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Ron Benner's art installation Three Questions continues at the McIntosh Gallery until Feb. 28.

Benner's art serves up food for thought

JOE BELANGER
The London Free Press

There's nothing easy about a Ron Benner installation but there's sure lots to savour, enjoy and ponder.

The renown London artist has managed to wrap his insatiable appetite for history, agriculture and travel into his art that has captured the imaginations of fans around the world.

So, when you venture out to Western University's McIntosh Gallery, plan for a lot more than a cursory visit. In fact, if Benner had his way, you'd return for

hours and days at a time to view, read and experience Ron Benner: Three Questions.

"I incorporate it all," said Benner of the installation.

"I studied agricultural engineering at Guelph University, before quitting to become an artist. But I wanted to be involved in farming in some way, so I am, but as an artist."

Three Questions is an exhibit that explores native food crops found in North, South and Central America that were cultivated by Native people then taken around the world — starting with Christopher Columbus and most who

followed — and how these plants influenced other cultures, economies, industry and politics.

The installation starts with Transend: Meeting Room, which includes a large Plexiglas table filled with beans, seeds and nuts of the Americas and four bookshelves, the nooks also filled with seeds and dried plants, as well as books he urges visitors to sit and read.

"Two things I want people to get out of it are to understand that when Europeans arrived in the Americas, it wasn't some kind of wasteland," said Benner.

"The people here were already

growing hundreds of economic plants . . . The Americas had more foods than any other place in the world and a cuisine that rivalled China and the Middle East. The meeting room actually creates questions."

The installation in the second room is titled, Wh...?, and explores the artist's connection to a question found on the side of a barn outside London asking: "Where will you be in Eternity?"

Benner presents photographs of the barn along with the pieces of tin that formed the letters of the question scattered on the floor with industrial corn seed. Under

one photo are dried samples of native corn.

In the third room the question asked is, Why is the Tomato to Blame?

Inside is a series of tomato plants that accompany two juxtaposed images — a photograph taken in 1997 by the artist that depicts a woman in Mysore, India selling tomatoes on a scale and, on the opposite wall, a photograph by the late Toronto photographer Bill Madison of a woman killed in 1960 when a pyramid of tomato cans fell on her in a supermarket.

"I want to show how tomatoes

have an impact on small and large market systems and how industrialized agriculture has repercussions that people don't even know about," said Benner.

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IF YOU GO

What: Ron Benner: Three Questions, curated by Julian Haladyn.

Where: McIntosh Gallery, Western University.

When: Continues until Feb. 28.