | Aislinn Thomas  
Sean Martindale | Jessica Eaton  
John Monteith | Bruce Nauman  
Marcel Dzama | Karen Azoulay

**FOOD**



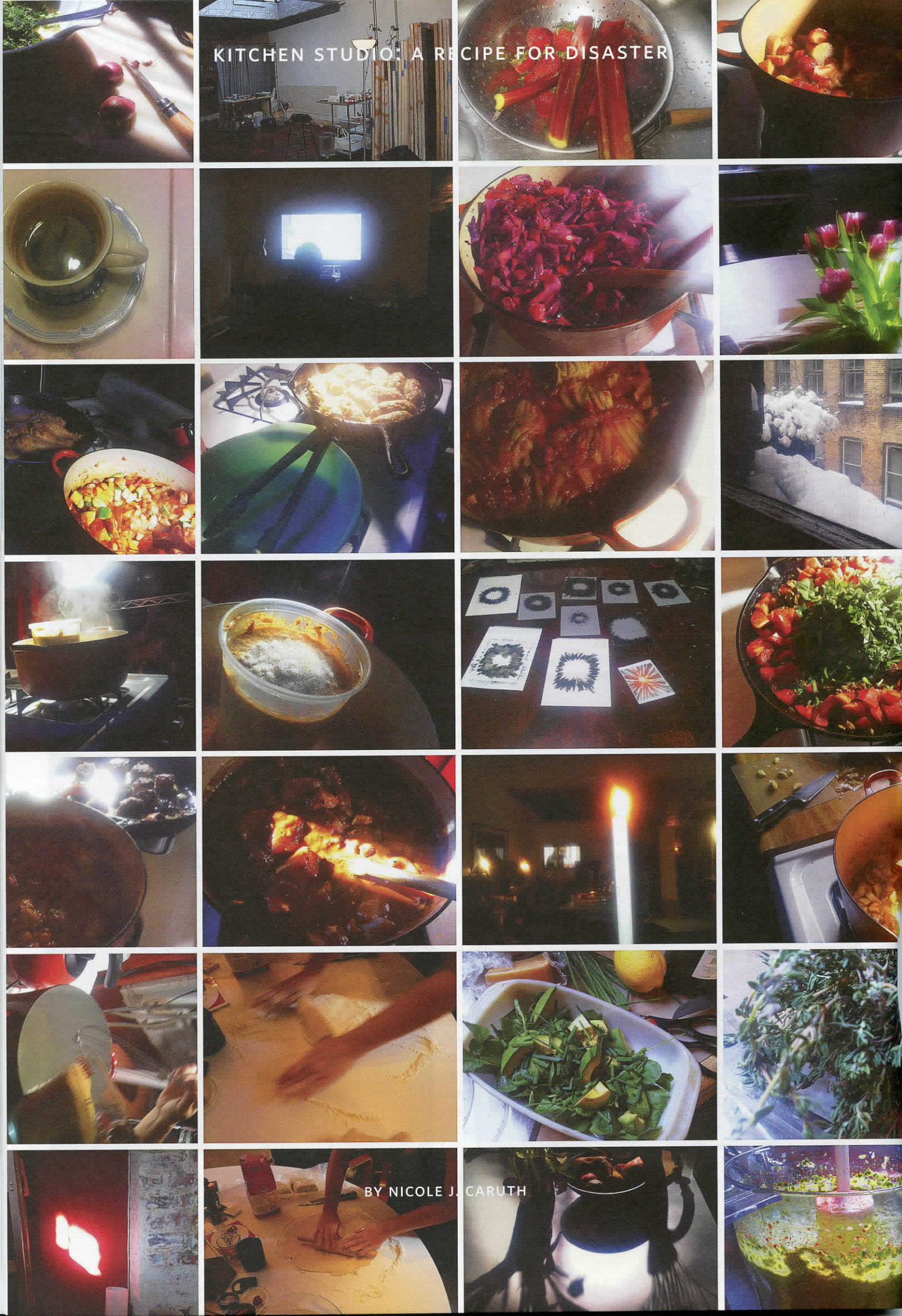
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KITCHEN STUDIO: A RECIPE FOR DISASTER



BY NICOLE J. CARUTH



"I have always danced my way through cooking as I work in the studio. Lately, I'm becoming more aware of it."

—Joy Garnett

In 2010, New York-based painter Joy Garnett began to snap pictures of her home cooking and eating activities with her BlackBerry camera phone. Like many modern-day food lovers, she turned to the Web to share her pictures with others, instantly uploading them to Twitter and tagging each image with the hashtag #cookstir, which she would later change to #tweetcuisine.<sup>1</sup> On Garnett's blog of the same title, any tweet with the #tweetcuisine tag appeared in a rolling list, a sort of moving menu of the moment. For a time, *Tweet Cuisine* garnered attention from like-minded twitterati (including me), who would use the same hashtag to share what they were whipping up in their kitchens. But on the Web, content and interest quickly comes and goes. Within a year, the novelty of *Tweet Cuisine* had worn off and participation slowed; the original blog will soon be defunct.

In spite of this, Garnett's food diary lives on in her new piece *Kitchen Studio* (2011), a limited edition, instruction-less, non-functional recipe box containing the artist's tweeted photographs. Filed using conventional divider cards for "Appetizers," "Entrées," "Vegetables" and "Dessert" are, for instance, a porcelain bowl brimming with rhubarb and strawberry compote; okra stewing in a cast iron skillet; a sinewy, raw salmon fillet; oven-ready stuffed cabbage leaves in a Pyrex dish; and two freshly baked berry pies with latticed crusts. In a fundamental twist, Garnett has also included photographs from her painting studio, located just steps from her kitchen. Herein, we see the progression of a new series of paintings, *Boom and Bust*, starburst compositions based on found images of military events and explosions.

At its most basic reading, *Kitchen Studio* exemplifies a Beuysian blurring of art and life in the era of social media and networking, a moment when Garnett's love of food and cooking visibly intersects with her painting practice. But such a simplistic analysis would fail to acknowledge a critical implication of Garnett's initial project: the role of social media in how people see food and cooking today. Where *Tweet Cuisine* prompts this discussion, *Kitchen Studio* complicates it with the additional reference to *Boom and Bust*, paintings that evoke thoughts of war, destruction, disarray, loss and economic decline. Is Garnett alluding to a correlation between cooking and catastrophe? One could conjecture, as many critics have, that in the farrago of

social media, the two types of imagery are so frequently and rapidly broadcast as to have a numbing effect, failing to provoke distinctive moral responses. On the other hand, maybe Garnett is not suggesting a blurring effect, but instead asking viewers to simply pay attention, to reflect on the barrage of images that we digitally cook up, dish out and consume.

Since the 90s, Garnett has mined the Internet for source imagery, drawing on military documents, photojournalism and scientific illustrations related to nuclear destruction, environmental disaster and human insurgency. She associates her paintings with the "apocalyptic sublime," a condition that she has described as "a metaphysical state of awe combined with horror in face of immense natural or supernatural forces" and as it materializes in her work, "man-made or human-influenced events where technology goes terribly awry."<sup>2</sup> Tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, atom bombs, nuclear missiles, the Three Gorges Dam and industrial agriculture all come to mind—at the moment, some more vividly than others. Watching news footage of Japan's recent tsunami, it's easy to believe that you are "on the ground," standing in the space of disaster, experiencing its terror and relentless aftermath. Of course it is an illusion engendered by news media packaging and big-screen technologies. It is in this experiential gap, in the chasm between watching something and knowing it firsthand, that Garnett positions her painting practice and art itself. "I think of art not as

a bridge of gaps, but as a gap enhancer," she says. "Rather than attempt to fill the vacuum, art puts you squarely in it."

Garnett's ongoing interest in the visuality and politics of mass media—now coupled with an eye on the kitchen—harkens back to the work of artist and "kitchen critic" Martha Rosler. In her seminal 1978 performance video and cooking show parody, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler called attention to the tactics of Hollywood by way of its primary tools—the camera and the television monitor. (In fact, Rosler would later collage images of kitchens with images of war.) In *Kitchen Studio*, Garnett nods to the latest surfeit of cooking shows with a single blurred photograph of her home television screen, taken while watching what appears to be *Top Chef*, *Chopped*, *Emeril Live*, *Hell's Kitchen* or maybe *Iron Chef*. The irony of the cooking show craze is that viewers are seldom taught how to cook *coq au vin*, for instance. Instead, they learn to enact cooking *coq au vin*. On these shows, chefs (the so-called "rock stars" of the moment) perform tasks for the camera, food is fetishized spectacle and, as Rosler has recently expressed, cooking becomes "a spectator sport."<sup>3</sup> In this context, food and cooking might even be called "aesthetically extreme," a phrase that Garnett has used to characterize the source imagery used for her paintings. But where television was the leading form of media when Rosler made *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, studies have shown that the Internet has twice the influence over consumers today. News and entertainment are now marketed and even delivered by URLs, whether it's via the screens of our televisions, computers or handheld gadgets. Consequently, the way people see food and cooking has also shifted.

Sharing pictures of what we eat, among other things, is a phenomenon of social media. Networks and platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr, Blogger and WordPress serve to extend the reach of a meal, virtually inviting other people to the table. It's no longer enough to merely declare that food tasted or looked good. With pocket-sized, high-quality digital cameras always at the ready, people are quick to prove it, documenting their meals for others to marvel at. Pictures of food are ubiquitous. Except still lifes have never just been about aesthetics; they also form a portrait of the eater and, often, the culture at large. Garnett's proclivity to tweet her food thus speaks to the era, one marked by extraordinary interest in the subject among Americans,

Joy Garnett, *Kitchen Studio*, 2011, installation detail from *With Food In Mind* at The Center For Book Arts, New York  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





can have a direct hand in changing things,” and making a difference in how society functions.

From Twitter to Facebook to Flickr to Tumblr, Garnett appears to revel in the “hands-on-ness” of social media, perhaps as much as she relishes painting and cooking. Yet throughout, she is ever the incisive critic—sometimes with darkly humorous flair. *Recipes for a Disaster*, a book project that she has not yet realized but conceived prior to embarking on *Tweet Cuisine*, brings M.F.K. Fisher to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in a set of recipes for a post-apocalyptic future. They include “E.coli Edamame with Spiral Jetty Sea Salt,” “Hot Crossed Botulism Buns,” “Bird Flu Frittata,” “Nuclear Savannah River Cod Cake with Tritium Fennel” and “Wild Salmonella Tartar.” If the act of writing a recipe represents a moment between looking back on the past and forward to the future,<sup>6</sup> Garnett sees an end that will not only be disastrous, but also, very likely, man-made. Taking time to prepare a knowingly contaminated meal indeed seems absurd. But when the world is coming to an end, this might be understood as a last supper to acknowledge and then hasten one’s imminent death. Then again, when people are being displaced and annihilated by wars and natural disasters, food and cooking—not to mention humour

a so-called national food obsession that goes hand-in-hand with the rise of “food porn” in popular culture. Photo sharing sites like Foodgawker and Food Porn Daily evince this sort of craving for the gastronomic. This of course coincides with the American obesity epidemic; and conversely, the growth of local and sustainable, or “good” food movements across the nation.

Author Michael Pollan, whose book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) has helped to spread the gospel of America’s local/sustainable movement, suggests that a distinguishing trait of this generation of food enthusiasts and activists is an equal—or conflated—interest in the ethics and aesthetics of food: “The fact is, slow food and other elements of the food movement are proposing that the best choice, the most beautiful choice, is often the most sustainable choice.”<sup>4</sup> And sometimes that choice will be the thing that one toils and cooks—and maybe photographs—with his or her own hands. Of all the cultural memes at play in *Kitchen Studio*, the trend towards D.I.Y. seems key to the relationship between food, art and social media at play in the work—saying nothing, yet, of the apocalyptic sublime. Before D.I.Y. became a marketing ploy for overpriced and artisanal products, it might have been characterized as a countercultural rejection of mass production in favour of ingenuity, or people just trying to save money by making their own goods. Now, D.I.Y. is widespread and even fashionable. When it comes to food, local/sustainable interests coupled with a weakened economy have spawned a “do-it-yourself food movement” that says, “You can’t get more local than your own kitchen.”<sup>5</sup> In visual art and culture, the impetus to take things back into our own hands, so to speak, is manifest in a renaissance of the handcrafted and homemade. (Consider, for instance, that more artists are actually growing food as part of their practice.) All of these things together are consistent with the spirit of social media where, as Garnett has said, “the implication is that everyone



Joy Garnett, *o.p.p.*, 2010, oil on canvas, 153 cm x 178 cm  
COURTESY OF WINKLEMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Joy Garnett, studio shot showing *Sploosh*, 2010, oil on canvas, 137 cm x 153 cm  
COURTESY OF WINKLEMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Joy Garnett, *Poof*, 2010, oil on canvas, 122 cm x 153 cm.  
COURTESY OF WINKLEMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK





and art—are ways of coping, filling a void, restoring sanity. And in the face of tragedy, a will to eat, to nourish oneself, to partake in the pleasures of life, may well mean that there is a will to endure and believe that there will be a better day.

Garnett's decision to forgo text in *Kitchen Studio* is no doubt intentional. She says, "Sometimes, it's important to retain the storyline throughout the process and in the final work; but for me, in most instances...it is essential to discard specifics so as not to close down the multiple meanings and readings of the work." As such, the recipe box lends itself to individual experiences with the content, inviting viewers to leaf through, handle and linger over any photograph they desire. Looking through *Kitchen Studio* (or any recipe box) is comparable to Garnett browsing the Internet in search of the apocalyptic sublime, uncovering pieces of the past amid a profusion of content and myriad interpretations of the same event or memory. Who knows what warm bit of nostalgia or terrible episode the next flick of a recipe card or click of a mouse might reveal? *Kitchen Studio* escapes any definitive reading but still it begs the question: what is the effect—the purpose even—of the glut of food being photographed, uploaded, enacted and devoured online? And again, what is its relationship to our daily digital diet of horrors? From Garnett's point of view, cooking is like painting in that it "connects us to life" and is thus "not an

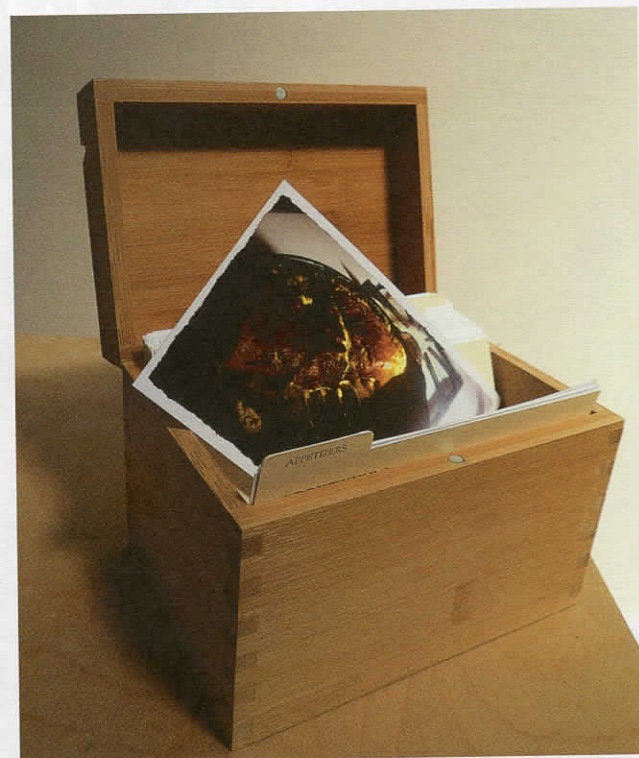
escape so much as an engagement with the real."<sup>7</sup>

As a final point, when the late cultural critic Susan Sontag addressed notions of reality and the spectacle, speaking directly to images of atrocity and catastrophe, she wrote, "Nonstop imagery is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has deeper bite."<sup>8</sup> Using ingestive metaphor, she reminds us that when there is so much—too much—information, photographs still have impact: showing people where they are, where they've been, and where they may be headed. At the same time, Sontag passionately reminds us that not everyone has the luxury of being a spectator. For this reason, we cannot assume that everyone has the privilege of tweeting his or her meals, or caring to look, any more than we can assume, for that matter, that everyone is eating. ×

→ *Nicole J. Caruth is a freelance writer and curator based in Brooklyn, New York. Kitchen Studio was first exhibited in her 2011 exhibition With Food in Mind, organized for the Center for Book Arts, New York. Caruth met Garnett on Twitter in 2010. Garnett continues to post her food photos to her general Tumblr account, www.joygarnett.tumblr.com.*

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 The hashtag (#) symbol is used in Twitter to categorize content. Garnett ceased using #cookstir as well as the eponymous blog after receiving a cease-and-desist letter from the lawyers representing a similarly named recipes website.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, quotes appearing in this article are taken from John Armitage, "Apocalypse Now: An interview with Joy Garnett," *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 2011, 59–78.
- 3 Nicole J. Caruth, "Gastro-Vision: Martha Rosler's Kitchen Mise-en-Scène," *Art21*, <http://blog.art21.org/2011/01/21/gastro-vision-martha-roslers-kitchen-mise-en-scene> (January 21, 2011).
- 4 Ian Brown, "Author Michael Pollan explains the war on food movement," *Globe and Mail*, March 18, 2011. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/food-and-wine/trends/trends-features/author-michael-pollan-explains-the-war-on-food-movement/article1948060/page1/>.
- 5 "The D.I.Y. Cookbook," *New York Times*, March 16, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/03/16/dining/16diy-recipes.html#view=intro>.
- 6 Marisa Jahn, Candice Hopkins, and Berlin Golonu, eds. *Recipes for an Encounter* (Vancouver: Western Front & Rev., 2009), 21.
- 7 Quote taken from a conversation with the artist in April 2011.



Joy Garnett, *Kitchen Studio*, 2011  
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