

Art as Research: An Excavation of the Heart

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This is part of the special section, [Art as Research](#).

I look, see, experience, and translate; move beyond the hunch into the idea; to manifest, document and report back to my viewer in the form of images, structures and installations, what I have found.

Can I call what I do as an artist “research” even as it stands one step behind the lines drawn for what constitutes a scientific search for an agreed-upon truth? Research with scientific protocols creates systems that can be repeated. The results when validated are always the same. The elements in water are unfailingly H₂O, but the emotional truth in what a human feels about water has countless translations and artistic outcomes. The light that emanates from a William Turner sea is not the same as the glassy green walls found in Winslow Homer’s cathedrals of waves arched and poised to crash over his men lost at sea. No matter the difference, they both capture a truth about water and the sea that goes beyond chemical composition or scientific description. Do we need this? We cannot drink it, bathe in it, or use it to cook our food. Is seeking emotional or spiritual truth when contemplating Homer’s arcing wave as useful or as valuable to human existence as the truth of H₂O delivered in a cup?

What joins my inquiry to a more traditional research process is the rigor and extent to which I am willing to expose and hold myself to an emotional, social, or spiritual truth. If, for example, I want my viewer to join me in the experience of what it means to live in a world where I must kill what I eat, I have to move from the place in my mind where grocery stores, delicatessens, cafés, and restaurants exist. I must believe that the food (i.e., the chicken or fish that appears in an image) is there because I have lived through each step of the capturing, killing, preparing, and offering of it in that image of dinner.

To arrive at that point, I take away my shelter, car, and all thoughts of modern food delivery systems; strip my mind of the well-supplied pantry and freezer to face the barren need: we must eat. Do I forgo the social convention that does not permit me to personally kill another mammal? I ask because even as I write I’m required by my personal rigor to stretch my definition of what is acceptable when taking a life. I am not innocent. I kill other living beings such as flies, roaches, rats, and — other unnamed things. Is this necessary? I will question that. My research demands that I excavate my internal landscape, unearth my personal experiences and buried stories, those I’ve told and ones told to me.

I exhume my dreams and nightmares, both beautiful and terrifying. There is no order here. The fish smiles, the landscape moves of its own accord past my window. I am in a bottomless ocean off a white sandy beach. My mother is alive and wearing a big yellow skirt. She is younger than I’ve ever seen her before. We are together in a room in a life that we did not share. But I would know her anywhere. I am

not in charge of what the imagination conjures, but I can use the crazy logic of its universe, where gravity does not apply and light shines from inside my eyes. I am responsible for everything I do in this life, especially how I tell you what scares me. I'm not here to shock or numb, that takes no imagination. I want to enter your bloodstream through a common cut where the body lives if the wound is not too deep. The results are seen, described, and shaped in visual notes taken along the way.

This inquiry leads me down a spiral staircase to the place where I lift the bar and open the gate. I stand on the brink of fear where the foreboding I imagine is the thing I feel. Divested of all self-protection, the heart lies bare. Truth comes when I win the battle against editing my feelings for appropriateness. Am I embarrassed, attracted, or intrigued by the smell, lust, or excitement? Am I disappointed, scared, distraught, dumfounded, nonplussed? My need to know, desire to express in visual form, or words, what it feels like is intensified. I want — no, need — to kill in order to create, make, and visualize that dinner I share with my viewer that goes beyond a mere description of the meal. That is my H2O in a cup.

It's a table. It's a family. It's a dinner. I need an authentic place to start. I'm back in a basement in my great-aunt's house. I am six years old, wide eyed, standing in a circle with women clad in aprons over full skirts. One of the old ladies grabs a chicken; fist up, she marks the air in an arc as she swings the chicken down hard. With a snap it hits the wood block. Ax leveled, in one stroke, whack — the head is off. Blood spurts, hot before it is directed down to drain away from us. Quick, with sleight of hand the chicken is passed to the next woman, who plucks it nearly clean before it is stripped bare down to its goose flesh. Damp and exposed, it falls to me to singe off what is left of the feathers. I hesitate until nudged to get on with it. "Don't act like you don't know where dinner comes from." They all laugh. The goal of this reverie is to move from the pitiful role of "she who singes the chicken" to inhabit the brave soul who chops the head.

In the process of my research it is possible that I will discover I cannot or I'm unwilling to kill the thing for myself. Here I'm not only thinking of dinner but also of the motivation, impulse, and state of mind a person must enter. I peel away the last layer. I become the need. If it were only for me would I rather die than do this? Not helpful if I'm going to tell you this story. But what if it were for someone else? Would I do it for a friend who is dying or for my family who must eat? Urgency is the operative word. I press, capture, hold, and focus on the urgent place. Put my finger in the stigmata. Belief overcomes fear. In the new story I hold the chicken. Feel its heart pump the last blood through its neck as I bring the ax down.

The deed is done. The family is delivered to a beautifully set table at dinner where the bird or the fish is consumed. Beauty and death are the discord that holds the eye and heart. I dissect and live in the sum total of the parts by virtue of my willingness to expose my own plucked carcass that singes the bird. This is the proof that must be excavated to validate my process. If I am successful, it will shine behind the smiles of conviviality. You will swallow this.

Beyond the simple repast, a daily ritual stands out to touch something in the viewer who wordlessly

understands what has gone down to make this meal possible. Is that which has been killed honored, its numbers protected? Perhaps. What is the social implication for a culture whose members have lost their connection to how food arrives and what it really takes to create communion in a shared meal? I'm taken back to the beginning where everything starts, with death and birth and the mystery of what comes before and after.

By the end of this scene plates, glasses, forks, and spoons lie in various forms of disarray. Exposed bones and meat scraps are the detritus of a meal; they bespeak the aftermath of the feast. My research and truth tell me we are joined to that bird or anything that died for our dinner. We are the buzzards who circle, the cat in the bush, the wolf that howls waiting for the calf to die as it sinks teeth into flesh. As responsible human beings we must really or figuratively be in on the kill to know what is at stake or we are relegated to wait on the edge, to live on what is left of the plunder with no idea of how to make it come again. Imagine that.

Barbara Earl Thomas is a Seattle-based painter and writer.

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