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An Artist Who Hunts, Emilie Clark Gets Her Gun, Then Her Dutch Oven

Close at Hand

By LIGAYA MISHAN MARCH 14, 2016



The artist Emilie Clark at home in New York University housing on Bleecker Street. Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

The artist Emilie Clark's first kill was a common goldeneye, shot down two Novembers ago on an island in the Baltic Sea in Sweden.

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She hung it for three days, skinned, gutted and froze it, then smuggled it past customs wrapped in polka-dot paper and tied with a bow. Back in New York, she put it in her Le Creuset pot with fennel and shallots.

Ms. Clark, 46, had traveled to Sweden as research for a series of paintings that she eventually titled “Meditations on Hunting,” now on display at the Morgan Lehman Gallery in Chelsea. It is a sequel of sorts to a 2013 installation for which she collected leftovers and food waste (milk at the bottom of a cereal bowl, grease smudged in a pan) from a year of meals she made for her husband and two sons.

She has always eaten meat and been conscientious about its origins. Still, she said, “It felt like there was a gap that I had to contend with.”



A painting in Ms. Clark’s “Meditations on Hunting,” now on display at the Morgan Lehman Gallery in Chelsea. Credit Emilie Clark. *Untitled TH-22 from Meditations on Hunting*, 2016, watercolor and graphite on paper, 95" x 62".

Hunting was not part of her upbringing. “I grew up going to anti-gun rallies with my mom,” she said, recalling her childhood in 1970s San Francisco. The idea of holding a weapon “terrified” her, she said. “It’s become an important part of my work to put myself in uncomfortable situations.”

She started with skeet shooting in Maine, then tagged along on a pheasant hunt in upstate New York (“a ‘Downton Abbey’ situation”). She remembers picking up a fallen bird, still warm. It felt strangely familiar from years of handling meat in the kitchen and simmering bones for stock.

When she first moved to New York, in 1998, she and her husband, a poet, lived in an illegal loft on Varick Street, with the bathroom down the hall and no stove. Somehow, she wound up doing catering gigs to pay the bills, cooking for huge parties on a hot plate.

In 2003, they moved to New York University housing on Bleecker Street. The galley kitchen dated from the 1960s. She celebrated anyway, marching over to Broadway Panhandler to buy a Dutch oven.

The flame-red enamel has gone nearly black, as if licked by a volcano. It is the most used and essential tool in Ms. Clark’s kitchen, even more so since she began bringing home game, which is leaner and, she has found, requires longer braising.

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Ms. Clark's Le Creuset pot, which she bought in 2003 at Broadway Panhandler.
Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

After returning from Sweden, she shot wild turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner with a newly purchased 20-gauge over-and-under shotgun. The birds spent hours in the pot. "I didn't get an A-plus from the family," she said. "They were supportive but slightly freaked out."

Taxidermy is part of her project: She preserves the skins of the birds she cooks. She is not squeamish, save for one detail. "I have to be strong for the eyeballs," she said.

She turned out to be a good shot, which surprised her. But she soon realized that hunting wasn't about chalking up kills. "Going out in pitch dark, watching the sun come up, feeling the temperature change," she said. "I had the strange sensation that my physical presence was void, with all this incredible activity around me."

Her watercolor meditations are almost delicate, garlands of beaks, wings and feathers circling that empty center. "It was about being, waiting, listening, all your senses activated," she said.

She added, "If I can die a happy artist, it would be if people experience my art in the same way."