

Enough on our Plates: A sensory journey with food waste turning muted colours into a resonant message

Joanna Rucklidge

INTRODUCTION

The body of work 'Enough on our Plates' was developed during an artist's residency with a social enterprise that redistributes so-called waste food within Sheffield. The project culminated in multi-coloured screen prints using inks made from disposed food. Life-size images of salvaged - and yet - edible food were printed using a colour palette dictated by inks derived from compostable waste foodstuffs. These unique botanical inks' muted tones defined the character and subtlety of intended messages about impactful statistics on food waste issues in the UK.

Tonnes of food is disposed of before it ever reaches a consumer. Some misconceptions include that food is only thrown away in supermarkets when it is near or past its sell-by date, but often, it is cleared off shelves as stocks change, seasons shift, and consumer demand progresses. This leads to vast sums of edible food becoming an expensive storage problem for businesses; the cheapest option being to dispose of it. The environmental impact of plane travel is widely understood, but consumers know less about how having shelves of fresh and varied food available everyday also has a significant impact.

'Food waste emits three times more carbon than aviation.' (Ritchie, 2020)

TASTE – COLLECT, COOK, EAT, SAVOUR, CONSUME

As a waste-aware consumer, I support Food Works Sheffield (FWS) by purchasing a box of food every week. (Figure 1) FWS recovers unused food from businesses and producers, ensuring it is put to good use, offering it to the public in their market and cafes. They also grow small quantities of

fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs on their small urban farm (thefoodworks.org). These enterprises significantly reduce the environmental impact of food's lifecycle, countering the negative and polluting effect of food production, delivery and disposal – either by salvaging and redirecting food away from incineration or growing and delivering food locally. FWS saves 500 tonnes of food per year. (The Food Works, 2022)



Set of 4 screenprints printed with food waste

In my creative practice, I began visually documenting the foods I received each week, listing each item, drawing around them and taking rubbings. The fresh food would sometimes need to be eaten immediately, which my family and I duly did. My documentation process forced me to dwell with these 'disposed of' items whilst being mindful of the enormous amount of time, effort and resources that have been invested to grow, harvest, process, package, transport and promote them, let alone the additional collecting, organising, and redistribution. My question became, can a creative visual record attract attention to these degraded and often overlooked items before they are consumed and disappear altogether?



Figure 1

I began to segregate and divert waste from my kitchen compost by collecting and storing offcuts, skins, surplus and perished parts of fruit and vegetables to create ink. Food that once looked bright, fresh and appetising was now non-palatable yet still retained various colours. (Figure 2)



Figure 2

TOUCH - HANDLE, CUT, STIR, SQUEEZE, SCOOP

For decades, I have been interested in 'rubbish' - the resources lost through consumer habits. I have observed, explored, collected, processed and visually articulated responses to found materials and disposed of objects. I have often used printmaking to capture unique marks from pre-used surfaces and shapes. I have carefully considered the materials I have used to ensure minimum environmental impact.

This project was distinct, however, as the things I collected, unlike litter, could no longer persist in the environment but were more transient, temporary and degradable substances. I created an inventory that included manufacturing and provenance by listing the foods in my weekly box. I collected surplus vegetable offcuts and coffee grounds from the FWS café, and I also visited their farm to pick surplus redcurrants, nettles, chard, marigolds, and amaranth. (Figure 3) All items I selected were based on the hypothesis that their pigment might make attractive, useable ink colours. Despite printmaking for years, this was my first experience making my inks - a wholly new and experimental approach.



Figure 3

It has struck me before that handling discarded and de-valued materials changes my relationship and connection with them. The same was true for picking, collecting and keeping botanical waste in various forms, from fresh and bright to soggy, mouldy and smelly. I began to recognise new potential in the smallest amount of compostable kitchen waste, anticipating its regeneration into an exciting unknown ink.

SMELL - SOAK, SIMMER, STEAM, CONDENSE, SNIFF

The method involved cutting foodstuffs, soaking, then simmering in



Figure 4

Figure 1. Patron Box (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Digital photo.

Figure 2. Collected compost (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Digital photo.

Figure 3. Redcurrants (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Digital photo.

Figure 4. Pots of inks (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Digital photo.

water before straining the solids to create a tincture. The tincture was then liquidised with Indalca - a guar gum-based thickener that can be combined with pigments - to thicken it, rendering it suitable as a screenprinting ink. Alum or Aluminium lactate - manufactured from lactic acid (sugar, starch or lactose) - was added as a fixative to improve light fastness. (Figure 4)

This process of making ink from kitchen waste proved to be very 'fragrant', and the smell dominated my kitchen. The fridge, where I stored the ink, also had a strong aroma, and I received regular complaints and negative responses from my family members. Despite this, I found these food-based inks' organic smell and slippery texture pleasant to work with. For other elements of this project, I had used a water-based acrylic polymer ink to print onto fabric, which, while classified as low-toxic, has a dramatically different 'unnatural' aroma. I found my food inks preferable to work with, feeling safer and assured with the smell and the ink contacting my skin.

SEE – SUBTLE, INSIPID, PALE, GENTLE, FADED

I usually prefer to work with bright, high-contrast colours. When I collect litter, it is often the jumble of coloured plastic and packaging that attracts my attention. I like primary, fluorescent and bold colours. With the inks and prints I made for FWS, the colours were subtle, gentle and subdued. The palette included greys, greens, browns and purples – not colours I would ever actively choose. However, my appreciation for the resulting ink colours grew enormously through the long process of collecting, making and printing. Much to my surprise, I began to love the sympathetic relationships the colours have with one another and the unique story each one can tell. Making each print became an exciting process of not knowing quite what the results would be.

The subject of each print in the edition was chosen to capture a category from FWS's data about their annual salvage rates. The print of a bag of bagels was to represent 42,566kg of bakery goods saved in one year. It was printed with inks made from wilted daffodils, onion skins, shrivelled grapes, avocado stones and skins. (Figure 5) The print of a box of eggs represents 5,702kg of eggs saved, printed with inks made from red cabbage offcuts, avocado stones and skins, wilted daffodils and surplus redcurrants. (Figure 6) The print of cream and yoghurt represents 32,637kg of dairy produce saved, printed with inks made from avocado stones and skins, spent coffee grounds, surplus redcurrants, composted strawberries and grapes. (Figure 7) The print of a packet of chicken in breadcrumbs represents the 22,893kg of meat and fish products saved, printed with inks made from surplus edible red amaranth plants, black grapes and brown onion skin. (Figure 8)

The colours chosen were unrelated to the food type but were selected from the inks available from the set I created. Those colours are directly dictated by their surplus, seasonality, geography and some of my consumer choices, such as strawberries and grapes. It was only

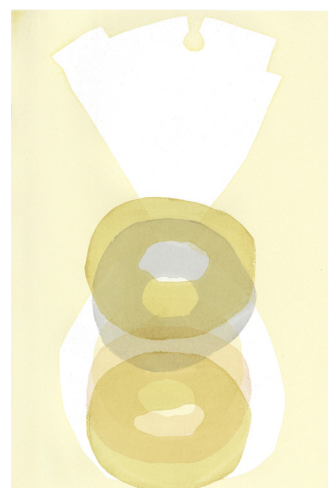


Figure 5

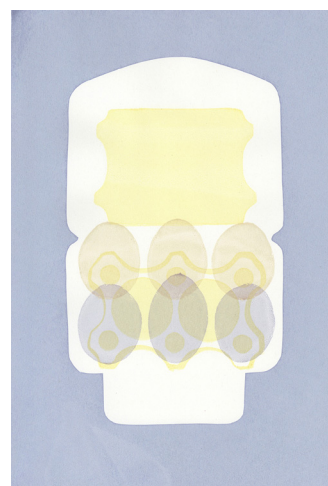


Figure 6

Figure 5. Bagels (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Screenprint with food waste ink, 420 x 297mm
 Figure 6. Eggs (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Screenprint with food waste ink, 420 x 297mm

recently, following Winter, that I used other plants, e.g. beetroot – a colour that people frequently asked me about trying but was not naturally available during the summer months of this project.

HEAR – MUTED, PURE, CALM, DEEP, RESONANT

The sound of colour can come from its name, usually found on a label. Standard screenprint inks, for example, the brand Speedball, come in colours like ‘raspberry’, ‘violet’, ‘emerald’, ‘primrose’, ‘fuschia’, ‘plum’ and ‘mandarin’, all pleasant and bright-sounding descriptions of what the colour resembles. This project, and making my own inks, revealed that the colour *of* something differs significantly to the colour *from* something. I enjoyed the contrast between the description of my inks and their sources, e.g. ‘shrivelled grapes’, ‘mouldy strawberries’ or ‘wilted daffodils’, compared with the colours from those substances. Pale greys, browns, or greens, respectively, do not necessarily appear to relate to the ingredients, but can still be described aesthetically and poetically with ethereal, subdued, and gentle language. The prints were acting as ghostly memorials to the food and the end of their useful life.

CONCLUSION

This experiment is ongoing. My next objective is to monitor the inks over time to understand how they might fade and change in daylight. The colour that once recorded a whole host of natural and human activity and their connection to one another, might eventually completely disappear. In my interview with Rene Meijer, the CEO of Food Works Sheffield, he explained one of the motivations for the enterprise: ‘People tend to look at convenience as something free that has no consequences. Expecting an abundance of choice needs to be challenged.’ (Meijer, 2023). By contributing to the circular food-waste economy, I supported FWS by donating proceeds from the sale of the prints to their project, enabling more food to be saved and redistributed. Thanks to those quiet colours, the prints have had lasting impact and resonance.

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Figure 7

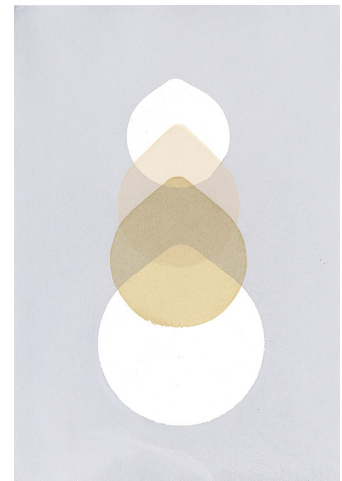


Figure 8

Figure 7. Chicken Kiev (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Screenprint with food waste ink, 420 x 297mm
 Figure 8. Dairy (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Screenprint with food waste ink, 420 x 297mm

Jacksonsart.com. Available from: <https://www.jacksonsart.com/search/?q=speedball+screen+ink> [Accessed December 2024]

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Joanna Rucklidge is an artist, designer and senior lecturer in visual communication. Rucklidge has worked in design education for over 25 years, consistently interested by how pedagogical experiences relate to environmental awareness and behaviour change. Within her practice, she tackles issues around the visual identity and value of waste whilst aiming to promote waste minimisation & re-use. She works with found material and disposed of objects, often using printmaking to translate and create responses to the utilitarian and ubiquitous resources found in bins, skips and litter. She has produced work for exhibitions, installations, murals, screenings and festivals.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Patron Box (2023), Joanna Rucklidge. Digital photo.

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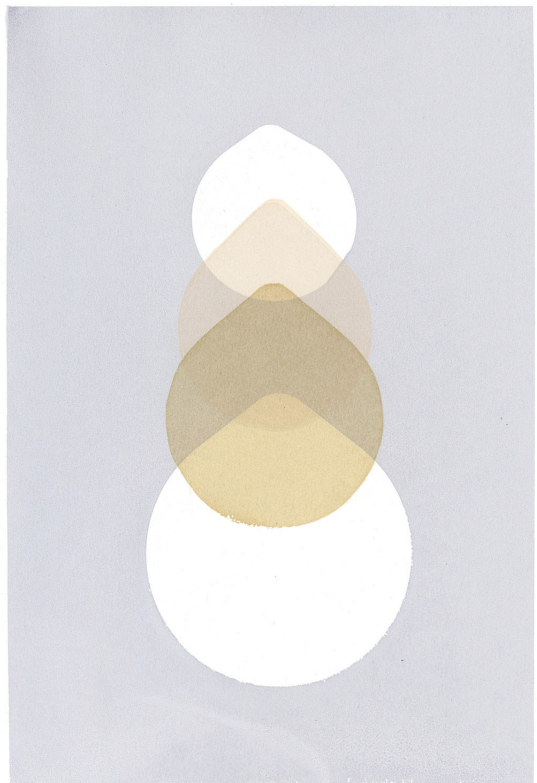
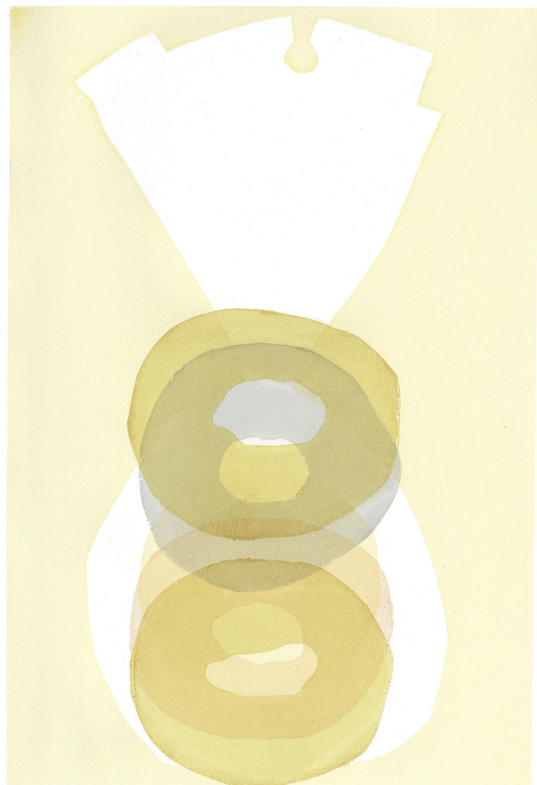
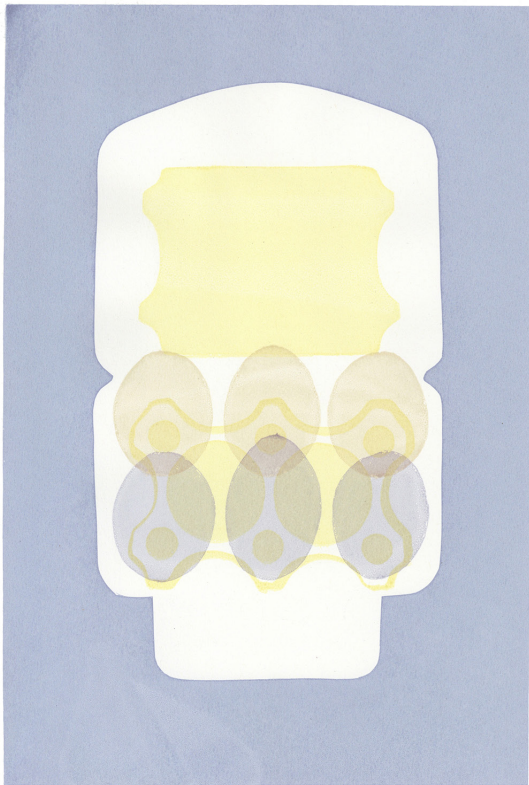


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