



BRAIN FOOD

INSIDE THE MIND
OF ARTIST
SARAH ILLENBERGER

*story by Charlotte Cowles
portrait by Tim Bruening*



On a cobblestone street in Portugal last summer, you might have seen a slender woman with thick, dark hair poking intently through lemons at an outdoor market. After squeezing mangoes and squinting at bananas, she'd ultimately purchase one gleaming fish, take it back to the house where she was staying, and lay it on the grass in the garden. Then she'd pluck a branch from a nearby plant and begin to laugh.

"When I'm really in the flow, developing ideas, I giggle a lot," said German artist Sarah Illenberger. "I was just playing around with the fish, placing leaves where the skeleton would be, and I kept chuckling to myself." (The result of this particular experiment, *The Fish*, is a striking photograph of a fern emerging from the creature's silver head, resembling a vibrant fossil.)

Illenberger's clever, colorful images often show fruit, vegetables, raw meat, and other foodstuffs with unexpected twists—a carrot protruding from a lipstick tube, for example, or an avocado with a pit made of crystal. They're playful, but they stop short of cute: In *Melancholie*, a watermelon weeps seeds, and in *Granate*, a bomb apparatus sticks out of a ripe pomegranate. "Food is a great medium for wordplay because it's so recognizable," said Illenberger, who was raised in Munich and now lives in Berlin with her 4-year-old daughter, Roberta. "The more obvious a material is, the better it works as a symbol for something else."

An alumna of Central Saint Martins in London, Illenberger has gained an international following for her graphic illustrations, which appear regularly in *Time* and *The New York Times Magazine*. Meanwhile, she's expanding her three-dimensional repertoire and recently sculpted mini-landscapes of sun-bleached hay for Hermès's window installations—inspired, she explained, by a straw bunny that she found during a trip to Japan. I spoke to her over Skype about grocery aisle treasures, awkward childhood birthday parties, and the importance of playing with food.

Did your parents allow you to wreak havoc in the kitchen as child?

My dad gave me a lot of freedom in his restaurant. He ran a café next door to my mom's jewelry store in Munich—they were side by side, like a mini concept shop, so you could get a coffee and shop for a bracelet. At one point, I got in trouble because the hygienic department came to check if my dad's kitchen was up to their standards. It wasn't, obviously, because I had weird mixes of ingredients in ice cube trays sitting out on the counter. The menu was mostly French—croissants and crepes, that sort of thing. There were marble bistro tables, and those really wonderful pressurized metal bottles that you press and whipped cream comes out, like an explosion. Then, when I was about 7, my dad opened another restaurant, where he also served sushi, so I learned how to make sushi rolls.

Aside from food cubes and sushi rolls—which were brilliant, I'm sure—what were your earliest artworks like?

My mom runs a jewelry line called Sévigné, and she had



ABOVE: *THE FISH*. AT LEFT, TOP: *COCO* FROM THE *TUTTI FRUTTI* SERIES. AT LEFT, BOTTOM: *TORTE* FROM THE *DÖNER KEBAP & OTHER STORIES* SERIES.

a workshop in a little beach house in Greece, where we'd spend the summer. I'd collect shells and make collages with Greek cigar boxes. Then I would sell them to the fishermen down at the port to make money to buy fish for the next day. My parents encouraged that, and starting when I was 10, they made a rule that when I was invited to other children's birthdays, I had to make gifts—they'd refuse to give me money to buy a present. At first I was so embarrassed, because it seemed uncool not to give my friends a Mickey Mouse pullover or whatever. But then my friends really loved the things I made for them, and it became a ritual to not go the consumer route. Now it's like, "I'm really sorry I just bought you something."

A lot of your work is really funny, in a sly way. Where does your sense of humor come from?

The simple answer is that I think it runs in my blood—my father is extremely funny. But otherwise, studying at Central Saint Martins taught me to find amusement and irony in everyday life. London is a really strange place to me, totally opposite from my perspective as a German, and being there taught me to observe things more closely than I would in Munich. I still do a lot of traveling to maintain that fresh look on things. I was also really influenced by British artists, like Martin Parr, and their sense of wit made me realize that humor can be the most impactful way of expressing an idea, even if it's quite serious.

You studied illustration at Central Saint Martins—and

then what next?

I didn't really plan to become an illustrator, but it just seemed like the best combination of things that interested me. After I graduated, I went back to Munich and got a job at a magazine called *Neon*. I didn't really have a defined position; I came up with visual ideas for each issue. And that was great training, to understand things from an editorial perspective—to see a cover, and the storytelling, how illustrations speak to an audience, and how to simplify complex matters with text. I was there for five years, and then I moved to Berlin to set up my own studio.

What made you choose to move to Berlin?

There's an expression in German that means a place is in development, and if you go there, you're able to shape it—and Berlin is like that. Creatively, it really came together in the last 10 years, and it's a very open city, international and metropolitan. I was able to get a beautiful studio for not much money, and looking out the window, you could see Portuguese artists on the next floor and Spanish people across the street. There's not such a class difference—as a creative, you're really well respected. It's not about how much money you earn and how big your car is.

What kind of independent projects are you working on?

I took these waste bins and plated them in gold. I like playing around with the familiar, using common and cheap materials that you can find at the grocery store, and giving them a new value. I love merging two contrary worlds.

Fruits and vegetables show up a lot in your work—particularly your *Tutti Frutti* photo series from a few years ago. What prompted that?

I started *Tutti Frutti* in 2012, when I was down in Italy—we have a house there, with a garden—and I was looking around the markets a lot. I find the patterns and colors of fruits and vegetables super intriguing, especially since they're hard to repeat, like the yellow tone of a lemon and the surface of a papaya. How the seeds squished inside a pomegranate look when you slice it open, or how beetroot can be cut to look like a ruby. The wonder of nature is that you can't control it, and it comes as it comes, and that creates a sort of suspense—especially when you combine it with graphic imagery, like shoelaces on a banana. I love the beauty of the banal.

Can you name some artists who influence you today?

My dad's best friend, Günter Mattei, is a very well-known illustrator—he's in his 60s now—and he had his studio on the corner of our street when I was little. He did all the menu cards for my dad's restaurant, and the logo. We're still close friends. I'm actually thinking about doing a book about his work, because he's been an important mentor in my career. He himself is very inspired by the Push Pin movement, with designers like Seymour Chwast and Milton Glaser, and that impacted me a lot as well.

Are you a chef in your personal life? Do you cook often?

Not as much as I would like to be. I mostly make salads, which sounds a bit sad. I love baking cakes. When I was in my teens, I went to the public library and found this fantastic book by a baker who made sculptural cakes—like a cake in the shape of a boxing glove or a camera. And I got so into it that I baked every single recipe in there. My first big magazine story was rebaking the accessories of the season. I made a Dolce & Gabbana boot, and a little Dior hat, and a Cartier necklace with gold and silver beads. I don't bake much anymore, though. I find that it either tastes good or it looks good, and it's so hard to achieve both.

What does your home look like, the space you create for yourself?

I'm in a transitional period of my life right now. I'm going through a separation, so I've just moved and I'm looking for a new place. At the moment, I dream of space, and I have a list of a million ideas for it—like, I want to buy benches from old fitness clubs to sit on. And casting tables inspired by the Ming dynasty. I want to do my own carpet collection, and I want to make special mirrors. In my mind,

it's a mix of showroom and home.

Your work also lends itself to being shareable on social media. Is it weird to see your images popping up around the Internet?

I love using Instagram as a daily exercise, to keep my brain busy with ideas. You can always post something and get feedback; otherwise, it would just stay in a sketchbook as a little thought. As for other people reposting my work on Pinterest and places like that, it obviously leads to the fact that one is copied much more now than one used to be. People lose the source of certain images, and think, "Ah, I don't know who it's by, so might as well use it for my new advertising campaign." I've had a lot of issues recently trying to stop that process, and it takes up time. It's hard, and it's quite tragic that people think it's all at their disposal. That's the downside, definitely.

Do you yourself find inspiration on social media?

Absolutely. Pinterest is such a nice window to artwork from all over the world. It's great having all these eyes out there, sourcing images and looking at things. And sometimes it's hard to not copy something subconsciously. It's tricky when your brain wants to move toward things you've seen, but you can't put your finger on where you saw it or what it was. To prevent that, I often show my ideas to other people and say, "Have you seen anything like that before?" Or just Google it, even. Put in some keywords and see if something comes up.

Have you ever been surprised to hear stories about your artwork being given as a gift by someone else?

Yes, a friend of mine gave one of my *Soft Heart* editions [a photograph of a heart made of knit wool, like a mitten] to the surgeon who operated on her son when he was born. Other friends have given prints to people for love, or for remedy—my work is very symbolic, so it lends itself well to that.

What kind of art do you like to live with?

Art that tells a story. I like going to places and meeting somebody and swapping a photograph or a piece. Artwork has to be a little bit like the stepping stones of life, little memories of where you were during certain periods, and people you met, and things that mattered to you at that point. I'm not super attached to my own work; I love to give it to people, and knowing that they have it. I've given my daughter pieces of my work over time, and it's nice to imagine her as an adult with 20 artworks from her mother.

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"THE
WONDER
OF NATURE
IS THAT
YOU CAN'T
CONTROL IT."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HEAVY WEIGHT, HOLZBROT, DONER KEBAB, PEA, AND CAP

