

Merlin Carpenter

March - May 2025

POLITE

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After seeing the paintings that are being exhibited in *Polite* a month ago at Merlin's studio, my immediate reaction was that I wanted to write a text that was a recipe for preparing a complicated, delicious dish. The reason why I felt like writing a recipe is that there is the assumption of repeatability, that the instructions and ingredients lead to a predictable tried and tested outcome. I also like the idea that if you follow a recipe you will get it right. If I follow Merlin's recipe straightforwardly, I end up with a meal that is somewhat expected and potentially, repeatable myself. It would nonetheless be his recipe that I am using. His method, however, comes from his decades long experience, his investment in his craft and his understanding of the kitchen in relation to the restaurant. Merlin knows about painting like a head chef knows about cooking! He can repeat a recipe each time with certainty, but does our confidence in the dish persist? Does it taste as good as it used to? Does he make the meal for himself at home as well?

The recipe I wanted to elaborate was at first Peking duck, however after watching videos about it I found a video called '*Two Master NYC Chefs Show How Difficult it is to Cook Perfect Duck / Great Works*' posted by the British tabloid The Daily Mail. Framed like a clash of the titans qua low stakes culture war, two different duck dishes are competed against one another. Both dignified head chefs; Chinese and French, were meticulous and highly skilled in their method. After watching and re-watching this video, I decided that I would point to both duck dishes: Peking Duck and Duck à la Rouennaise. Both recipes are equally ornate, thorough and need to be well practiced. It could be said that both of these recipes have been perfected. I could go into the intricacies of these recipes here (I implore you to check both out) however two idiosyncrasies in both processes remind me of the works in this exhibition. In Peking Duck the duck is inflated and in Duck à la Rouennaise the duck carcass is flattened in a specially designed press to create a sauce. Just to be clear, both dishes are culturally specific innovations.

Peking Duck is made from a meticulous set of instructions: the duck needs to be well selected, plucked, cleaned, trimmed, seasoned, scalded, basted, hung and air dried before it reaches the oven and plate. The aim of this precise technique is to ensure that the skin is crispy and that the fat can render out sufficiently. When it is cooked perfectly the skin should be maroon in colour, hardened and almost turned to glass. To achieve this the skin needs to be separated from the fat – we do this through inflating the duck. In commercial kitchens this is normally done with an air compressor. (Intriguingly, I've also seen this done at home with a bike pump, a mattress pump, or by mouth with a straw.) It is quite absurd seeing a duck inflated like an ungainly pool flamingo, its mottled skin overstretched.

The Duck à la Rouennaise recipe is less well known and less available than Peking Duck. This speciality dish is very expensive and reserved for luxury restaurants, tourist traps and cooking competitions. The Rouennaise sauce is what defines this dish. In the traditional recipe the duck is partially roasted then its innards, legs and breast are removed. The liver is kept aside, ground and seasoned. To make the all-important sauce, the remaining carcass (meat, bones and skin) is put into a specially designed press. A duck press is a heavy archaic contraption – it's normally made from solid brass or iron. A huge wheel is cranked applying pressure which crushes the carcass into a mush, extracting the duck blood and other juices. The extract is thickened and flavoured by adding the duck liver, butter and cognac. The sauce is creamy and rich.

To press OR inflate a duck feels like a secret in the same way a chef withholds their special technique. However, nothing is a secret anymore, there is a recipe and video instructions for anything that you would like to make – regardless of how complicated or obscure it may be.

The logic of this exhibition is for me like these two ornate duck recipes. The recipes demonstrate the elaborate lengths that a material can be rigorously and exactly transformed. Both traditional recipes also describe the commitment of a chef to a process that exceeds the singular act of making – to repeat both duck dishes is to repeat a cultural context and historical contract. Peking Duck was invented in Imperial China over 700 years ago; the first recording of its recipe was from 1330. Being a Peking Duck chef is highly revered in Chinese society and it takes years of mastery to claim to be one. Although the recipe exists for Duck à la Rouennaise, barely anybody attempts to make it. The Chef de Cuisine from the Daily Mail video said that he is the only person in New York that can confidently make it and serve it regularly.

Rather than being reduced to and by tradition, *Polite* is a complete re-reading of a traditional recipe. Merlin is uncooking, that is, unmaking the perfected traditional recipe (so that it is never cooked the same way again!) In the paintings there appears to be many specifics: a popular 90s font called Serpentine Bold Oblique, the Rough Trade logo designed distressed in the mid-70s, an outmoded haircut captured from the back, a naval ship from the Battle of the Coral Sea and the logo of Berlin Airport. The space itself is also specifically divided by huge egomaniacal coke lines made from reused marble dust. How could these things specifically connect? They are ingredients brought together with instructions to unmake the recipe. Their specificity is diffused in a process of becoming red on white, by doubling, by inverting and through being rotated 90°. Uncooking is in fact less like cooking and more like art and the role of an unchef is more like an artist.

To reiterate, just because you know the instructions and the ingredients doesn't necessarily mean you could actually make it. Making a meal from somebody else's recipe is tricky as there is still a lot that can go wrong. You might explode the duck you are trying to inflate or forget to add the ground liver to your blood sauce... Maybe, in finally getting it wrong, you realise that you need to reread the recipe and remake the dish again. Or potentially, try to cook your favourite dish so that it is exciting and fresh again, for yourself and those who are hungrily waiting to eat.



Adam Gallagher, March 2025



BER, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Bob, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Color, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



BER

BER, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Bob, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Battle of the Coral Sea, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Color, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Battle of the Coral Sea, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Rough Trade, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm



Rough
Trade

Rough Trade, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 170 cm
Untitled, 2024, marble dust, dimensions variable, edition of 12



Untitled, 2024, marble dust, dimensions variable, edition of 12

Please ask for more information via mail@jubg.space

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