



Art & Design

You say tomato . . . Jeanne Dunning stages a food fight for art's sake at Gallery 400
by Lauren Weinberg



Jeanne Dunning, *The Field*, 2005.

The largest tomato fight in the world is held every August in Buñol, Spain. The streets are blocked off and people hurl hundreds of thousands of pounds of overripe tomatoes at one another until “absolutely every surface is red,” according to Chicago-based artist Jeanne Dunning, who is a professor at Northwestern University.

When Dunning read about the fight, which is known as La Tomatina, in a magazine in 1996, she was struck not by the oddity of the event, but by the photographs accompanying the article. “It looked so gory and visceral, but it was just tomatoes,” she recalls. She became interested in the image of the tomato-strewn ground because it reminded her of her own series of photographs depicting various foods as unidentifiable one-color “fields” of viscous substances. But while Dunning was deliberately constructing her photographs’ bodily references, La Tomatina offered “something that already existed in the world . . . that was really the same thing.” She decided she wanted “to photograph the ground—that vast expanse of tomatoes—and print it really big.”

When Dunning discovered it wouldn’t be feasible to get the photographs she wanted at La Tomatina, she put the project on hold until 2005, when she was invited to do a residency at the California College of the Arts’ Wattis Institute in San Francisco. With funding in place, Dunning decided to restage the tomato fight with 11 enthusiastic art students.

The Wattis fight took place in a 20’ x 28’ white tile-board enclosure that Dunning constructed in a concrete-paved courtyard. It never occurred to her to invite anyone to watch. “I was adamant that the tomato fight was not a work of art, that I was doing it so I could get these pictures,” she explains. Once the fight began, however, she was enthralled: “I thought, This is so beautiful; maybe I was wrong. From that moment, I thought it would be interesting to do the fight again, but this time, with an audience.”

Dunning proposed this to the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Gallery 400, which held what may have been the world’s second-largest tomato fight last month (after our interview) at UIC.

Gallery 400 is also presenting the five-panel, 8' x 21' photograph *The Field*, Dunning's document of the Wattis fight's messy aftermath, which will cover an entire wall. A video of that event will also be on view.

The Field reflects Dunning's fascination with the ways in which we construct a sense of self. "For me, it was somehow about separating yourself from something," she says of the tomato fight. "After the fight, [the fighters] were completely drenched in tomato juice and they still had bits of red stuff clinging to them. They were still part of [the field], even though they had separated themselves. Where are your boundaries? How do you distinguish yourself from the other things around you? We're very invested in the sense that we know where the borders of our bodies are, that the line between what's part of us and what's not part of us stays pretty clear. And yet we know that's not true; there's a constant crossover between what's inside and what's outside."

The work also reflects the artist's ongoing interest in our relationship to our bodies, which she has explored through tomatoes before, using the fruit to evoke veins, blood and organs. Dunning intends her ambiguous images to show "how foreign and unfamiliar the body [is], because it is so easy to look at aspects of it and be utterly mistaken." She adds, "If you're not absolutely certain of what you're looking at, it lets you go with a lot of associations; it keeps everything in play. I think there's something really powerful about a little bit of doubt."

The Field is on display at Gallery 400 through November 4.