

MAY 23, 2013, 2:33 PM

Food Matters | Steakhouse Art That Goes Against the Grain

By **HOWIE KAHN**

Nasser Azam, a 49-year-old London-based artist, is used to dealing in extremes. He once took an 11-day trip to Antarctica to paint large-scale abstract canvases outdoors, intentionally leaving the work on a frigid ice field overnight so it could be roughed up by the elements. Another time, Azam boarded a specially modified aircraft in Star City, Russia, and painted two triptychs honoring Francis Bacon while the plane flew in parabolas, thus enabling its artist-passenger to conduct his work in zero gravity. More recently, at London's City Airport, Azam unveiled "Athena," Britain's tallest bronze sculpture. Azam's debut in the United States, this week, is also marked by a certain degree of monumentality. His work has gone on permanent display in a steakhouse.

New York steakhouses pretty much follow a design template set into motion over a century ago by places like **Keens** and **Peter Luger**, where everything in the room is reminiscent of meat. Leather banquettes possess a medium-well give. Polished wood paneling echoes a hot broiler's char. The art on the walls features many a man whose blood type is bacon. The signature décor? Caloric, clubby, comforting. At **Costata**, the new SoHo steak spot from the chef Michael White and the **Altamarea Group** C.E.O., Ahmass Fakahany, they're taking a different route, featuring 16 colorful works — in oil, mixed media and ink jet on both mirror and aluminum — from Azam, all made between 2010 and 2013.

For White and Fakahany, **Costata**, which means "ribeye" in Italian, represents an opportunity to take over the space where they met a decade ago. White was then the executive chef at **Fiamma** and Fakahany frequently used its third-floor private dining facility to conduct business for Merrill Lynch, where he was president and chief operating officer. **Costata** also reconnects Fakahany and Azam, who worked as an executive with Merrill Lynch before pursuing a full-time art career. "He's as passionate about what he's doing now as I am," Fakahany said. "We were always more creative than we thought."

On a recent walk-through of the **Costata** space, Fakahany demonstrated great excitement in Azam's work (he recently bought one of the artist's smaller bronze sculptures, "Sorrow," for his personal collection) and in his group's decision to reject the usual steakhouse design tropes. All the meatiness here will exist on the plate. Standout works include two color-saturated pieces from Azam's Antarctica series and, also, a striking six-foot-by-nine-foot oil and mixed media piece called "Poppy," which features a lot of energetic gestural swiping and impasto surrounding

the seductive image of a model's face.

Azam, who is hardly a foodie — “I’m more of a hermit,” he said by phone from his Islington studio; “I normally eat once a day, if that” (he does, however, paint with a bottle of Laurent-Perrier by his side) — is eager to for his work to exist outside the context of the typical white-box space. “In a restaurant,” he said, “You have people sitting down, enjoying themselves and looking at art far longer than they would in a gallery. The pressure’s off. That’s when you start to see things.”

[Copyright 2013 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018](#)