



WINTER 2017

Elvira Finnigan: Reception



Elvira Finnigan, *Reception* (detail), 2017, installation. Photo: Don Hall.

ELVIRA FINNIGAN: RECEPTION

JANUARY 14 TO MARCH 22, 2017

CURATED BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

Bodies salty as oceans

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

It's challenging to write about an exhibition that does not yet exist. No matter how clearly I can envision the as-yet-unrealized exhibition, surprises are always revealed as it takes shape. Often, it is only by visiting an exhibition several times, or living with it for a while that I feel like I know it well. And so, a caveat: at the time of writing this essay, the exhibition has not happened yet.

I look forward to getting to know Elvira Finnigan's solo exhibition, *Reception*, as it will change dramatically over its duration. The exhibition will commence with an afternoon tea party. Finnigan has collected an assortment of vintage pastel-hued, gold-gilded, English bone china cups, saucers, and serving platters, a silver tea service, and cut-glass punchbowl for the occasion. The menu for the tea party and the protocols of service will adhere to tradition: an appointed host will pour tea for us, and we will drink it with milk and sugar. We

will eat fancy finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off. There will be trays of dainties for dessert.

Is there any kind of party simultaneously more charming and melancholic than this? "Afternoon tea" is a holdover from the past – from many real and imagined pasts, actually. I'm from rural Saskatchewan. Though we drank coffee from Pyrex mugs rather than tea from china cups, no community or extended family gathering would be complete without platters of open-face or tiny triangular sandwiches and the ubiquitous "dainty tray," – the quaintly anachronistic Prairie term for a platter of desserts, which always seemed to feature a lemon, date, and chocolate option, along with peanut butter marshmallow confetti cake to make the kids happy. This spread reminds me of my childhood, my grandmas and great aunts, church basement potlucks and wedding receptions in high school



Elvira Finnigan, *Tea Party's Over - Teapot*, 2010, silver plated teapot, salt crystals, and *Tea Party's Over - Tea Strainer*, 2010, silver plated tea strainer and saucer, salt crystals. Photo: Don Hall.





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gymnasiums, and mostly, funerals. The last time I had tiny egg salad sandwiches and butter tart squares for lunch, it was because my grandpa had just died. “Dainties” my friend Linda recently remarked, “are funeral food.”

When the party is over, the artist will, as she has done to a variety of table settings, vessels, and other objects since 2006, pour dense salt brine into the near-empty teacups, the depleted punch bowl and teapot, over the scraps of food that remain on plates.

Initially, this act will make these leftovers and dirty dishes even more unappetizing – wet bread, salty punch, morsels of uneaten dessert floating in puddles on platters like flotsam. But in a relatively short while the water from the brine will begin to evaporate and the salt will start to form glittering crystals that will preserve the foodstuffs and fix them in place. Salt will obscure and obliterate the details of the table setting under a sparkling, lacy film. It will encrust the tops of teacups, softening hard edges and clean lines. It will pick up colour from the punch and tea. It may spill over the edges of the saucers and platters and the tabletop, the drips of salt water stilling into solid stalactites.

Finnigan utilizes the transformative chemical properties of salt to physically complete her work, while salt’s rich cultural history and metaphoric associations charge them with varied, complex meanings. One of the most common mineral compounds on earth, salt is everywhere – the salt that Finnigan will use for this particular installation was mined in Belle Plaine,

mere kilometers away. Salt sustains us: it is an antibacterial, a preservative, and an essential human nutrient. And yet, it also corrodes, dehydrates, and desiccates. It has long been used in religious ceremonies worldwide, in purification rituals and blessings, but also in curses. It is one of the oldest commodities, one of the earliest forms of currency. Wars have been waged over salt, trade routes and human settlements developed to ensure access to this vital substance. We know no other mineral as intimately. Our bodies are salty as oceans.

Here is what I anticipate: We will gather together. We will eat, drink, and visit, and then we will go. Salt and time will turn what we leave behind into a glimmering memento mori, a meditation on the passage of time, the fading of memory, and the inevitable stillness of death.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Elvira Finnigan is a visual artist based in Winnipeg, Canada. Using time as a method and salt brine as a material, her work employs a salt brine crystallization process to create poetic large-scale installations, video animations, photos and small objects. Finnigan’s work has been exhibited in Canada, the US, and Japan.



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COVER IMAGE

Elvira Finnigan, *Reception* (detail), 2017, installation. Photo: Don Hall.



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