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Photographer Christopher Boffoli Uses Art to Underscore America's Obsession With Food

By Sierra Tishgart



Cheesecake Daredevil: Zed was showing off for the ladies again. Photo: Christopher Boffoli

Even if you haven't heard of Christopher Boffoli, the Seattle-based, James Beard–nominated artist behind "Big Appetites," you've probably seen his imaginative photos:



His work's on the cover of *Lucky Peach*'s spring 2013 issue; his second solo exhibition in New York, "Portion Control," opens tomorrow at the Winston Wächter Fine Art gallery; and in September, his first book will be released. Boffoli's signature style is juxtaposing tiny toy figures with real, human-size food. Food and toys, after all, are two of life's most basic pleasures. "We all know them from childhood, regardless of language, culture, and social status," Boffoli explains. His art appears playful, but Boffoli hopes it will address issues of overconsumption and food spectatorship. (And his clever captions reinforce his messages.) We spoke to Boffoli about the freak accident that inspired his career, his endorsement from Neil Patrick Harris, and the cuisine he wants to photograph next.

Your art recently appeared on the cover of *Lucky Peach*. How did that come about?

They approached me a couple of weeks before the issue came out. Considering it's on the cover, I was surprised to shoot it in mid-to-late April. But the art director, Walter Green, had a really clear concept of what he wanted on the cover, which made things easier. And on the back cover, he gave me license to do whatever I wanted. The concept was a guy in a rowboat in a sea of milk and cereal, and I thought that his destination should be a deserted island made of cereal.

What Walter sketched out for me looked like Lucky Charms, so that's the direction I went in. I had shot a scuba picture using marshmallows from an out-of-production *Finding Nemo* cereal, and I had it in my archive. The cover shot is mostly Lucky Charms, but I threw a few of those in, too.



The front cover of *Lucky Peach*: Issue 7. Photo: *Lucky Peach*

What inspired you to pursue this as a full-time career?

As a teenager, I got a camera as a gift and took pictures. I didn't receive any schooling for it, but if you take 30,000 bad pictures, you eventually start to get it. And then for about twelve years, I worked in philanthropy, raising money for elite colleges. I moved to Seattle for work, and about a month after, I was almost killed on Mount Rainier mountaineering. Doctors told me I'd never walk again. I got back into the office and I thought, *What am I doing here?* I thought it might be a good time to take a creative sabbatical, and I never went back.

When did you start working on the “Big Appetites” series?

I was in London in 2002, and I went to the Saatchi Gallery and I saw an exhibit by the Chapman brothers. It was dioramas of war scenes with figures.



That's when I first got the idea of using figures in artwork. When you're a kid, you exercise your imagination around a constellation of toys. Children are especially adept at dealing with scale issues, and it stayed with me.

Around 2002 to 2003, I made a couple of the first images. I had just switched to digital photography, and I wasn't satisfied with the quality. I tried another photo every so often. For the longest time, my 10-year-old niece loved the pictures, but otherwise, no one cared. An editor in Europe saw some of the images, and then they went viral across the world. Within a couple of months, I'd wake up to several interview and gallery requests. It was a complete surprise. I always saw myself as a writer — I do food writing here in Seattle — and I never thought I'd have a full-time career as a visual artist.

The captions that go along with the photos are clever. Do you write those before or after you shoot the images?

Sometimes I'll think of a scenario in advance. You can't just stick a figure on a cupcake and call it a picture; you've got to think of the context of what a character is doing. For me, the caption is a way to reinforce the humor and the action in the photograph. People connect with the image first, but the caption gives it a snarky bump.

One of the other inspirations was "Travelers" by Walter Martin and Paloma Munoz. They did the same kind of scale figures, but in snow globes. I love that their snow globes are whimsical and something from childhood, but the themes they present are kind of dark. Even though my work is funny, there's an undercurrent of darkness there. They don't tend to show up in galleries as much, but my favorite images are those with a dark edge.

How do your images serve as social commentary?



Even if the work is designed to be funny, it's supposed to engage people and to get them to think about the American obsession with food. It's such a complicated issue in the U.S., and overconsumption is a huge part of it. Where else but in America can you wrap your head around the idea of a 30-foot-high piece of chocolate cake? Portion sizes were in the front of my mind from the start. And then the way that we're also food spectators — there are gorgeous cookbooks and magazines — and yet people are cooking less at home and relying on fast food.

Which foods or liquids pose the biggest challenges?

You don't see liquids very much in the work. People don't understand that these figures are really small: They're 20 millimeters. Setting them up is really trying and tedious. A moving liquid is an additional level of nightmare. Plus, I live in Seattle, where it's a felony not to be caffeinated, so I have shaky hands.

Are you making the figures by hand?

I source them from Europe and then I hand-paint them. I often have to change them digitally or physically, like by cutting them. The European ones are expensive, but they're intricately done. The more realistic the figures look, the better the work is. And very rarely do I use the same characters. I try not to. Once I have an image that I think is successful, then that character is retired. I have thousands.

Does food serve as your inspiration? Do you look to what's in season or culturally relevant?

Sometimes the food is the inspiration. All the food is real. There's a lot of cheating in commercial food photography, like using white glue in place of milk. I want everything to be edible. I go to farmers' markets and see what looks good. Although sometimes I have the context figured out in advance,



and it's a matter of finding the food that's visually exciting. But if I see a food that has a beautiful color and texture, the truth is that it really isn't all that pretty when you start to look at it closely through macro lenses. You see all the imperfections. And then you have to style the food, cut it, clean it, and digitally paint out all the flaws in Photoshop, too.

How long does it usually take to shoot an image?

It depends. The [cover image of the book](#), which is called Zesty Mower, I shot in 2011. I wasn't even shooting that day. I found this citrus rinding tool in the back of a drawer that I had forgotten about, and I started making a rind. I knew I had a figure with a lawn mower, and I pulled it out, set it up, and shot it in fifteen minutes. It's now one of the most popular images in the series. Even though I've done this for a decade, I really don't know what makes a good picture. I just do what pleases me, and sometimes the world connects with it.

Neil Patrick Harris is quoted on the back of your book. How'd you land that endorsement?

My 2012 New York solo show was covered last summer by a website called [Colossal](#), and apparently Neil Patrick Harris saw the work and enjoyed it enough to [tweet](#) out a link to his followers. It was a nice, random surprise that gave my work a huge boost in visibility.

Is there any food or drink that you want to tackle next?

I've been thinking more about Asian foods. The cuisine is such a huge part of the food world right now. I haven't done much with Indian foods, either, and there's so much Dutch food that I love. It's staggering how much variety there is now. One of the reasons that the series has done so well is because even if you're not American and you don't speak English, the images translate.



Whether you're eating with a fork, your fingers, or chopsticks, you understand food. We all know it from childhood. And toys are another thing we all know from childhood regardless of language, culture, and social status. It's very human.

I read the article with Adam Platt and Michael Pollan and took away that food seems to be this simple thing that we all know, but it's much more complex than we think. It's a doorway to these other things: politics, policy, production, and obesity and health issues. We have entire television networks full of nothing but food shows. In America, it's our obsession.