

ALL THAT HAS VALUE NATIVE TO THE AMERICAS UNCLASSIFIED: ANONA ALMENDOR
ARRACACIA ACHIRA AÑU AGAVE ACORN ALGARROBA AVOCADO ATA ACEROLA
ASSAI ACHOCHA ASH ARBOR-VITAE AMARANTH ANNATTO ARROWROOT ALLSPICE
ARARоба J. ACHITA ANYU BUFFALOBERRY BLACK HAW BALM OF GILEAD BARBASCO
BABASSU BEECH BUTTERNUT BLOODROOT BALSAM OF PERU BEANS BOTTLE GOURD
C. BAYRUM BLUEBERRY BLACKBERRY BOUGANVILLE BEARBERRY BIRCH BOROJOA
BACURI BREADNUT BRAZIL NUT BITTER SWEET BEGONIA BERGAMOT BLACK
ZAPOTE TH. BACUPARI BAYBERRY CHOKEBERRY CHRISTMASBERRY CRANBERRY
CHESTNUT CURRANT CRABAPPLE CASSAVA CHILE PEPPERS CASABANANA
CARNAUBA CANDELILLA UPHOF CORN COCOPALM CARANDA CACTUS CROWBERRY
COLUMBINE CALALU CHICOZAPOTE CANNA CHERRY COLORIN CHUPANDILLA
CATTAIL CURARE CANNON-BALL TREE (ECONOMIC CARAPA CAUSSU CAMPEACHY
BOTANIST CURUA CHAYOTE CUSTARD APPLE COWLILY CAINITO CUPU-ASSU
COSAHUICO COPAL COTTON CHICLE COUMARIN COCA CERIMAN CAPULIN
CANISTEL CAMBUCA TO CUITLACOCHÉ CAÑIHUA CASHEW PEAR CAAPI CACAO
CAIMITO CASHEW CREOSOTE PLANT DENGUE DAHLIA DEU DIOSCOREA DOGWOOD
DARLING PLUM DEWBERRY THE DITTANDER FEVER ROOT ELDERBERRY ELM ELDER
EPAZOTE FIR FERN FOXBERRY GROUNDNUT GUAMA GENIPEPO GUAPARANGA
GALLITO GRAPE GOOSEBERRY BOARD GUAYUSA GARLIC GINSENG GOLDEN SEAL
GOLDEN CLUB GOPHER APPLE GROUND CHERRY GRAPEFRUIT GUACO GUARANA
GUAVA GINGER HAW HUCKLEBERRY OF HAZELNUT HUAUZONTLE HEDGE-APPLE
HONEY LOCUST HAWTHORN HICKORY HELIOPSIS LONGPIPES HAPLOPHYTON
CIMICIDUM HONEYSUCKLE HENEQUEN HEMLOCK HORNBEAM ECONOMIC HOLLY
HEPATICA HEVEA HUIZACHE IPECAC IPOMOEA IMBU ITA PALM INDIGO INDIAN HEMP
INGA ILAMA IRONWOOD JABORANDI JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT WARFARE, JACK BEAN
JEQUERITI JARA PALM JITOMATE JICAMA JACARANDA JOJOBA JUNIPER JIMSONWEED
JALAPA JABOTICABA KINO KENTUCKY COFFEETREE KRAMERIA KAPOK WASHINGTON,
KINNIKINNIK LUCUMA LOBELIA LEREN LIMA BEAN LUPINE LIMANANTHES MAYAPPLE
MURUMURU MEXICAN OREGANO MANZANILLA MONKEY PUZZLE MATÉ D.C.)
MONSTERA MARSH MARIGOLD MAHOGANY MAPLE MOUNTAIN ASH DICTIONARY
MAMONCILLO MBOCAYA MARLBERRY MAYPOP MILKWEED MOREL MUSHROOM
MANIOC MELLOCO MARTYNYIA MEXICAN MARIGOLD MESQUITE MAGNOLIA
MAMEY OF MACAW MULBERRY MANGABA NANCHE NASTURTIUM NARANJILLA
OITICICA OURICURI OLLUCA OCA OGEECHEE LIME OSWEGO TEA ORCHID
OSAGE ORANGE ORPINE ECONOMIC OLOLIUQUI OAK PIÑON NUT PORTULACA
POPLAR PERSIMMON PINEAPPLE PATAUA POTATO PUMPKIN PINE PAPA W PSILOCYBE
PHYSALIS PEJIBAYE PITANGA PAPAYA PLANTS, PLUM PARTRIDGEBERRY PEYOTE
PEANUT PECAN PENNYROYAL PIQUI PASSION FRUIT PRACAXI QUASSIA QUINOA
QUININE ROTENONE REDWOOD RYANIA SPECIOSA REDBUD (LEHRE, RASPBERRY
RED MOMBIN RUBBERSEED SUMAC SCARLET RUNNER SOURSOP SEAGRAPE
SILVERBERRY SPATLUM SQUASH SWEET POTATO SISAL SERVICEBERRY SWEETSOP
SANDROOT WEST SKUNK CABBAGE SCHOENOCALON OFFICINALE SAPODILLA
SARSAPARILLA SWEETGUM SATINLEAF SNOWBERRY STARAPPLE SAXIFRAGE SAWARI
SHADBUSH GERMANY: SAGO SPRUCE SCAMMONY SUNFLOWER SASSAFRAS J. SHELL
BEAN SYCAMORE SOURAI NUT STRAWBERRY SOLOMON'S SEAL SOUR CHERRY
SAW PALMETTO SWEET FLAX SEA ROCKET AMARACK TUCKAHOE CRAMER TUCUM
TEPARY BEAN THORNAPPLE TAGETES TOBACCO TULE TREE TOMATO TOMATILLO
TULIP TREE TUPELO UCUHUBA ULLUCUS VANILLA VIOLET VIBERNUM PUBLISHERS,
WILD ROSE WILLOW WINTERGREEN PLANTAIN WORMWEED WOLFBERRY WILD
ONION WILD RICE WALNUT WINTERBERRY WITCH-HAZEL WILD FIG WHITE BEAN
WILD LEEK YELLOW SAPOTE YAM BEAN 1968) YUCCA YELLOW MOMBIN YEW YAUPAN
YAUTIA ZUCCHINI ZINNIA ZAPALLO CLASSIFIED: WAS THEN COUNTED AS NOTHING

Whenever I visit Ron Benner and Jamelie Hassan's home/studio, I always leave with an object, maybe an exhibition catalogue or a little souvenir from their travels. Recent gifts: a half-finished sudoku puzzle, a bookmark from Mexico, an artist proof of Ron's *Trans/mision: Vectors*, a pile of exhibition fliers, a set of coffee coasters, a computer mousepad from China, a package of rolling tobacco. And books, always books. For one reason or another, these items will inevitably materialize over long conversations: over lunch, or cups of coffee, or sometimes as we work on one of Ron's garden installations. Each bit of ephemera has a story, which leads to another story, another thought, another object.

This is how our conversations go. It seems to me that this is also how Ron approaches the puzzle of making art. He will begin with one single, small thing and follow it wherever it may go, a path he calls a vector. Since the 1980s, Ron has used these vectors to describe the trajectory of plants native to the Americas. For this interview, Ron also used Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*—human behaviour dictated by the logic of social practice—to describe his process. Vectors and *habitus* both help to illustrate how the relationship between plants and humans manifests itself through small scale and industrial farming practices, through colonialism, capitalism and trade. These behaviours have shaped how Native American food crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, chilli peppers, squash, and beans came to be known, grown, and consumed by cultures around the world.

Maize appears often in Ron's practice. I think he likes how it grows. As a material in his garden installations, I notice how tall the plant becomes in relation to my own body, how, because of this, maize defines the space of his gardens. Every autumn, cooking over a custom-built corn roaster, Ron serves the year's harvest while displaying photographs of the many people he has met in his travels who grow, sell, and eat corn. There are many vectors underlying this gesture of sharing food: the cultivation of maize for at least 7000 years in the Americas by indigenous farmers; the "discovery" of Brazil and of maize by Portuguese explorers; the plant's introduction to Africa and India through Portuguese trade and conquest; its later migration, via India, to Vietnam. The vectors continue. During the interview, dried cobs of corn in white, purple, and gold sit jumbled with our books and cups of coffee—heritage varieties to be used later for planting. I visit Ron's most recent exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery in London Ontario. Grains of F1-hybrid corn are scattered across the floor. A photograph of an old barn, written across it in aluminum siding: *Where will you be in eternity?*

My hometown is full of pale yellow brick buildings, something I'd forgotten until my last visit there to talk to Ron. Knowing him, I knew that he could tell me where these bricks came from and how they came to be. Though his art and research is global in its scope, Ron is very much of this yellow-bricked place—London. Not London England, though the name fittingly carries us back to this colonial heritage, but rather London, a mid-sized college town in southwestern Ontario. Emerging in the late 1960s, London was the home of a significant community-minded movement

in Canadian art, Regionalism. Resisting the homogenizing pull of large urban centres, this movement anticipated the present impulse to "go local", embracing London as a subject matter and experience. It had strong collectivist impulses, organizing the earliest Canadian artist-run centres and, through CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des Artistes Canadiens), negotiating a standard of payment for artist exhibition fees now used in public museums and galleries across Canada. Ron is completely of this praxis, helping to establish spaces such as the Forest City Gallery and Embassy Cultural House and imbuing these local institutions with an international and political perspective.

Ron's work emphasizes the real over the symbolic. His installations feature live plants, food, dirt, ephemera from travels and daily life. Even a recent print has beans and seeds nestled along the bottom of the frame. In this process, it is important to go to where that painting was painted, where the tomato migrated. The experiential, the journey, and all the things that come up along the way are what is really real. In his essay "The World of Concrete Contents", philosopher and environmentalist Arne Næss irrefutably confirms that relationships and feelings are concrete facts, while scientific and economic models are sometimes useful, but nevertheless abstract constructions. He even illustrates this in terms of tomatoes, comparing an abstracted idea of value to the value of a tomato based on one's direct, sensorial relationship with it. "Expressions of the kind 'object x has value y' immediately lead to the question, Given an object x, how do I assess its value y? If we start with designations of concrete contents, for instance, 'delicious, red tomato to be eaten at once!' or 'repugnant, rotten tomato,' the evaluated terms are there from the very beginning of our analysis. And there is no separable tomato to value!" In short, the way we relate to something like a tomato, the way the tomato affects us, the tomato's one-to-one relationship with things such as soil, water, air, and other forms life... these are the tangible structures that make up reality—and they are truly valuable.

Ron Benner's work acknowledges the conflicted tangle of cultural and political exchange across history; it strives towards a kind of complex beauty that I want to talk about through a recent experience. I spoke on a panel a few weeks ago, responding, reluctantly, to a bad piece of art that misrepresented, even stereotyped, the person that it depicted. A discussion around politics, appropriation, and representation inevitably dragged on. Then some frustrated member of the audience reactively asked, *Why can't we just appreciate art based on beauty alone?* As much as, in that context, I disliked the negligence of that question, I got stuck on it. It kept me up late into the night because I agree in some ways with its sentiment. Beauty, in and of itself, is important. However, does beauty encompass only the visual? Taking a cue from Næss, beauty in art could also entail a respectful and empathetic feeling towards one's subject and material. Accusations of "stealing" through cultural appropriation seem simplistic and inadequate, given the innate fluidity of culture. Perhaps wondering if a work is beautiful in this empathetic sense can address ethical issues such as misrepresentation while leaving room for ambiguity and complexity. Instead of asking if something is wrong or right, perhaps we can ask, is it really beautiful?

You wanted to ask me about plants.

Yes. You look at how plants circulate all around the world: the political economy of plants. Plants are real things. They exist and would exist without us. And we find them useful – we can eat them, we can use them... Money is different because it circulates but as an idea. We give it value. However, there's a parallel between how money travels and how plants travel in your work.

Well, when Native American plant species started to move around the world, it was primarily after the conquest of Mexico and Brazil through the Spanish and Portuguese, and then later, through the English. At the same time, with the Spanish takeover of Mexican silver and gold mines, coinage also began to move around the world. At a certain point, one of the currencies circulating worldwide was Mexican – the Mexican peso because its silver content was so high. So for instance, if you travelled to Japan in the late 1800s you would find Mexican currency in use. It's interesting that the takeover of the Americas by Europeans resulted not just in the introduction of our world currency based on Mexican silver as well as South American silver out of Potosí in Bolivia, but also in the massive movement of indigenous crops around the world. In fact, it was the crops that moved first, so that within one generation of the conquest of Mexico and the conquest of what's now called Peru and Bolivia, corn – maize – was being grown not just in Europe, but all throughout Asia and Africa. In the tropics, it moved even faster:

The French wouldn't eat potatoes up until about the end of the 1700s. They wouldn't eat tomatoes. These are Native American food crops. They wouldn't even eat corn! The Italians would eat a bit through, let's say, polenta, but

for the most part maize was not considered a valuable food crop for Europeans until the 1800s. But in Asia and Africa, it was the opposite. These crops were accepted almost immediately and became very prominent. A good example would be chilli peppers. When people think of chilli peppers, often they think of Vietnamese cuisine, or Szechwan cuisine. But prior to the 1500s, there was no such thing as a chilli pepper in Asia. Farmers in other parts of the world, even to this day, are quite knowledgeable about this movement and how it happened.

They're aware of where these food crops came from.

They're totally aware, yes. You ask them where corn came from, and they'll tell you, it came from the Americas. It's people in urban centres who don't know where food comes from. They're quite chauvinistic about it. They think that all food came from them – from their people, their farmers. That's not true. Mangoes, for instance, originated in China, or Asia, and now they're grown in Peru and Mexico. Native American farmers, they know that mangoes weren't there originally. People in urban centres, like Mexico City or Lima, for instance, would probably tell you, "Oh, mangoes have been here forever." But farmers know where these things came from.

It's like how a potato goes from place to place. When you say potato, people think of Ireland. Or, maybe a German meal of meat and potatoes.

Meat and potatoes, for sure. Or, where would Italian cuisine be without the tomato? Or cassava, I mean if you look at the history of cassava... There are different types of cassava. There's a type of cassava that's native to Africa, but it's very poisonous and it takes a lot of

leaching to get the poisons out. But the Native American cassava was a sweet cassava. You didn't have to leach it, there were no poisons. Native America cassava, or yucca, is now everywhere in the tropics. It's a famine food actually, because it'll stay in the ground for decades and you can still dig it up and eat it during times of famine.

So, with something like maize for example, in your artistic practice you'll go to Peru, and see where the plant came from. From there, you'll go perhaps to India, and see it growing, produced.

Yes. And very ancient varieties too. The most popular corn in Vietnam for roasting is a white corn that originated in Peru. And it's still there, still growing. And the heritage varieties that are grown in Asia date back in the Americas to about six thousand years. I just brought back a number of varieties of Mexican corn that I'll be growing this year in Halifax.

However, even though my work has been primarily about the movement of food crops coming into, let's say, London Ontario, or moving outwards from other parts of the Americas to the rest of the world, I've always done a similar analysis of other things, like paintings for instance. Or instead of Native American food crops I've done works that have looked at how oranges from the Gaza Strip entered the Covent Garden Market [in London Ontario]. For instance, in 1989, I went to Gaza, to the orchards and the packing plant that put everything together to be shipped over to Canada, and found that oranges came over through Rotterdam, through Mennonite Relief.

I want to ask you what happens through tracing these tangents. When you start from a watercolour and trace it back to its place of

origin... To use your terminology, there are many vectors.

Split-second vectors. As Bourdieu says about the *habitus*. Things that can only occur once you start on your journey... but you have no idea they are in play. I'll give you an example. I was researching Pierre Bourdieu, and also Eugene Delacroix, in relation to Algeria and this watercolour of Oran, Algeria by [N. Neal] Solly from Birmingham, England... I decided, okay, I'm going to go to the Père Lachaise cemetery, and I'm going to photograph Delacroix's tomb as part of the piece. When you enter the cemetery, you can get these little maps that show you other famous people who are buried there. Jamelie [Hassan] noticed right away that Pierre Bourdieu was buried there. So instead of going to Delacroix's tomb, we went directly to Bourdieu's. There's Pierre Bourdieu, who died in 2002, buried right next to Brillat-Savarin. Brillat-Savarin wrote the book called *The Physiognomy of Taste*, about food.



At Ron Benner's home/studio, London Ontario

Oh, I know that book.

His famous quote was "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are." I came up with this other idea, "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you'll invade." Or I came up with other ones: "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what your theory is..." etc.

The weird thing was that right across from Brillat-Savarin was the tomb of Parmentier. On his tomb someone had placed potatoes.

Who's Parmentier?

Antoine-Augustin Parmentier was a French military pharmacist and agronomist. In the late 1700s, he introduced the potato to French cuisine.

Potatoes are from the Americas?

Yes. The potato came from Peru, but the French would not eat it. They'd started eating it in Ireland about a hundred years before that. [Walter] Raleigh introduced it to Southern Ireland, and people then adopted it as a food crop. But the French were very reticent. They grew potatoes for their pigs. It was Parmentier who got the French eating potatoes as a part of their cuisine.

So he's buried a stone's throw from Bourdieu and Brillat-Savarin. I was completely taken with the thought that someone had loved Parmentier so much that they put potatoes – real potatoes – on his grave. If you look at the engraving on the tomb, on one side there are potatoes growing, and on the other side is corn. Corn and then wheat. Corn, of course, is native to the Americas. He was a big fan of corn, too. Parmentier, to convince the people to eat potatoes, created these big test plots that had fences around them where he planted potatoes. He had military guards posted at each corner so no one could steal the potatoes. When the potatoes were ready to be harvested, he told the guards to walk away. That night all the people came, dug up the potatoes, took them home and ate them. Because they considered them valuable. Because the military had been guarding them.

There's a famous French dish called *hachis Parmentier*, potatoes Parmentier. In a baking pan you layer meat – either duck or ground beef – with a layer of mashed potatoes. Then you add more meat, then another layer of mashed potatoes... And that's Parmentier, *hachis Parmentier*.

When I first went to the Louvre-Lens, I went there to see Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* – they had taken it out of the Louvre and moved it to the Lens satellite-Louvre. So we went through all the exhibitions and we go back to this restaurant, and they're serving *hachis Parmentier*. So I got some and I was proceeding to eat, and this man came up to me – a tall, elderly French gentleman – he looked at me and said, "Ah! *Hachis Parmentier?*" And I said, "Oui!" And he says "C'est bon?" And then moi: "Ah, très bon!" Here I am, with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, and the most significant thing for me is this Frenchman recognizing that I am eating potatoes Parmentier.

So you're going to all these places and tracing backwards. From one starting point you move from potatoes, to Algeria, then to Père Lachaise... There's something, though, that seems to require that you actually go to these places to know them, but what is it that you're trying to know?

I don't know until I get there. But I understand what you're getting at. I'd gone to the Père Lachaise cemetery to photograph Delacroix's tomb, but that's not the real reason. The real reason is that eventually all sorts of things will happen just by going on that one little journey to see the tomb of Delacroix. I have no control over what is going to happen to me as these other things come into play. I think that applies to any...

Research?

Any process that an artist goes through when they're doing whatever they're doing. It could be weaving, it could be painting, it could be putting together an installation. It's all the same. It's this strange process that happens where the artist, they think they're in control, but they aren't. And what's in control is what Bourdieu would call the *habitus*. The things that are in you, and of you, and around you, of which you have no say. All you can do is be aware of them, and be able to move fast when something happens.

So, to somehow be conscious of that something...

Yes, be conscious of it. Exactly.

... To take all these little things that are floating in the background... to be able to bring them to the fore and be aware of them. And this process is what you're transmitting through your installations.

Yes – once I'm aware of it, it becomes an installation.

But that's another transference. What's happening there?

Well, you become aware of all these things that have come into play in your research, in your moving around. Then when you try to do a work that might show that process, there's something else that happens. It has to do with your own taste, how to communicate what you've learned or what you've experienced, what has acted upon you. When you try to put that into a visual format, things happen there as well. Things change. It depends on the site. For instance, the big difference between showing work in a museum and showing it outside is that far more can happen outside than inside. Because my work for over the last 30 years has been mostly – about seventy-five percent –

outside, a lot more things can happen. If I do a garden installation, the work is affected by the site, the climate, the bugs, the vandals... Even my own ability to keep working. At a certain point I can say, I don't want to do this garden anymore, and stop. The piece then becomes ephemera. It's gone.



Installation detail, *Trans/mission: Still Life* (2004)

You have to keep on working on them all the time.

Yes. Otherwise they deteriorate.

They're long-term projects that are dependent on your labour and reliant on the good graces of an institution to keep them there.

Yes, and also dependent on people who want to help out.

It is unusual to find institutions that are willing to commit to such long-term projects.

Yes. It doesn't happen very often. I installed a garden at Bishop's University – it was a lot of work and that was only up for a year. There were problems – the university administration didn't want me to do it again. There was pressure, probably from the administration. They didn't want the piece to be replanted.

Why was that?

Possibly because the piece was critical of F1 hybrid corn production, industrial corn production. They didn't want Monsanto's name

mentioned at all in the piece. Originally, I was going to use it and had to take it out because they didn't want to be sued by Monsanto.

When you're dealing with sites that are public, you have to negotiate with people that normally you wouldn't even want to sit with. If you don't negotiate with them, you'll never get the work done. It's not just university bureaucrats, it's also people who might be, let's say, the head gardener for Oakville Galleries, or the city of Oakville. To be able to do a garden project in Oakville I had to develop a dialogue with the head gardener, because he was very, very territorial about his space. And here I am, this alien artist coming in, wanting to do a garden installation in his garden. So I had to negotiate, to be very respectful of his area. That always happens – negotiation.

You've always worked within these very specific systems in the artistic community, but you work with public institutions, government funded bodies, never really...

Commercial. No, rarely. I'm not part of that.

There's complications to each. Why is one more negotiable for you?

The first reason is because I don't know how I'd ever sell a garden to someone who's shopping. I suppose if some very wealthy person wanted to buy one of my gardens for their estate, they're more than welcome to, but I can't see that happening because of the critical, anti-corporate nature of my work. It's work that deals with acknowledging farmers, small-scale farmers, so it's anti-industrial agriculture. It's anti-GMO. It's pro-diversity. A lot of wealthy people just don't support the kind of work I do, my critical work on agriculture. Many of them make a lot of money off of genetic engineering,

patents, and proprietary rights to seeds and chemicals. It goes hand in hand, the chemicals and the proprietary rights to seeds. So it's always going to be the public galleries and the curators and directors of these public galleries that are more willing to go along with me doing my work. I've never sold a garden project, but I'm working on that. There's a possibility in a couple years that I might sell one.

How?

They would have it permanently. It would be a garden installation, which would become part of the permanent collection.

And they would maintain it?

Yes, after I'm dead. Right now when I do these gardens and they last longer than a year, I negotiate how much they're willing to pay me to replant everything every year. And, you know, take the weeds out and add more soil.

How long is the Halifax garden going to last?

I think it's just for one year. But, who knows, I never know. Oakville Galleries was three years. It was agreed upon as a three year project. That was good, because I like it when it dies down, and then when I return in the spring, it lives again. And then it dies down again. I like to observe that whole life-death cycle. I like it when it lasts longer than a year.

Yes, it's more of a real garden that way.

There's something else, too, about the colours. Usually my gardens incorporate black and white photography. There's something about the colours of the plants – from the bright greens of springtime to the yellows of the fall – that changes your perception of the black and white photography. Another thing that happens is that, let's say, in the middle of

summer when all the flowers are blooming and they're in front of the black and white photographs, if you take a photograph of that, and you look at that image that you've photographed, you're looking at a black and white photograph. But layered on top of that black and white photograph are the flowers and the leaves and they're all colourful and it's quite... it's quite striking, that way.

I've noticed that same thing in a lot of your work, not just the gardens. When I was at the Banff Centre I found your catalogue, Other Lives. I was looking at it, and I thought, "Oh look, here's an image that's been obscured by marks."

Yes by tar. The railroad piece?

Yes. And also, "Here's this photograph that's been smeared with mud." So there's all this information in the form of texts and photographs, and then, I don't know, something more real gets in the way. I don't know what that is, for you.

Well, it's funny, because at the time I didn't have the words to explain what I was trying to do. But, now that I'm going to be sixty-five years old, I can look back and have ideas about what I was doing. I can explain it a lot better. It was in the mid-seventies and eighties that I was doing these works where the black-and-white photographs underlaid actual material – be it tar, or clay, or blood. I used a lot of blood back then, on top of the photographs.

From a very early age, I realized that the concrete could influence the symbolic, so that you could realize it was only a symbol. You understood that. A lot of people don't realize when things are symbolic. They think that they're real, but in actual fact they're not.

But the symbolic can be a good allegory for teaching and communicating ideas.

Yes, for sure, I'm not debating that. What I'm saying is that I think that sometimes photography has a symbolic value to it. People don't know that. When I was doing works like *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, or the *Asado* pieces, or the clay pieces about Lake Erie, I was trying to make people aware that these images were symbolic, that they were part of a myth. If someone is murdered for their beliefs, you say, "Oh, he's a martyr." But James Baldwin said, "No, he's not a martyr. He's a corpse." The concrete reality of the corpse makes you understand that, okay, as a martyr; he's a symbol, but as a corpse, he's concrete, he's a loss. You've lost a friend, or you've lost a lover; or you've lost a comrade. To violence. And that's *not* symbolic.



As Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid (1975)

Right.

It's real. When I lost my two friends on the railroad and someone photographed it for *The London Free Press*, it became a symbol. It became not about the death of my friends, but about something sensational, dramatic, something almost fictional. It was so awful, what happened. By using the tar on top of that image over and over again, I wanted to root people in the fact

that two of my friends had become corpses, not symbols.

Savarin—he died 1826. When did Parmentier die?

Parmentier died in 1815, I think. Tombs are structures that are commemorative and some consider them to be symbolic of a person. But when the potatoes are there, the tomb becomes something else.

Yes, but all we know about these tangible things is understood through these images. That's always been a difficulty for me.

Well, the journey into the Père Lachaise cemetery was specifically to see Eugene Delacroix's tomb. All of that came after – Bourdieu, Brillat-Savarin, Parmentier, and the proximity of their tombs to each other.

When I was in Paris for four months, I was eating all these different kinds of cheeses. After about three months, I'd eaten tons of different kinds. I would usually go to this one little place on Île Sainte-Louis. After I got back from visiting the Père Lachaise cemetery and visiting these four tombs, I went to get my cheeses. I looked, and realized, *my favourite cheese is called Brillat-Savarin*. I didn't even know. I hadn't noticed. Because I went to the cemetery, all of a sudden I realized that my favourite cheese, that I had been eating for months, was called Brillat-Savarin... *à la truffe*. When I went back to the cheese place on Île Sainte-Louis I said, "Hey, I want that Brillat-Savarin package." I would usually only get a little slice – it's pretty expensive. So he said, "Oh yes, I can give you that." So, [gestures to plastic Brillat-Savarin cheese package] this is part of another piece. But it's also about this, this journey to the Père Lachaise cemetery.

That's how it works. It's not meant to be easy, it's not meant to be simple. It is a complicated endeavour to do any kind of research on anything. A lot of researchers will limit themselves when things get too complicated. But I don't, I just let it happen. So the Brillat-Savarin *à la truffe* cheese, it has always been part of my market system on the consumption of cheeses, but it's now part of my consumption of the *hachis Parmentier*, you know, the mashed potatoes. It is now part of my work on Algeria.

I want to ask you about how you've found your own way to contribute to social justice, to think about it, work through it. I'm wondering what the nature of this is for you. What does it mean to care for the planet? What does it mean to ally yourself with indigenous movements as a settler in Canada or to respect indigenous culture as someone living on this land?

When I was in Grade 6, we took a history course on Canada. It wasn't called First Nations then, it was The Native People of Canada. So, already I was given an education on who the indigenous people of Canada were. Now, there was no course on imperialism. There was a course, a similar sort of course, on the discovery of Canada, the colonization of Canada, but colonization wasn't a dirty word. It wasn't associated with imperialism. So even though I was educated to a certain extent about First Nations peoples, I never understood the implications of settler culture until later on in high school, when I was radicalized because of the anti-Vietnam war movements, the various liberation movements in Latin America, and then the American Indian Movement. These events were happening around that time, between 1965 and 1968, when I went to high school. By the time I entered university I was radicalized,

but in a very superficial way. I had some knowledge, but I couldn't put it all together.

That didn't happen until later, after I quit university in 1970 and I made a conscious decision to travel south of the US–Mexican border. One of the things I noticed as soon as I entered Mexico, or the southern United States for that matter, was that all of a sudden, people there started to look like Native people in Canada, and they were the majority, only there, they were called mestizo. Then the further I went, further south into southern Mexico, and then later on into Peru, Bolivia, they were no longer called mestizo, and they were the majority. They were called Aymara or Quechua, their proper names. It's like being called Anishinaabe, the proper word for Ojibwe. I was astounded. There was something like 30 million people that spoke Quechua in Peru, Bolivia, northern Chile, southern Ecuador, and part of Brazil. This was the beginning of my understanding of the history of the Americas: It's that Native people are everywhere. In some places, they're the majority, and despite colonialism and modern day imperialism, they haven't gone away. And they aren't going to go away. Just having that knowledge was enough to begin my own education and try to make work that hopefully would add to the debate, the dialogue. That started in 1973, and it's never stopped. I'm still learning all the time.

And this is a very simplistic question, but how do you see your work adding to that debate and dialogue?

One of the ways that it adds to it is through the acknowledgement of the production of First Nation farmers for eight thousand years in the Americas. And again, it's not an issue of appropriation. It's an issue of acknowledgement. You're acknowledging the fact that corn, the production

of maize, which is totally a human production—maize wouldn't exist without humans—has existed in the Americas for eight thousand years. You have to acknowledge that along with the concrete plant with its grains of corn and its cob, maize has symbolic significance. That symbolic significance is counterpointed to what Europeans call religion.

That's what I try to visualize through my gardens. That's why I'm always planting maize, all different kinds, because I love it so much. It's just filled with information that's not just about food. And I'm not appropriating this stuff. The maize plant was appropriated eight thousand years ago in its development. It was from teosinte and another plant. I'm just adding to the knowledge that gets covered up, opening that up.



At Ron Benner's home/studio in London, Ontario

So there's this hidden knowledge... And we were talking about making something conscious before.

Yes. That's what I try to do.

But then you also serve the plant through the corn roast as well.

Yes. This year I'm doing the corn roast at Museum London and at Hart House at the University of Toronto, but I'm also doing one in Halifax in connection with my garden installation at Dalhousie University. We're going to ship out my corn roaster. It'll be the first time that my

corn roaster has gone beyond Toronto. I'm pretty excited about that, because it has other corn roaster images on it from around the world.

What are some of the different economic systems you've encountered through your research and travels?

Well, there's the political economy of the watercolour, for instance. Or the political economy of... cheese. Or the political economy of... well you have to add another word and that's the political visual economy. I'm a visual artist, so it's the political visual economy of... whatever thing I am following. Oranges, or potatoes, or maize, or cheese, or watercolours...

The starting point might be food, or it might be visual ephemera, a piece of art...

Yes, or an event, something that happened to me. Most of my early work is based upon things that happened to me directly. It was my way of coming to terms with not being prepared, as an artist, for things that happened to me, trying to come to terms with them.

Like Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid?

Yes, or traveling to Latin America in 1973. I wasn't prepared for what I went through. I was twenty-three years old. I'd studied Spanish. I tried to be aware of the world south of the US-Mexican border, but I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

That was the time of Pinochet.

Yes. So then when I came back, I did all those works like *Asado: Through the Eyes of Young Sheep*, where I look at myself as... just as a

sheep. I correlated the killing, cooking, and eating of lamb in Argentina to what was happening all over Latin America at that time, which was military and state violence against people who, for the most part, were socialists. I'm still a socialist; I'm still intrigued by the market economy, the visual economy of Canada and of the world. When I use the term "market", I don't necessarily mean the capitalist market. There is such a thing as a socialist market. There are many different kinds of markets, and I like to move through all these different markets. It seems to me, though, that we're often forced to move through the capitalist market. But we don't have to. The same thing applies to any kind of endeavour. We don't always have to go through the capitalist system to get what we desire. We can use other systems.

And I'm sure you've seen these systems in action throughout your travels.

Yeah, for sure.

Can you give me a couple examples of different kinds of markets?

There's my own experience in Cuba. There are a number of market systems that operate in Cuba that aren't capitalist and some of them aren't socialist either. They're just co-operative, communal. Another word that gets lost in market ideology is communal. Most of the agriculturalists in the world that came up with our food crops were communal agriculturalists and I've met many of them in Latin America, what's now called Latin America. I met them in India and Southeast Asia. Communal agriculture is still practiced and it's very productive.

On a large scale?

No. Communal agriculture is a different scale than industrial agriculture and their market systems. In industrial agriculture, all the inputs never get added up, all the chemical inputs, the gas, the petroleum required, the machinery. The detrimental effects of pesticides, herbicides, petroleum use, those kinds of things, on our future generations never get counted.

Ron Benner interviewed by Stacey Ho
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