**[A Feast of Thoughts – Nicola Churchward](https://hayesjulia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/a-feast-of-thoughts-nicola-churchward/)**

Food — once the provision of entirely seasonal nourishment — is a register by which our calendars, and their many predecessors, have been interpreted for millennia. Where primordial representations of sustenance-to-be-hunted speak both for the vulnerability of life and its enduring tenacity — peculiar fodder and fare, significant to events in history, have come to symbolise the stories of our humanities. For her latest performance, Julia Hayes presents the bare bones of a veritable feast for the thoughtful. One jubilantly fat, phallic and smiling carnivalesque sausage and a skinny Lenten herring, each spinning on a wheel of fortune. This is a game of seasonal supremacy.

The pagan festivals of Carnival and Lent are seasons born from the turning of the world. Carnival — or carne vale ‘farewell to meat’ — is a celebratory feast of spectacular abundance. In whatever form it may take, carnival denotes winter’s drawing to a close. For the British, Shrove Tuesday — and Mardi gras in French, or Fat Tuesday — refers to the ritual of filling ones belly with rich and sustaining foods, before forty abstemious Lenten days are met. Throughout history, the collision of these seasons has brought with it a tension, heavy and bright with impending moral servitude, and it is one felt firmly in and through the body.

The Fight Between Carnival and Lent as depicted by Pieter Bruegel in 1559 portrays a struggle fraught with aspirational desire; his work is a study of individual modern Northern European’s and their striving for piety, pleasure, or a positively questionable combination of the two. Yet in the Western contemporary age, when much of the Gregorian calendar’s authority has, for many, fallen away — these pagan rituals or Christian festivities have lost
their ubiquity, and the lessons inherent in the act of observing them now reside where? Hayes’ wheel of fortune spins out an eternal and perhaps increasingly internalised or personalised battle; while her stark gamification of societal and individual mores calls agency, for all, into question.

Dictated by the lunar cycle, Lenten — or the Anglo-Saxon lenctene — names the full moon that marks the lengthening of the days and the coming of spring. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the struggle between Carnival and Lent, as played out in historical culture, is a performance that works to symbolise the inevitability of time’s forward march — not only in recognition of the futility in attempting to delay a season’s arrival, but in acknowledgement of the natural order of things to come. In replacing the calendar with a wheel of fortune, Hayes asks us to embrace chaos and to consider a multitude of oppositional constructs, without the structure of narrative or ritual in place. Cyclical rhythm is relinquished and the outcome of a struggle between fat and thin; degradation or piety; virility against weakness; gluttony over abstinence; sin; integrity; right and wrong, is random — left purely to chance and luck. Where this game might provide humour, or provoke conjecture — even a sense of relief at the overruling of society’s boundaries and systems — it also acts to question the very validity of polarisation within any moral stance.

Oppositional symbolism has traditionally been used in order to provide an exaggerated point of view upon which weighty moral tales may be constructed. According to Hayes, ‘carnival’s revolutionary power comes from the strength of the crowd. The crowd is the fat man’ — previously she has painted his image in beaming, fleshy pink watercolour, delivering a picture of generosity and jubilation. For her Royal College of Art final show 2012, fatness reigned supreme: food with faces, donuts and orifices, buttocks, breasts, and nakedness on a French crepe canopy were all shown in joyous celebration. Yet, in conjunction with its opposing other — the thin and meagre, frugal Lent — Hayes’ portrayal of fatness sits at odds with contemporary news headlines that present obesity as sinful inspiration for reality television programmes made with the intent to appal, or as volatile political ammunition.

This game of roulette spins more than simple binary duos. Hayes asks her audience to consider where the oppositional divide in her symbolism lies and what its relevance is to the viewer — and it is here, in the capacity for dichotomies to split further, and again, that this dialectical game show brings kaleidoscopic effect.

What do a sausage and a herring really stand for anyway?

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