

JEFF WARMOUTH: DAY OF THE CABBAGE

Vegetables rampage in the name of art

PROFILE BY RAY HAINER

One night back in 2004, artist Jeff Warmouth had a dream that a cabbage meteor slammed into a city and destroyed all the buildings—well, actually, he dreamed that he made a movie about a cabbage meteor that slams into a city and destroys all the buildings, and that it would be called *Day of the Cabbage*.

It's a weird dream to have—but considerably less so if you're the creator of *Kung-Fu Kitchen* and *Il Spaghetti Occidentali*, two short films that Warmouth describes, entirely accurately, as genre epics starring vegetables. In those live-action films (the vegetables are controlled by human puppeteers) Warmouth lovingly parodies kung-fu flicks and spaghetti Westerns.

With *Day of the Cabbage*—his dream come true—he's riffing on monster movies like *Godzilla*. At just over 10 minutes, *Cabbage* is his most ambitious film to date. In it, a giant cabbage meteor lands by chance in a pool of toxic waste, and mutates into a cyclops with a death-ray-emitting red-pepper eye, leek arms and yucca legs. The rogue cabbage then rampages through the city of Matzoville, stomping trains, knocking over baguette buildings, and crushing the lime tanks and green-bean fighter jets sent to bring him down. Finally, after much hand-wringing, scientist Dr. Bell Pepper and his colleagues break out the food processor to engage the cabbage in a battle to the death.

Even more startling than the all-vegetable cast are the film's production values. *Kung-Fu Kitchen* and *Il Spaghetti Occidentali* were unabashedly low-budget: They were filmed in Warmouth's kitchen, and the visible puppet strings and shaky camcorder cinematography were all part of the aesthetic. *Day of the Cabbage*, by contrast, was shot in high-definition. The film features pyrotechnics and elaborate (yet edible) sets, and Warmouth has meticulously edited out the strings, frame by frame. He wanted to "really take it to the limit." He explains that *Day of the Cabbage* got its start when he asked himself the question "What if I use the top filmmaking craft to work with the same retarded idea of vegetable genre movies?"

DAY OF THE CABBAGE
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This brand of restless searching has typified Warmouth's career. Currently, he heads up the Interactive Multimedia program at Fitchburg State College; but in the mid-'90s, as an M.F.A. student at the Museum School, Warmouth (now 35) was a photographer looking for a subject. During this time, he began transforming mundane household items into "ridiculous visual jokes." One of his works from this period was a mirror-image photo of his white pet rabbit gnawing on a blue broomstick, which he called *Q-Tip/Bunny*. At first, Warmouth treated food as just another everyday object (take *Potato Optics*, for example, in which he embedded a camera lens into a potato). But he soon discovered an important difference: "I started noticing that whenever I used food, it took on a personality in a way that manmade objects don't," he recalls.

Artists have long used food as a subject, and sometimes as a medium, but Warmouth is one of the very few to actually use food as a character. It's something of a radical concept, and when Warmouth first embarked on filming *Kung-Fu Kitchen* in 1997, he wasn't confident that he could pull it off. "It's kind of crazy that it works," he says. "The vegetables totally feel like characters, in a ridiculous way." Warmouth even holds what he refers to as "casting calls": He wanders through the produce section of the supermarket—mostly going by feel. Take Dr. Pepper's wife, Aubergina. "I was originally going to use an endive or something," he says. "I thought, OK, what's a feminine vegetable? I have no idea." (He eventually settled on an eggplant.)

Of course, personifying vegetables is absurd—which is in keeping with



Warmouth's body of work. His past projects include a series of "absurdist musical instruments" made from bathtubs and sinks, and *Super Jeffu Market*, a self-portrait in imaginary canned goods that was featured in a 2001 exhibition at the DeCordova Museum. But judging from the enthusiastic responses he's received at underground film festivals and art galleries alike, his films' bizarre take on pop culture is incredibly accessible. "People can relate to it," he says. "People see the films, and they're always like, 'Ha! It's an orange!'"

As Warmouth suggests, vegetable genre films are also, for some reason, inherently funny. The built-in joke reaches new heights in *Day of the Cabbage*, which is laced with puns both verbal ("This thing has got us by the balls, Melon!") and visual (as when the carrots go hot-tubbing in a fondue pot). The unsubtle humor speaks for itself, but it has a serious objective as well. Warmouth is dismayed by the bias against comedy in the art world. Embracing levity was a liberating experience for him—and he hopes that gallery audiences (perhaps too long accustomed to feeling a sort of refined confusion when viewing art) will find his work similarly refreshing.

Warmouth is currently planning *Les Pommes de Guerre*, a film about potatoes involved in the underground resistance (get it?) during World War II. However the film turns out, it's a safe bet that the underlying message will be the same as in his earlier work: It's OK—you're supposed to laugh. ☉