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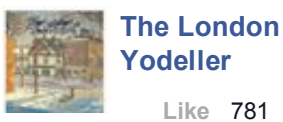
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Exploring the Political Economy of Food, Farming and Agriculture

Vince Cherniak - January 22, 2015 - Art & Books



“It’s a provocative show with a bit of a misleading title as there are plenty more than three questions to ponder here”

If you’ve ever pondered how (or why) we have “fresh” tomatoes in January (see *The London Yodeller* interview in this issue for more on that), Ron Benner’s mixed-media photographic exhibit *Three Questions* at [McIntosh Gallery](#) might just provide an answer, and yet, raise a few more questions about our agricultural practices to scratch your head about. Benner’s oeuvre is devoted to issues around food production — how we’ve manipulated plants and livestock to our own ends — and the politics and economics that have formed our contemporary agri-business.

Three Questions is presented in separate room installations. The first question is set up by a photo of two billboards called *The Exchange* that Benner put up in Seville, Spain in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus setting sail to North America. This question, which sets up the show as a whole, is translated from the Spanish as “Was it worth it?” It’s a quote Benner found from a Peruvian in the 15th Century – a reference to the exchange of economic plants and livestock between the Americas and Europe. Tomatoes, potatoes, corn, squash and beans went out around the world to become staples of agriculture. In exchange, the Americas got the

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horse, chicken and eggs and even honeybee wax. “But in Spanish,” says Benner, “the final ‘it’ of ‘was it worth it?’ is ‘pain’ . . . in English it’s sort of hidden (the British don’t like to talk about pain.) So in actual fact it says, ‘was it worth the pain?’ – what you received, what you took?”

The second question “Wh...?” is a fragment of “Where will you be in eternity?” which came from the painted text on the side of a southwestern Ontario barn that Benner has documented and salvaged after the barn blew down in a storm. The fragments of the lettering are presented here, which Benner has co-mingled with corn seed; open-pollinated old school seed on one end where the letters ‘Wh’ remain on the wall, and F1 hybrid Pioneer seed (seed that doesn’t replicate itself, so the farmers can’t save it) which accompanies the fallen letters.

The F1 seed is also treated with a pesticide coating implicated in the recent devastation of bee populations. And implied here too is the devastation of old-school agriculture in the wake of corporate factory farming.

The third question, “*Why is the Tomato to Blame?*” is taken from a Chilean pop song in the ‘60s by Victor Jara – a song about the export of canned tomatoes to the wealthy city of Caracas . . . and a song that may have had something to do with Jara’s murder in 1973 by the Chilean military for his devotion to social justice issues. It frames the installation of two large juxtaposed photos around live tomato plants, heritage varieties under a glow light. On one side of the room is a photo of a quite bizarre incident wherein a woman was killed by a falling pyramid of stacked tomato cans in Weston, Ontario in 1960. Opposing it is a photo taken in Mysore, India of a woman selling tomatoes being weighed on a scale. Those are scales of justice for Benner, indicting the other politico-economic tomato paraphernalia in this room, from crates of mass-produced Dutch tomatoes exported to Canada and photos of their greenhouse origins, to the lackluster Flavr Savr tomato from 1992, the first genetically engineered and commercially grown food granted a license for human consumption. This first GMO introduced a gene which prevented the development of an enzyme responsible for ripening and softening of tissue, with the supposed benefit of less rotten produce when it hit the shelf. It didn’t make many fans however, and was commercially withdrawn in 1997.

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But questions beget questions, and that leads us to the third installation, *Transcend: Meeting Room*. The centerpiece is a large table with various seeds collected from around the world symmetrically inlaid in its top. Surrounding this piece are numerous photographs from the artist's journeys, from Egypt to Thailand to China, with selected books and souvenirs from his personal collection to accompany each image. It's a meditative space meant to further the viewer's enquiry around the political economy of food, farming and agriculture.

It's a provocative show with a bit of a misleading title as there are plenty more than three questions to ponder here. The tomato is not to blame for the poor woman's death, nor for the inadequacies of its flavour in winter. A lot of breeding, genetic twiddling and corporate designing have gone into our overly-aesthetic, uniform produce, and the marketing thereof. Hint: if you want flavour, you need ugly, lump-sided tomatoes with ribs on the top; those ribs are responsible for the proper ripening of the fruit, but they've been bred out of the stuff at the supermarket. You might have to get some heirloom seed and grow them yourself, like grandma used to do in the backyard.

While the images and motifs may hang loosely together in these installations, much like a tapas sampling of a varied regional cuisine, you'll leave feeling you've had a rich and rewarding meal. Kudos to Benner for an exhibit with a lot of food for thought.

Ron Benner: Three Questions

McIntosh Gallery until February 28

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