

Derya Akay,
on Process, Labour and Time
by Greta Hamilton



Derya Akay researches the rituals of making a thing, eating a thing, letting a thing die, loving a thing and destroying a thing. His practice straddles process and product through meticulous acts of representation and destruction. These acts appear organic, with loose gestures, food and flowers, but they are almost always practiced. Derya's process-based way of working emphasizes the reality that practice is both a noun and a verb. In this interview, Derya discusses cooking as a metaphor for the process of labour – both collective and singular, immediate and over time.

GH: When we first met a year and a half ago, something you said to me about cooking was “time, not temperature.” I’ve found this to be really resonant when considering process and practice, which I think are about time rather than temperature.

DA: Did I say that? That’s nice, I should remember that. I think process is about time, and temperature with wisdom – time before temperature. My relationship to time is one that I’ve revered and have wanted to master. I think internally it gives me a lot of satisfaction to set the timer to 13 minutes and let something cook and know that 13 minutes is a good time for that dish at that temperature, rather than 16 or 11. But also, the satisfaction is in the moment when, 12 minutes and 40 seconds later, I think about that food and how much time is left, and there’s six, five, four, three seconds. Then I’m satisfied.

There’s also an idea that cooking without a recipe is intuitive and that you’re not concerned with precise measurements like time and temperature. In my experience, this isn’t true. I think people think this about process-based artworks, too, that a lot of it is intuition based. But I don’t think intuition is a substitute for measurement.

GH: How does time play out for you in the studio? Or process as a methodology?

DA: Cooking is a good metaphor for how things work out in the studio. I had a camellia that I dipped in beeswax. It was pink and beautiful at first but started to get mouldy over a few months. I put it in a bucket of sawdust because I was trying to get rid of it, and later I put it into the burn pile. Then I found it when I was digging for something a few years later. Time had changed it obviously, but it was so beautiful and full of meaning. It had become the thing that I wanted to make and couldn’t replicate. It cooked, essentially. At first everything is fresh and hasn’t developed its flavour. Then you let it sit and it does its thing – releases, absorbs, binds, settles, cools down – and it tastes good. I stumble upon this pattern a lot in my process.

There’s often a process of objects and past works resurfacing, or something that has been “cooking” on a hidden shelf in the studio. A work gets made for an exhibition, then dissolved back into the studio, then solidifies again into a different work, which may or may not stay as is. This is another familiar pattern. Something new that I’m doing is using resin, which ends up encapsulating these objects and gives a sense of freezing time. In that process, materials get stuck in moments of time and I’m not able to disassemble them.

GH: What is your interest in making objects permanent? Or your interest in preserving objects in resin or beeswax, or through fermentation?

DA: One thing is a desire to preserve a moment. It’s an obsession of trying to freeze time with alchemy in the kitchen/studio. When you have a flower, it’s impossible to keep it the way it is – fleshy and plump and full of life and juice. It only stays like that for your eyes as long as it’s not plucked from the plant, and even then, it wilts. And with these preservation materials, you always have to sacrifice one quality of the flower in order to keep it in that moment. If you want to keep the flower in its beauty and colour, you can take a photograph, but then you give away its form. Whereas if you dry it or preserve it in a liquid, like resin, you give away its texture or its colour. Or you can forget the actual flower altogether and try to make a replica of it using another medium. Then you’ve sacrificed the whole flower in its reality. It’s really hard to freeze time. So, that’s one thing – a desire to understand the relationship between myself and reality in time.

Derya Akay, *with bread* (installation view), 2017, various materials, 5 works each: 4' x 8' x 0.5', Campbell River Art Gallery, BC.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



It's also a way of exposing my unconscious, and a way of self-reflection from observing my desires. I observe that my desire isn't about wanting to appreciate the flower's beauty without touching or preserving it; it's about control. Working with these materials allows me to work on myself. The trial-and-error process, the appreciation of atmospheric changes, chance, oversights. All the consequences of time I exercise with allowing something to rot or letting something go wrong. It's not so much the desire of getting the perfect thing, but failing and learning.

GH: What is your process of representation like when you're dealing with organic materials? How do you create objects with a specific aesthetic when they all decay differently?

DA: It becomes a game of being able to predict how a material is going to react while preserving it. With flowers, you can learn which ones dry better. You can look at a flower and understand that it will never stay how it is – if there's too much moisture, it will decay. Which is totally fine sometimes, and you get the craziest mould patterns and mould dye, or a mush that keeps its form. When I look at work by other people who use similar aesthetics or looseness – like rougher gestures, flexible outcomes, or people using decay and organic materials – it always looks good, or real. Somebody else's relaxedness with their execution, or their incorporation of time and life into their works, always looks less contrived than mine. I have a lingering neurosis about how *real* my work is. Like when you bump a glass by mistake and break it, versus breaking it on purpose by dropping it. Is one more real? I give value to the *real* thing, the mistakenly broken glass. The purposely broken glass, the artwork – or my artwork – becomes a mimic. Or like, when you have a plate of food and you eat it and there are juices left on the plate, that's such a beautiful painting. But the moment you try to replicate the juices of a meal, it looks contrived. It's not the thing itself, it's trying to be the thing. You can get good at replicating it in a different medium, but I get into loops about representing something – is it true to what it is? Does it have to be the thing itself to be the truth? Is there a way of making it more true? Is that important, or can it be a representation? This brings me back to observing my relationship between myself and reality.



Derya Akay, *Poetry Painting with tray*, 2016-2017, aromatic cedar, zebrawood, padauk, Douglas fir, paper, acrylic paint, watercolour, ink, beeswax, cotton, ceramics, flowers, 48" x 38" 3".

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

GH: What is it about organic objects specifically that move you to re/create them in line with reality?

DA: It's kind of an obsession of observation, looking at things and wondering how to incorporate them into my practice. Everything is a metaphor, or everything is an idea for a sculpture. I think about my studio work as 100 per cent of my being – everything is constantly in relation to studio work. I feel pretty inspired by the world and all the things that are walking and moving. I said this initially a few years ago, but I feel like I've been on the Earth for a long time, but not as a human. I think in the past, I was a rock in a desert or on a cliff that was sun-facing. I feel like I had millennia of observations, but only hearing and feeling. All the other senses are new to me. I feel like I get to have this body for as long as I get to have it, so I need to smell and taste and see and touch things on my own time. And I don't know how much time that is. I need to do it all as soon as possible all of the time. I need to break fears and get into the dumpster sometimes to ask, why is this thing slimy and why does it gross me out?

GH: Your practice is intertwined with processes of labour, in that the objects created are ephemeral, or in an endless cycle of decay, consumption, preservation and destruction. Can you speak about your practice within a context of labour?

DA: One thing that comes to my mind, is that I'm interested in labour that is inherently feminine. Labour in relation to the social, or collective labour. I have been investigating that by inviting people to share their labour and their work and their practices with mine. I did a show with my mom recently, and a lot of that work was needlework, or pleating table skirts and using flowers and food. Those practices are undeniably culturally associated with women's work. There is a certain kind of collectivity with that work. That feminine space of collective learning and sharing, and sharing labour, is something that I find really valuable. So, that's kind of one of my motivations – to share these practices and learn from them in relation to how I want my own labour to be, and how I can share processes in my life, and what setting that can be in. Rather than a hierarchy, how can I create a space for an equally shared labour experience?

The metaphor for the shared meals was always in relation to the preparation for meals at the end of the summer in Turkey, when women meet up in a yard and prepare food for the winter, like *mantı* or *tarbana* or something else. One station does the mixing of the dough, one thins the dough, one station does the filling. They all bring materials, they all provide labour. And at the end of the day, there's a really big pile of food that they all share equally and take home. Rather than 10 different homes trying to do the same thing, they make their actions collective. It's social, it works for the division of labour and speed. People get more food by joining forces. That is a method of labour that I strive for and try to understand and fit into my life. I don't know if I do it successfully all the time, but it's something I reflect on.



Derya Akay, dinner event documentation from *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner & Supper*, Centre A Gallery, Vancouver, 2015.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

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Derya Akay and Anne Low, *Elaine*,
2016, Haunt Gallery, Vancouver.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

GH: Does this distribution of labour also inform your intergenerational practices? Can you talk about your interest in collective and intergenerational practices of sharing?

DA: Something that comes up during or after collaborative projects is how collective labour unlocks the layers of stories, secrets and knowledge associated with the medium. Food really has this ability to carry all of its cultural heritage with it. Not just its recipe, but almost like a poem in a different language of execution. The way someone's hand moves, or their method of organizing, sorting, preparing the process of making a dish. When I observe someone else cooking, I feel like I am reading a poem in a different language and understanding it. I think, in retrospect, this was one of my motivations for creating an opportunity for intergenerational projects. To be able to create a space for participating, observing and learning other people's poetry.

GH: How about your process of destruction, like the burn pile?

DA: The burn pile is a pile in my studio of things that become the ashes of my work. It's another way of organizing in my studio when I don't know how an object is supposed to function and I don't know if I want to see it again or not. I put it in the burn pile to cook. Not a delicate cook, but a rough cook. It's a "last chance" pile.

The last burn I did was all these parts of chairs that I didn't want to see again, and broken sculptures. A lot of first attempts and a lot of things that I didn't want to take up space in my world. The idea is that, I look through the pile and find things to rescue, then burn the rest of the pile to ashes, collect the ash and make a glaze out of it that gets fired onto ceramics. It's as magic as art can get. You have a thing that you apply energy to, it turns into something else, then you apply energy again and it turns into glass. It's a beautiful form of transformation.

Greta Hamilton is a writer and artist living and working in Toronto.