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### You Are What You Eat: Photographic Portrait Series

Danielle Carrick

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# You Are What You Eat: Photographic Portrait Series

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2011

Honors Capstone Project in Photography

Capstone Project Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Tony Golden

Honors Reader:

\_\_\_\_\_

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Honors

Director: \_\_\_\_\_

James Spencer, Interim Director

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## ABSTRACT

*You Are What You Eat* is a photographic portrait series drawing visual parallels between food and people. Each portrait consists of not one, but two separate images – a person and the food they resemble. The series pays homage to portrait photography and food photography but is defined by neither.

Each pairing is based on physical attributes of the food subject and human model. For example, the freckled face of a man is side by side with a sesame seed bagel, the pattern and coloring of both mirroring each other. Likewise, a tall, thin girl is perfectly posed to resemble an asparagus spear.

As I elaborate on the process and considerations behind each image, I will refer to each by a title combining the featured food and the first name of the model. For example, the image of the girl and the asparagus spear is called *Asparagus + Julianna*.

All ten pairings needed to maintain a visual consistency. To achieve a uniform aesthetic, all pictures were photographed against a white background. Through lighting techniques and some post processing, the backgrounds were made nearly pure white so that they would not have a discernable border when printed. Other color adjustments were made in Photoshop to enhance the connection between the subject and the model. The green in the skirt of *Asparagus + Julianna* was tweaked to better match the hue of the asparagus spear. The sweater of the model in *Orange + Aaron* was yellow before I adjusted the tone to complement the vibrant color of the orange. Similar steps were taken in *Marshmallow + Carly*, *Cauliflower + Doug*, and *Lollipop + Renee*.

The pairings are clever and lighthearted but nonetheless spark contemplation in the viewers. Their mind is still on the pairings even once their eyes have left it. They will have an altered perspective on every person they pass throughout the day. Suddenly, they'll notice that their mother looks exactly like a pear while their best friend resembles a cupcake. Every food will take on new meaning as well. Who do they know that looks like spaghetti?

The power of these images is in their ability to subtly alter one's perception of the two most ubiquitous features of their day – people and food.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am humbled by how many people have helped over the last year and a half. In order of appearance, I'd like to thank Eric Holzwarth for being there every step of the way. He was always available to talk and offer advice. He loaned me books, referred me to sources and followed up on my progress. It is because of Eric that I met Stasya. She introduced me to parts of Syracuse I would never have stumbled upon – thoughtful artists, great community organizations, and delicious restaurants. While I was working with Stasya in the summer of 2010 I thought my Capstone would be very similar to the Northside Heroes Project that the two of us collaborated on. Even though my final Capstone barely resembles such a project, all of Stasya's support and advice has helped me along the process.

I'd like to thank every single model for donating their time and image to me: Julianna Kiilsgarrd-Ellis, Michelle Robinsons, Aaron Katchen, John Sumpter, Doug Wonders, Carly Piersol, Renee Reizman, Jeff Carroll, Catherine DiGennero and Shannon Lins.

I owe my gratitude to Chief McClees and the men of Rescue 1 for being the most hospitable photo subjects. They gave me an elaborate tour of their workplace, let me ride shotgun in the fire engine and included me in crew dinners.

Thanks to Tony Golden, my final advisor on this project and Tom Kennedy, my first advisor. Thanks to Erin Kinsella for her inspiring ideas.

Thanks to Stephanie Keefe, who spent hours brainstorming with me.

Thanks to Catilin O'Donnell for approaching strangers on my behalf.

Thanks to my peers and classmates for critiquing my work, offering new ideas and etweeting my pics: Taylor Miller, Cassia Brooks, Alyssa Stone, David Miller, Matt Ziegler, Anthony Garito, Kuan Lou, Christine Mehta, Jed Greenwald, Ellie Sunakawa, and Mary Cappabianca.

Thanks to Bridgette Werner for reflective essay consultation and always being around to chat. Thanks to Andrew Hida for loaning me a CF card when I forgot my own.

Finally, thanks to the Honors department and the Multimedia, Photography and Design Department for their guidance and resources.

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The evolution of my Capstone is a story of excitements and failures, accidents and coincidences. It was a process of growth, exploration, fear and self-discovery - exactly what a Capstone should be. If ever an Honors student worries about their Capstone project, let me be an example of what can be done in a short amount of time. I've missed just about every Capstone deadline. I didn't have a proposal until October. I didn't have an Advisor. I didn't have a Reader until a week before the deadline. I also changed my project three (maybe four) times.

By the fall of my senior year, I had compiled several half-Capstones featuring images from projects I had the momentum to start but not to finish. There was the Northside Heroes Project, the Syracuse Faces Project and the Man and Vehicle Series.

I struggled with creating a project from the beginning. As a freshman and sophomore, Capstone seemed ages away. I was constantly reassured that I had "plenty of time" to figure things out. "Plenty of time" quickly became "a little bit of time" until it was just *time*. I took the Capstone seminar with Eric, hoping I would find the guidance. With each

class, my ocean of ideas gradually narrowed into a river, but all of my ideas seemed to sink.

I spent a lot of time thinking about my Capstone, worrying about it, and contemplating it, but not a lot time actually doing it.

All I knew was that my Capstone would be photography based. Even though I was in my third year, I hadn't started the courses that would differentiate the two possible photography tracks: illustration and journalism. As a photo illustration major, I hadn't taken Studio I, the first course that differentiates photo illustration from its sister majors, photojournalism and graphics.

## EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

The long list of failed attempts may not be directly evident in the final presentation, but my ups and downs were necessary behind-the-scenes developments. In addition, the ideas and concepts, which formed my previous attempts, still resonate in my new series. They represent my artistic transition, the impact of which cannot go unexplored.

While taking the honors seminar class with Eric Holzwarth, I described my potential project with words like "community," "portrait," "story," and "hero." Somehow Eric was able to string together my thoughts and suggested I contact Stasya Panova, a recent graduate who was an Americorp VISTA with the Northside Collaboratory.



The Northside Collaboratory would eventually be rebranded as Northside UP, complete with an awesome, new logo and a launch party. In the meantime, Stasya and I met to talk about, well, we weren't quite sure. As it turned out, we had similar project ideas. We both wanted to create a project to honor outstanding locals but at the time the final incarnation of the project was still a mystery. Initially, I was going to accompany her to meetings, observe, and see what I could learn and apply to my own project. I brought my camera. She brought her laptop. While she interviewed each honored hero, I snapped pictures, unsure of how they might be used.

Working with Stasya provided me a necessary crutch. My greatest hindrance is my fatal shyness. Calling people is frightening. Talking to strangers is mortifying. Fortunately, Stasya took care of all the scary parts. She made the contacts, set up the meetings and did most of the talking. All I had to do was show up with my camera.

The creative process with Stasya and the Northside Heroes Project mirrored the progress on my Capstone as a whole; there was an idea, there was some direction, but the final project would be as much a surprise to us as to the people of Syracuse.

Gradually, the Northside Heroes Project began to take shape (much in the same way my own project wasn't realized until after several proposals and failed attempts).

At the time, I expected my own Capstone to be quite similar, an expansion on the Northside Heroes Project that would span throughout the greater Syracuse area.

The difficulty in arriving at my final project could largely be because at the time of my proposal I didn't have the skills I would eventually need. The first two and a half years of my education in photography were entirely journalistic. I had shot for newspapers, magazines and web articles, but didn't know a thing about photographing in a studio.

I wanted the photos to have a life outside of the frame. They wouldn't just be nice images. They would be nice images that told a story and had a purpose. They would honor their subject and the city of Syracuse. Two of the three intents would stand.

When the school year began again, I tried to continue the Northside Heroes project, looking for my own subjects. After starting and stopping a slew of projects, I became increasingly nervous. Time was running out and every attempt had failed. "You are what you eat" came like divine inspiration. The project was halfway done before it became my Capstone.

In fact, the first two images in the series, the asparagus pairing and the pretzel pairing, were originally done for a class assignment. They were the first portraits I ever took in the studio. I started off on the right foot because even after the class ended, I enjoyed continuing the series on

my own time. Without realizing it, I had been working on my Capstone for the last year and I had more complete images than any other of my Capstone attempts. After trying to continue the Northside Heroes Project on my own terms, I realized I was not progressing at a necessary pace. I wanted to create two images of each subject – one photojournalistic showing the subject in their element and the other a straightforward studio portrait. After contacting a handful of potential individuals, it seems the schedule of their characteristic events would not work with my deadline. The timing was off. For example, I pursued a public artist who wouldn't be starting a project for several weeks. It was the end of Fall 2010 by the time I visited all of my subjects – spending hours in hair salons, revitalized parks and wine stores -- and realized the pictures were not as I hoped they'd be. I wasn't able to capture a strong photojournalistic image of each subject that adequately represented their role in the community. In order to salvage the work I had done and the contacts I had made, I altered the direction of the project to be environmental portraits of the same people. I began visiting fire houses, Department of Public Safety officers and Centro bus drivers. At this time my Capstone focus changed yet again. Each of my new subjects dealt with unique vehicles in their daily lives. I sought to draw visual parallels between their car and themselves. For example, the facial features of one fireman almost perfectly resembled the rear taillights of the fire engine.

However, yet again, my enthusiasm for a new project faded as roadblocks and hurdles gathered. I had used up all of my opportunities to start again. As I was editing through images to include in my portfolio, I noticed the ever-increasing number of food pairing portraits I had done over the semester. I had more complete images in that series than in any of my Capstone attempts. It was the epitome of a “Eureka” moment. I wouldn’t have to change my Capstone again because I had already been working on it the entire time; I just needed to expand it.

In the end, it turned out that I had been working on my Capstone this entire time. How did I not realize what was already in front of me? I sometimes wish that I had made the realization earlier, but, then again, I don’t know how I would have. In a way, the Capstone came about very organically. I was consistently crafting a personal project without realizing its greater applications.

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: IMAGE-BY-IMAGE

As I elaborate on the process and considerations behind each image, I will refer to each by a title combining the featured food and the first name of the model. For example, the image of the girl and the asparagus spear s called *Asparagus + Julianna*.

### *Asparagus + Julianna*

There are several arresting elements to this image. The limbs of the girl, tall and incredibly thin, perfectly mirror the structure of the

asparagus spear. She poses, leaning slightly with her head tilted so that one is not sure if she is imitating the asparagus or if the asparagus is imitating her. Either way, her wide, dark, vacant eyes seem to suggest that she truly is what she eats.

*Pretzel + Michelle*

The next image in the series compares a pretzel with a very flexible girl. Again, the shape and color of the human subject excellently mirrors that of the food object. The model, Michelle Robinson, is a member of the SU Dance Team. She was extremely flexible and aware of her body. The tonalities of her skin perfectly fit that of the pretzel.

I shot over 100 frames for *Pretzel + Michelle*, but *Lollipop + Renee* required fewer than 30 frames. The lollipop dictated the pose. The pretzel image, on the other hand, required the most shutter releases of any other picture to capture the most “pretzel-esque” body position.

*Orange + Aaron*

Like other images in the series, it was necessary to use Photoshop to manipulate colors so the colors of the subject and object matched more closely. The pairing between the orange and the model, Aaron Katchen, was an interesting evolution as well. It is the only one where the model’s face is not seen, but only five frames were shot with his head down. This approach is perfect for this pairing because the image is about color and shape. Keeping his head up would distort his circular silhouette. The

roundness of the orange was best represented by having him sit, rather than stand.

*Marshmallow + Carly*

Several of the portraits done later in the process, such as *Oreo + Catherine* and *Taylor + Strawberry* were thought up by peers or the models themselves. One of the most well received images is *Marshmallow + Carly*. It was actually the result of a suggestion from a friend who noticed the puffy, white winter coat the model, Carly Peirsol, wore daily and thought it looked like a marshmallow. The idea to add the flame came later on, but in retrospect it seems like such an obvious route. After posting the final image online, everyone wanted a pairing of their own.

In the April of my senior year, with deadlines looming, the pace began to pick up significantly. My portrait series was well-known among the dozen or so students in my major and everyone made it their pet project to find the next best idea. In several cases their support and inspiration were crucial to the success of the images.

*Twizzler + Jeff*

For example, a friend of mine approached the man in *Twizzler + Jeff* after spotting him at a concert. She knew I was looking for a man with a great mustache and got his number on my behalf. It turns out he is a Resident Director for Syracuse University. I had never seen him before he walked into the studio, but he and his mustache did not disappoint.

*Hershey Bar + John*

*Hershey Bar + John* is one of the more visually complex images in the series. While the others use foods with one color palette, the Hershey bar is composed of additional parts. It has a foil wrapper as well as a paper sleeve. It also has words stamped into the chocolate, which subconsciously forces a viewer to spend more time on it as they attempt to read the words. To create an effective relationship between subject and object, some styling was required. The model was wearing a gray hoodie with a maroon top underneath so I bent the foil of the Hershey bar to echo the folds of the sweatshirt. The richness and color of the chocolate pair perfectly with that of the model's skin.

#### *Cauliflower + Doug*

Doug Wonders is an Assistant Professor and self-titled "Studio Guru". His wispy, white hair is a trademark as much as his infinite and intimate knowledge of every feature of the studio. The shape and texture created by his hair mirrors that of the cauliflower.

#### *Oreo + Cat D*

The model, Catherine DiGennero, proposed this pairing between her and an Oreo. Her vintage, sixty's style dress has the same black and white lines and curves that can be found in the Oreo. For this image, I had to consider the angle from which to shoot the Oreo. If I shot it from the front, the logo would show and the cookie would create a circular silhouette, but the white cream would be hidden. I could angle it slightly to see both the shape of the cookie and the cream, but it created an awkward tension

that didn't reflect the model's pose. Based on these considerations, I chose to shoot the Oreo from the side so that the back strips of cookie and the white strip of cream would all be parallel.

*Bagel + Shannon*

Shannon certainly has more freckles than the average person, but if you were to meet him on the street, they would not stand out as fiercely as they do in this image pairing. Many images required delicate toning to bring out elements in each image. For Shannon I blended color channels in very specific ways to bring out his freckles.

The first few portraits, *Pretzel + Michelle*, *Asparagus + Juliana*, *Hershey Bar + John*, all came easily -- always something that had been swimming in my mind. As I tried to expand the series, my river of ideas was drying up. I looked at everyone as a potential food pairing, but the connection wasn't always strong. I didn't want to dress someone in all yellow and call them a lemon. Anyone can put on certain clothes, but I wanted people with genetic features that represented foods no one else could emulate. For example, not many people can twist their body like Michelle Robinson and her pretzel pairing or possess wispy white hair as seen in *Doug + Cauliflower*.

The ten subjects are an interesting slice of the population. Curiously, three of my ten models have ginger hair, while only 2% of the global population has red hair (Gazeta).



## METHODS

To be a successful series, the images needed to be cohesive. The underlying concept of each image is the same, but the visual aesthetic had to unify as well. I carefully considered visual elements like the background, lighting and styling needed to maintain a level of consistency. I chose to shoot everything on a high-key white background. Bright white gives the images a purity and cleanliness. I also chose to make the comparisons between whole foods– solitary fruits and vegetables, rather than dishes or sandwiches. This also helped maintain a simple, graphic element.

Every image required some post-processing. The most common alteration was to match the color and tones of the model and the food. *Orange + Aaron* is a much stronger image when the orange coloring of the fruit and the orange in Aaron's hair and shirt are nearly the same shade. Likewise, *Asparagus + Julianna* required that I alter the hue of her skirt from a lime, pastel green to a richer tone that complemented the asparagus spear.

Another consideration in each image was to ensure the background was nearly white. When placed side-by-side, even slight differences in darkness and color would create visual tension and disconnect. The best and easiest way to assure symmetry is with a pure-white background that wouldn't detract from the tones of each image or pairing.

In displaying each pairing, I chose to print some of them together on a page and others separately. The reason is that in the images in which models were cropped on the left and right (such as *Twizzler + Jeff*, *Cauliflower + Doug*, and *Bagel + Shannon*), placing the model next to the food would make it seem as though their shoulders were lost in the abyss. By printing them separately yet still mounting them together, the audience can still see the connection between the pairing without the visual tension of lost shoulders.

## FOOD IN SOCIETY

It is also helpful to frame this project in the context of society's relationship with food. The title of the series, *You Are What You Eat*, is derived from a popular cultural saying. Food culture is undergoing a revolution. The organic, natural movement is rising up to combat food's steady decline into an over-processed, packaged state. Dieting has become a \$60 billion industry (Rao). U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to \$24.8 billion in 2009. (OTA). Food has moved from the center of the table to the center of the stage. Food's relationship to people and people's relationship to food is in flux. It is more than a means for nutrition and energy; it has greater environmental implications than ever before. Factory farming of animals for meat is responsible for more pollution than all of the cars on the road (NRDC).

These images expand on the symbiotic connection between man and food. We are permanently attached to our food system to sustain us. It is not far-fetched to purport that our bond with the food system and food in general is so intense that we are one and the same – hence, you are what you eat.

## CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks: food is a ubiquitous part of life that defines time and marks occasions. People look to food as nourishment, to mark occasions and bring people together. But despite all the time people spend with food, looking at it, thinking about it and eating it, they only see it in a single context. My images create relationships between common objects and show them in an uncommon way.

All of the upheavals and last minute changes were ultimately for the best. This project suits me personally and professionally. Instead of chasing subjects across the city, my models came to me in the studio.

The images in “You are What You Eat” were not technically difficult to execute. The subjects were conventionally lit and most of the food wasn’t even shot in the studio but on my living room floor or well-lit stairways. Eight out of ten portraits used the exact same lighting set up. In addition, neither image in each diptych pair is particularly astounding. The full effect is lost unless they are side-by-side.

After viewing my images, I want people to carry the comparisons with them and begin to create their own. In fact, after showing my work to a handful of friends and classmates, I was approached with suggestions for my next subject. That is the effect I want the images to have on people. It gets them thinking. The image stays with them even after their eyes have left it. They instantly start to view their peers in terms of potential food pairings, often in unconventional ways. The marshmallow image, including the flame, was the direct result of one such suggestion.

Half of my work is pictures of food but it is not food photography. A majority of food photography consists of delicious, colorful meals with soft, natural looking light. The food is meticulously styled by expert food stylists that make a career out of whetting our appetite. They create brownies you wish could come out of your own oven, cakes perfectly decorated and steaming bowls of soups that have never looked so tasty in real life. It is undeniably beautiful and delicious, yet, as a whole, food photography is vastly similar. The proper techniques are widely known and well rehearsed. Few break the mold.

My images are not just about food. They are about the connection with food: its role in our everyday lives and the mind's ability to overrule a hungry stomach and see food as more than a tasty treat.

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## SUMMARY

Breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks; food is a ubiquitous part of life that defines time and marks occasions. People look to food for nourishment, to mark occasions and bring people together. But despite all the time people spend with food, looking at it, thinking about it and eating it, they only see it in a single context. My images create relationships between common objects and show them in an uncommon way. I have produced pictures of food, but they do not represent food photography. None of these images would whet a chef's appetite, but they could make him look at food differently around the kitchen.

This project suits me both personally and professionally. The images are clever and light-hearted and have the ability to spark conversation among their viewers.

As I elaborate on the process and considerations behind each image, I will refer to each by a title combining the featured food and the first name of the model. For example, the image of the girl and the asparagus spear is called *Asparagus + Julianna*.

*Asparagus + Julianna.*

There are several arresting elements to this image. The limbs of the girl, tall and incredibly thin, perfectly mirror the structure of the asparagus spear. She poses, leaning slightly with her head tilted so that one is not sure if she is imitating the asparagus or if the asparagus is

imitating her. Either way, her wide, dark, vacant eyes seem to suggest that she truly is what she eats.

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paper sleeve. It also has words stamped into the chocolate, which subconsciously forces a viewer to spend more time on it as they attempt to read the words. To create an effective relationship between subject and object, some styling was required. The model was wearing a gray hoodie with a maroon top underneath, so I bent the foil of the Hershey bar to echo the folds of the sweatshirt. The richness and color of the chocolate pair perfectly with that of the model's skin.

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The first four portraits came easily. The connections were immediate, always something that had been swimming in my mind. When I struggled to expand the series, my river of ideas was drying up. I looked at everyone as a potential food pairing, but the connection wasn't as strong. I didn't want to dress someone in all yellow and call him or her a lemon. Anyone can put on certain clothes, but I wanted people with genetic features that represented foods no one else could emulate. For example, not many people can twist their body like Michelle Robinson and her pretzel pairing or possess wispy white hair as seen in *Doug + Cauliflower*.

The most successful part of this series is the reactions they elicit from the audience. I love the expression viewers will have in the half-second before they connect and understand the pairings. Separately, each image in a pairing is straightforward, even bland. I did not take any photographic risks by experimenting with lighting or composition. But, when the model's portrait is paired with a corresponding food, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The pairings are about connection --

not just between the food and the model, but between the whole image and the viewer. After the eyes of the audience leave my pictures, their minds will still be thinking about them. They will go through their day quietly wondering what kind of food they are. A week later they may find the grocery store clerk to perfectly resemble a raspberry or their boyfriend's mom to look oddly like Challah bread. Either way, my images will have hopefully made a lasting impact.

