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A Slice of Pie, a Painting of the Sea

by Thomas Micchelli on July 12, 2014



Elaine Tin Nyo "Untitled (Sour Cherry Pie) July 9, 2014" (courtesy of the artist)

First there was a solo show by a painter's painter, and then a slice of sour cherry pie from a food based conceptual artist. That they were encountered on the same day was by accident and not by design, which is the way art happens much of the time.

The conceptual artist is Elaine Tin Nyo, whose practice includes baking one sour cherry pie per day in July, the month the fruit ripens on the tree, until her supply of fresh cherries runs out. The lattice-topped pies are shared with her friends and acquaintances, and other than an occasional [blog post](#) about them, that is pretty much it: a pretext for a visit with people she likes to be around.

Sour cherries are not an abundant baking ingredient — while Tin Nyo finds what she needs locally, in green markets and upstate farms, the majority of the American crop is raised in Michigan, destined to be canned or juiced — and this year came up particularly short, with the harsh winter wiping out an alarming number of trees. But the cherries' relative scarcity is not a deliberate formal obstruction. The artist chose sour cherry pie as her medium simply because she loves sour cherry pie.

The painter is Pat de Groot, a longtime resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, who turned 84 last month. I was introduced to her work by two *Hyperallergic Weekend* colleagues — Jennifer Samet, who [interviewed](#) her in September of last year, and John Yau, who wrote an introductory essay for the current [show](#), which is on view at Joe Sheftel Gallery on the Lower East Side.

De Groot paints what she sees, and what she sees is the sea outside her window. Each of the panels in this show (dating from 1999 to 2005), other than two snowy but otherwise vacant landscapes, depicts a stretch of water and an expanse of sky starkly divided by the horizon line. The upper section is rubbed and scraped (de Groot paints only with palette knives, never with a brush) into a calm, stable surface, while the lower portion is mottled with streaks of impasto.

The paint handling mimics the action of the water, with boldly laid-in knife strokes atop a wiped down undercoat: waves churning inward while the undertow pulls out to sea. These tiny paintings (all the works are 12 by 11 inches) are quiet marvels of paint-as-image, delicately rendered convergences of pigment and texture. It is the kind of work, savored from inches away, that is most acutely appreciated by other painters, their eyes roving across every swipe and smear.



Pat de Groot, "bright windy sea" (1999) oil on panel, 12 x 11 inches (via [joesheftelgallery.com](#))

I stopped by the de Groot show on my way to Smack Mellon, the nonprofit art space in DUMBO, where Tin Nyo is included in [FOODshed](#), a large group show curated by Amy Lipton (described in its tagline as "An exhibition of upstate/downstate NY artists who work with food and agriculture"), and where she invited me to share some sour cherry pie. (See Allison Meier's [review](#) of *FOODshed* in the July 1st issue of *Hyperallergic*.)

However, while I was en route, Tin Nyo sent me a message that the World Cup had intervened, and she had decamped to a bar around the corner, where the match between Argentina and the Netherlands was being projected on a back wall. When I reached the bar, I found Tin Nyo sitting with another friend from her "pie list" alongside a large wicker picnic basket. The game was still scoreless.

And there we sat for about an hour, talking about the ins and outs of cherry pie, soccer and a smattering of other, mostly food-related topics. At the proper moment Tin Nyo stood up and approached the waiter to explain why we were about to open a picnic basket and carve up a sour cherry pie, and, with his blessing, we did just that.

The pie was a perfect balance — a hint of sweetness over the cherries' mild, full-bodied tartness, with a firm but delicately toasted crust.

Tin Nyo is an artist of huge ambitions — last fall I wrote about an [event](#) she staged at the Museum of Modern Art during the run of its René Magritte retrospective, a four-course dinner (five, if you counted each of the two desserts) that incorporated the classically surrealist imagery of Magritte's paintings. And she is currently involved in a globetrotting project funded by a Creative Capital grant that will take her, as I explained in the article, "to five pig-centric cultures (France, Italy, Spain, China and the U.S.), where she will adopt a piglet in each location and document its life in photos, videos and books from (as she puts it) 'birth to ham.'"

But the encounter that afternoon at a bar in DUMBO was something altogether different, a private gathering with no purpose other than to spend time with likeminded souls, a respite from the nonstop bustle. That it was structured around Tin Nyo's sour cherry pie project gave it an extra dimension, just as the application of oil paint to a primed surface lends Pat de Groot's experience of what she sees outside her window an extra dimension, but neither seems to begin nor end in art.

Tin Nyo's practice addresses the production and distribution of food, but with a moral stance that I described in the earlier piece as "food as a memento mori — a preordained moment of mortality for the animals we eat that defers our own mortality until an equally lethal, if not similarly planned, moment arrives."

Pat de Groot is also working within a much larger context, one defined by the seascapes of Gustave Courbet as well as the paintings of the early Modernists and the New York School.

But she distills those traditions down to something that's intimate, jewel-like, and formally rock-hard.

What she is conveying with these paintings of sea and air, and what Tin Nyo is expressing with her pies, is a humility in the face of immensity, an infusion of the vicissitudes of daily living into art's rigorous embrace. For the moment, grander expectations are brushed aside, and time feels suspended, like a scoreless soccer match or the light of a late summer afternoon.

A chronicle of Elaine Tin Nyo's 2012 sour cherry pie season is available as an artist's ebook, [Sour Cherries 2012](#).

[FOODshed](#) continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, DUMBO, Brooklyn) through July 27

[Pat de Groot: 11 Paintings](#) continues at Joe Sheftel Gallery (24A Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 2