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Meatballs made from human fat, anyone?

By Gideon Long

SANTIAGO, May 18 (Reuters) - Last year, Chilean-born artist Marco Evaristti mixed fat removed from his body by liposuction with ground beef to make meatballs, which he fried in olive oil and displayed in a public gallery.

This year, he plans to climb Western Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc on the French-Italian border, color the summit pink and declare it an independent state, with himself as president.

His work has been slammed as disgusting, publicity-seeking and immoral but Evaristti says he is simply trying to highlight some of the double standards he sees in the world around him.

"What I'm trying to do with these works is to give society a jolt and make it ask questions," the 44-year-old said in a telephone interview from Denmark, where he lives with his wife and children.

"And it can answer those questions, and in that way maybe we can be a little better as human beings."

Evaristti's meatballs piece consists of 13 tins of the meat on a long table, in an echo of Christ's last supper.

He says the work is about the sanctity of the body and an unhealthy modern obsession with food and weight loss.

"Firstly, I want to show people that meatballs made with my fat are no more disgusting than the meatballs you buy in the supermarket," he said.

"Secondly, it's a dialogue with a modern society that lives to eat, rather than eating to live as it should be.

"You eat, and when you're fat, you go to a clinic, have an operation, have your fat removed and you start to eat again."

When he displayed the piece in Chile, Evaristti invited 12 people to join him in eating the meatballs in a last supper.

How did they taste? "Even better than my grandmother's," he said.

In perhaps his most infamous work, Evaristti filled food blenders with water, dropped live goldfish into them and plugged them into the electricity mains in an art gallery.

He gave the public the option of making their own fish soup by simply flicking a switch.

He also painted an iceberg in Greenland red and placed an embalmed human corpse in the front seat of a Ferrari, all in the name of art and introspection.

Evaristti is not alone in provoking shock and disgust by using humans and animals, dead and alive, in his work.

German anatomist Gunther von Hagens triggered outcry around the world some years ago with his "Body Worlds" displays of preserved human bodies, cut open to reveal their inner structure, and British artist Damien Hirst gained notoriety for pickling a dead sheep and a shark in formaldehyde.

But even in a world inured to the impact of such work, Evaristti's pieces have prompted fury and retaliation.

In Austria last year, animal rights activists broke into a gallery where his work was displayed, liberated his goldfish and smashed his blenders. They are trying to put Evaristti on trial for animal abuse.

Evaristti has had death threats and galleries displaying his work have twice been subjected to bomb threats.

When he painted the iceberg in 2004, Evaristti says he was highlighting the fragility of the natural world. The iceberg melted, dissolving his work into the North Atlantic.

That was the first part of a trilogy, the second part of which Evaristti plans to unveil on Mont Blanc in June.

Undeterred by warnings from French authorities, he wants to color the top of the mountain pink (although he refuses to say how) and declare it an independent state.

"They haven't given me permission, they say I'm mad," he said.

The third part of the trilogy will be staged either in the Sahara or Chile's Atacama Desert later this year.

Born a Jew in predominantly Catholic Chile, Evaristti spent much of his early life in Israel before moving to Britain and finally Denmark, where he has spent the past 24 years.

He converted to Buddhism in 1994 and says he tries, not always successfully, to practice his faith.

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