

Julie Green: Flown

~~~~ Sarah Sentilles

Figuring

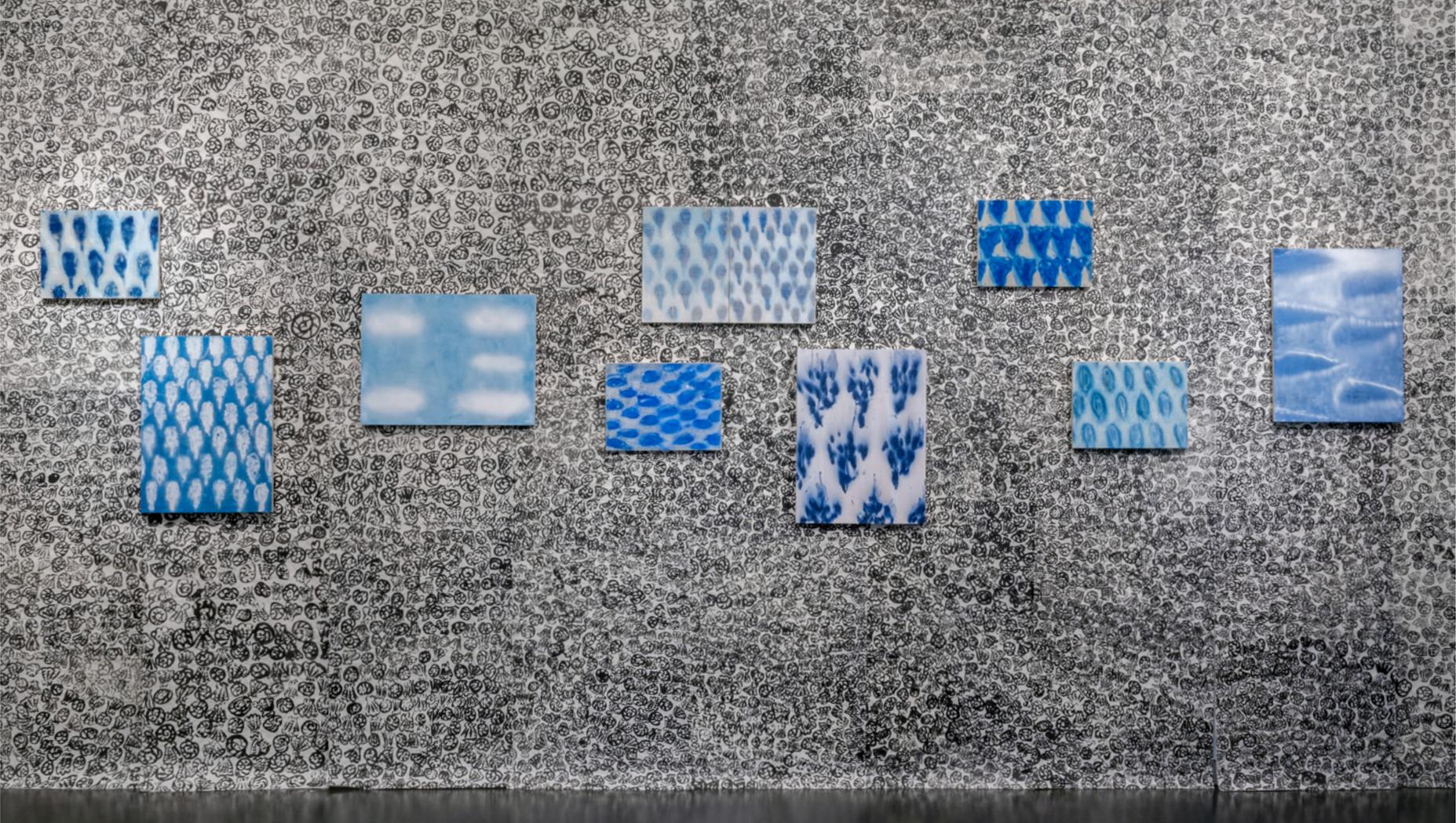
How do you represent absence? How do you depict loss? For two decades, Julie Green has been painting the final meals of people on death row. Green's ongoing series "The Last Supper" (2000–) includes 850 (and counting) paintings on ceramic plates, almost every one painted blue. Green looks directly at hard topics, and the artist keeps looking, keeps painting, for years. Yet there is delight in the work, playfulness, humor, a clear love of paint and pattern, of material and experimentation. For *Wallpaper* (2015), two hundred sheets of mulberry paper, hand-painted in sumi ink with thousands of seashells, covered the gallery walls in Portland and served as backdrop for "My New Blue Friends" (2015), blue airbrushed egg tempera paintings, abstractions of food (Figs. 1, 2). In *2-pack Trauma* (2017), 34 flattened cardboard vinegar boxes are the artist's canvas, and on each box Green has painted in acrylic and

Day-Glo a small oval scene depicting a personal traumatic event (fig. 3). The work plays with the idea of confession—the brand is Four Monks, vinegar can be used to clean and disinfect, and the date stamps suggest repetition, ritual. What does forgiveness look like? And who can grant it?

Though not used for most of "The Last Supper" series, flow blue (also called flown blue) is Green's favorite historical ceramic technique—blue glaze painted or transferred onto white ceramic that smears during firing. "What likely began as an accident becomes a goal," Green said.<sup>1</sup> Accidents, mistakes, misunderstandings. To be human is to be fallible; our beliefs are infected with our biases. "The most ethical thing we can say is 'I might be wrong,'" my mentor, the late theologian Gordon Kaufman, used to tell me. That doesn't mean we can't stake our lives on our beliefs. But it does mean

we can't kill someone else over them. Like me, Green was Christian, and like me, the artist isn't anymore, but Green's work offers a version of compassionate transcendence that troubles certainty. To know what someone ate before being executed—shrimp, French fries, garlic bread, ice cream, and strawberries with whipped cream—humanizes. Green's work reminds viewers there is a part of every person that is uncapturable, resistant, free—even if they have been locked away for years.

Theodor Adorno describes that uncapturable part of every being as an "elusive force," as "a presence that acts upon us." People, places, objects, and animals exceed our representations of them. In *Vibrant Matter*, philosopher Jane Bennett puts Adorno's idea this way: "We knowers are haunted...by a painful, nagging feeling that something's being forgotten or left



Sarah Sentilles

Pages 51  
and opposite:

Figures 1, 2.  
Installation view,  
Julie Green,  
“My New Blue  
Friends,” 2015,  
at Upfor Gallery,  
Portland, OR,  
November 5–  
December 19,  
2015 (Photos:  
Mario Gallucci for  
Upfor Gallery)

Figure 3. Julie  
Green, *2-pack  
Trauma* (detail),  
2017. One of 34  
cardboard boxes,  
acrylic, Day-Glo  
paint, 15 × 13 in.  
(Photo: Julie  
Green)

Figure 4. Julie  
Green, *Picnic  
Brownies Make  
Life Easy* (detail),  
2018. Limited-  
edition facsimile  
of artist’s  
ledger cookbook,  
publication  
supported by  
the Oregon Arts  
Commission and  
The Ford Family  
Foundation  
(Photo: Julie  
Green)



1966

**Filing**

|      |                      |              |       |
|------|----------------------|--------------|-------|
| 1-4  | Gar Tower            | 11-00 @ 1.40 | 11000 |
| 2-22 | arrow                | 14-30 @ 3.00 | 4200  |
| 4-28 | arrow trucks - chain | 28-90 @ 3.00 | 8400  |
| 30   | L. Poles             | 17 " @ 3.00  | 5100  |

5-2 John Stout Grand Barling  
 12 John Stout Loading (Beans)

1600  
 1200  
 4400  
 2500  
 1400 R. 589  
 500 11600

★

CLAUDE FROM PROVENCE SHOWED ME HOW TO HARVEST AN REMFULL OF TARRAGON, PACK IN GALLON GLASS JAR, ADD RED WINE VINEGAR UNTIL FULL, TOP WITH A CLEAN FLAT ROUL AND PRESS DOWN, COVER WITH PARCHMENT THRU UP. WAIT A YEAR, DELANT, FILL SAME WITH MORE VINEGAR E.

CLAUDE LIVED IN PARIS DURING WWII. CLAUDE IS AN INSPIRING PERSON AND A GREAT COOK. BETT. GARDON TO.

Wow! With the "M" Yes! Ja



HOMEMADE VANILLA  
 1.75 L RUSSIAN OR OREGON VODKA  
 50 MADAGASCAR VANILLA BEAN FROM BEANILLA #  
 SLICE OPEN BEAN, SCRAPE. PUT BEANS INWARDS IN VODKA, WAIT A YEAR, DECANT.  
 \*YOU'VE SEE WHY VANILLA IS EXPENSIVE

**2-PACK**

**Four Monks**

**WHITE DISTILLED VINEGAR** (REDUCED WITH WATER TO 5% ACIDITY)

**BEST BY**  
 02/11/19 C2  
 912018 B-00262534

002624  
 19:40:52

**TWO 1.0 GALLON (3.79L) (128 OZ) BOTTLES**



Figures 5, 6.  
 Julie Green, *An Embarrassment of Dishes* (detail), 2015. Cobalt blue pigment, 7-Up and simple syrup, painted and kiln-fired on a set of 1961 Noritake dinner ware, dimensions variable (Photos: Julie Green)

out.”<sup>2</sup> And the ethical challenge is to learn to live with this haunting, to accentuate it, remember it, protect it. Green’s art helps viewers learn to do just that. The paintings suggest there is *more* than whatever it is we think we know—about an apple, an orange, a prisoner, a plate.

Growing up, Green never ate alone; eating was a shared activity, led by the artist’s mother, who taught home economics. Most people on death row eat their last meal alone or with a guard. Green thinks about that when painting. The artist tends a garden and sent me home from a studio visit with a suitcase filled with tarragon and instructions for how to make tarragon-infused vinegar, a recipe included in Green’s limited-edition artist’s book, *Picnic Brownies Make Life Easy* (2018, fig. 4). At home, I rinsed Green’s tarragon, packed it in a glass jar, added red wine vinegar, and topped the mixture with a clean flat rock. In some communities, family is formed not only by blood or marriage or adoption, but by eating food grown on the same land. You bury your ancestors; their bodies nurture the plants; the plants nurture the people and animals who eat those plants.<sup>3</sup> “Take, eat,” the story tells us Jesus said. “This

is my body.” Then he hands his friends pieces of bread.

For *An Embarrassment of Dishes* (2015), Green painted over the original pattern of a Noritake dinner service for twelve, inherited from the artist’s grandmother. On the back of each dish, Green painted words, inscribing moments of discomfort, using a mixture of blue pigment, 7-Up, and simple syrup (figs. 5, 6). Confessions, injury, humiliation, and secrets exposed. “We can learn from the objects in our homes,” Green said. “Especially from objects we didn’t choose.” Green shared that their grandmother had two sets of china—Japanese china designed to look British, and British china designed to look Japanese. Like Green’s childhood pink sponge curlers meant to make straight hair curly, these household objects “reveal something about the human longing to be other than we are,” Green said.

Green’s art also reveals the human longing to make others *other than they are*—to mis-see and to misunderstand. The effects of misapprehension are at the heart of Green’s new series, “First Meals” (2018), paintings of what the exonerated eat when they are

released after years, even decades, of being wrongly imprisoned (figs. 7–9). Green expected creating this work to feel hopeful but found it crushing. “All that lost time,” Green said.

The work is a three-way collaboration among the exonerees, the Center on Wrongful Convictions, and the artist. The paintings are made on Tyvek, a synthetic material used to protect buildings during construction, to protect homes. Green calls the paintings “pennants of loss,” and they are flag-like, from a country most of us pretend doesn’t exist.

In *Blueberries Handfed to Julie Rea* (2018), the third in an ongoing series of fifteen paintings to date, one woman feeds another blueberries, the pair in the foreground of a landscape that feels as if it is from another time (fig. 7). Rea spent six years in prison wrongly convicted for the murder of her ten-year old son, and her first meal was a potluck at a friend’s house, with lots of fresh fruit. Looking at the blueberry-blue painting, I thought of Ariella Azoulay’s “Potential History” and her argument about how photographs work.<sup>4</sup> Green placed figures from different eras in the same scene—Rea and her friend alongside a group with a person wearing

a top hat—collapsing time, or at least bending it. Azoulay, too, asks viewers to bend time by projecting themselves into the scenes of photographs and viewing their outcomes not as inevitable but as one possibility among many. Looking this way, Azoulay asserts, can help us remember that history didn't have to proceed the way it did. Things could have been different. Viewing becomes a kind of reanimation: what was still begins to move, what was intractable becomes malleable. And that, ultimately, is what exoneration is, though Green's paintings remind us that release is only the first step. What has been done cannot be undone; something new must be fashioned—a painting, a plate, a meal, a world, reparations. Green comes from a family of repairers, people who knew how to mend and heal, how to transform broken objects into something useful again. The artist continues that family work.

*This essay is a slightly abridged version of Sarah Sentilles, "Flown," in Julie Green (Roseburg, OR: The Ford Family Foundation), 2020. Our thanks to the author and publisher for permission to reproduce the essay here. —Ed.*

- 1 I visited Julie Green at their home and studio in Corvallis, OR in October 2018. Green gave me a studio tour and prepared a delicious lunch for us. The artist quotes in this essay are from that conversation or from a conversation we had by phone on March 9, 2020.
- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 14. Bennett engages Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 189, 364, 385, 378. A long endnote about Adorno in *Vibrant Matter* appears on p. 127.
- 3 Marshall Sahlins, "What Kinship Is (Part One)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17:1 (February 2011), 4.
- 4 For a discussion of Azoulay's concept of photography as a "civil contract," see Sarah Sentilles, "How Should We Respond to Photographs of Suffering," *New Yorker*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-we-should-respond-to-photographs-of-suffering>.

Sarah Sentilles is a writer, teacher, critical theorist, scholar of religion, and author of many books, including *Draw Your Weapons*, which won the 2018 PEN Award for Creative Nonfiction. Her next book, *Stranger Care: A Memoir of Loving What Isn't Ours*, will be published by Random House in 2021. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Oprah Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Religion Dispatches*, *Oregon ArtsWatch*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among other publications. She's had residencies at Hedgebrook and Yaddo. She earned a bachelor's degree at Yale and master's and doctoral degree at Harvard. She is the director of the Alliance of Idaho, which works to protect the basic human rights of immigrants by engaging in education, outreach, and advocacy at local, state, and national levels. She lives in Idaho's Wood River Valley.

Figure 7.  
Julie Green,  
*Blueberries  
Handfed to  
Julie Rea*, 2018.  
Acrylic on Tyvek,  
35 × 47 in., from  
the series  
“First Meals,”  
made possible  
thanks to the  
assistance of  
exonerees and  
Julie Green’s  
collaborators  
at the Center  
on Wrongful  
Convictions,  
Bluhm  
Legal Clinic,  
Northwestern  
University (Photo:  
Mario Gallucci for  
Upfor Gallery)



Figure 8.  
Julie Green, *Huwe  
Burton Said Truth  
Freed Me, Music  
Kept Me Sane  
While I Waited*,  
2019. Acrylic and  
glow-in-the-dark  
paint on Tyvek  
(sewn together)  
40 x 47½ in.  
(Photo: Mario  
Gallucci  
for Upfor)

Age 16 forced  
confession for  
rape and murder  
of own mother.



Figure 9.  
Julie Green,  
*Pepsi-Cola  
Monticello for  
Horace Roberts*,  
2019. Acrylic  
and glow-in-the-dark  
logo on  
Tyvek, 38 × 47 in.  
(Photo:  
Mario Gallucci  
for Upfor)

On release, Roberts enjoyed a big Pepsi first thing, then Chick-fil-A at the airport on the way home. Horace Roberts served more than 20 years behind bars for a murder he didn't commit. The two true perpetrators were arrested in October of 2018, the same month that Roberts was exonerated and freed.

