



The artist Eduardo Navarro samples his own edible artwork before his opening at the Drawing Center, whose exhibition of his work, “Into Ourselves,” is open through April 22.  
Amy Lombard for The New York Times

## What’s for Lunch? Soup, With a Side of Art

Eduardo Navarro placed a paper in our cream of broccoli soup. “Perhaps if you truly want to understand a drawing,” he said, “you have to just eat it.”

**By Meredith Mendelsohn**

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We agreed to meet for lunch at an old wood-paneled diner on Flushing Avenue in Bushwick, Brooklyn. When I arrived, the artist Eduardo Navarro was already seated at a Formica-clad four-top, nibbling at a plate of mozzarella sticks.

I decided to save my appetite for the main course, which was sitting in a translucent pink plastic case on the table. I wanted a clean palate and empty stomach for what we were there to eat: his drawing.

Mr. Navarro, 38, who is Argentine but works in every corner of the world, had just arrived from his home in Basel, Switzerland, to prepare for the exhibition “Into Ourselves”

(<http://www.drawingcenter.org/en/drawingcenter/5/exhibitions/9/upcoming/1665/eduardo-navarro/>) at the Drawing Center in SoHo. He’s presenting 16 edible drawings there, displayed on shelves, through April 22, and I was getting a preview tasting before the show’s opening, where he would be feeding the crowd one of the images dissolved in a giant pot of soup.



Mr. Navarro's drawing in the soup. Amy Lombard for The New York Times

When he returns to Switzerland after two more feedings at the Drawing Center (on April 11 and 21), he'll have less to carry. But as far as he's concerned, those drawings will not have fully vanished from the world. Rather, they will have taken on a different form, digested by those who eat them and forever absorbed into their cells — and, possibly, their minds.

“I’ve always been curious about how babies, when they are here in the new world, put things in their mouth,” he said. “Perhaps if you truly want to understand a drawing, you have to just eat it.”

Mr. Navarro’s project is not just a provocative gesture; it is also a sensory experiment. He is asking us to contemplate art with what he called an “internal eye,” or through the stomach rather than the brain.

“This is not about the thrill of coming and eating a drawing,” Brett Littman, the Drawing Center’s executive director, said in a phone interview before I met with the artist. “Aesthetics throughout the Western tradition is very much tied to vision,” he explained. “The idea that metabolism and the stomach could play a role in art and aesthetics instead was one of the hinge points that made me want to do the show.” (Mr. Littman organized the exhibition with the Drawing Center’s assistant curator Rosario Güiraldes.)



The drawings are arranged under red heat lamps — the kind that are used to hatch chicken eggs — to begin the melting process before they go into a cauldron. Amy Lombard for The New York Times

Not all of Mr. Navarro's work involves food, but much of it calls on participants to use their senses and bodies in ways that veer from the normal human script. His projects may seem like absurdist interventions in existence as we know it, but often he's genuinely trying to create ulterior intelligence.

In the 2016 São Paulo Biennial, for instance, Mr. Navarro attached a giant brass trumpet-like device to a palm tree. Visitors could put an ear up to the instrument — or “hearing aid,” as he described it — to listen to the tree. This was to hear not the leaves rustling or insects inside, but the organism itself.

I am eager to truly understand Mr. Navarro's peculiar black-marker line drawings, which show comic-like, surrealist-looking entities, like machines brought to life or organisms that could only appear in a dream. They're made with edible marker on sheets of rice paper, the kind that bakeries use to print pictures on cakes. It's sturdier and more porous than wood-pulp-based paper, like a fibrous, chewy card stock.

The drawings are not obviously edible, but for the works on display at the Drawing Center, he inserted culinary clues into slits in the paper: bay leaf, a sprig of rosemary, a cinnamon stick. The drawings are arranged under red heat lamps — the kind that are used to hatch chicken eggs — and the environment is not unlike a stomach, the artist pointed out.



Scenes from Mr. Navarro's show at the Drawing Center, where he dispensed soup to visitors.

Amy Lombard for The New York Times

At the diner, I nibbled on a blank edge of a sheet and was glad the chewy, relatively tasteless paper would soften in hot liquid. We ordered a bowl each of the soups of the day: cream of broccoli, and chicken and rice.

“The soup is merely a vehicle to transport the images to the stomach,” he said. He has been fine-tuning the concept for the Drawing Center for the past year or so, first during a residency at Der Tank at the Institut Kunst (<http://institut-kunst.ch/category/der-tank/>) in Basel last November, then at the booth of his gallery, Nara Roesler (<https://nararoesler.art/>), at the ARCO art fair in Madrid in February.

“People at the fair were like: Is this real? Are we really doing this?” he said. I felt the same way when we began discussing which drawing to eat, but the artist reassured me. “If I ripped a drawing on paper, that would be destructive,” he said. “But the drawing is asking for this moment. It’s its destiny.”

He added, “it is not destroyed; it is just scrambled.”

His merging of art and eating taps into a concept from quantum physics — that information and energy are never destroyed — that has long preoccupied him. (To that end, Tom Banks, a physicist from Rutgers University, is leading a discussion titled “Entropy, Black Holes, Coffee and Soup” at the Drawing Center on April 11 during the soup tasting.)



From left, Felipe Mujica, Ksenia Pavlenko and Takuya Ikezaki tasting soup at the Drawing Center.  
Amy Lombard for The New York Times

Mr. Navarro's edible drawings fit into the tradition of food as performance or medium: the culinary manifestoes of the Futurists and Surrealists; the communal dining happenings of Gordon Matta-Clark, [Rirkrit Tiravanija](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/) ([https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/)) and Jennifer Rubell; [Joseph Beuys's](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/04/beuys-is-dead-long-live-beuys-characterising-volition-longevity-and-decision-making-in-the-work-of-joseph-beuys) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/04/beuys-is-dead-long-live-beuys-characterising-volition-longevity-and-decision-making-in-the-work-of-joseph-beuys>) use of chocolate, lard and dried meat.

But Mr. Navarro is an outlier, Mr. Littman asserted.

"I've eaten Paul McCarthy sculptures or Dieter Roth sculptures, but they are made from chocolate or bubble gum," he said. "But in the 11 years I've been here no artist has explored eating a drawing as a possibility."

Ms. Güiraldes and Mr. Littman (who begins a new role as director of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum in May) both suggested that Mr. Navarro's work might have more in common with [William Pope.L's "Eating The Wall Street Journal"](https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/02/arts/art-architecture-performance-hops-back-into-the-scene.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/02/arts/art-architecture-performance-hops-back-into-the-scene.html>) (2000), in which the artist sat on a toilet suspended in the air and ate pieces of the newspaper to "digest the news" or [Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy-mound portraits](https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/11/nyregion/felix-gonzalez-torres-38-a-sculptor-of-love-and-loss.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/11/nyregion/felix-gonzalez-torres-38-a-sculptor-of-love-and-loss.html>) of his lover who was dying of AIDS, in which visitors are invited to take a piece as a representation of his diminishing weight.

And while Mr. Navarro is not religious, it's hard not to think of the biblical passage in which Ezekiel eats a scroll so he can internalize and speak the word of God. Mr. Navarro also cites cannibalism as an influence, noting how some societies eat humans to gain their power and strengths. The thought did not elude me when I spotted a drawing at the diner of a bald entity with a giant eyeball connected to a coiling intestine — a frequent motif in his edible work. It looked like a totemic image from another galaxy.





Mr. Navarro puts the final touches on a drawing. Amy Lombard for The New York Times

Mr. Navarro gently tore apart the drawing and placed it on the surface of the soup, and the paper slowly transformed into a nearly translucent, gelatinous skin, leaving the black outline of the image still visible. “It’s like a soup tattoo,” he observed. It also added some welcome texture to the cream of broccoli, we both agreed.

After taking a few bites, he sighed with relief. “It’s liberating to think about the drawings leaving the archive,” he said. “There is so much mummification in art. You have to think about how it’s shown and how it’s collected and stored and archived.”

A few days later, on a cold evening at the Drawing Center, Mr. Navarro prepared a spicy vegetable soup in a giant pot on a hot plate. He dissolved four sheets of a drawing of a multinosed creature into the pot, and visitors were offered a cup as they streamed through.

“It’s a different way of digesting it, much more visceral,” said Jessica Kaire, who had also eaten a Gonzalez-Torres candy.

When asked if ingesting the drawing made it more memorable, the art historian and critic Alex Kitnick replied, “Ask me tomorrow.”