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WEB EXTRA: An a-peeling photo gallery of potato art

art

Paean to the potato

BY STEVE PARKS
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If McDonald's has served more than 250 billion hamburgers since the golden arches first appeared in 1961, how many individual fries has the fast-food chain served? Talk about super-sizing.

Yes, the potato is the world's most utilitarian vegetable. It's in that sense of tuber ubiquity that Lake Grove artist and itinerant teacher Jeffrey Allen Price curates "Occupying Potato: The Cult of the Potato 2012."

Thirty artists from 12 countries occupy every gallery, gift-shop wall and hallway of the Islip Art Museum.

"The potato is very pronounced in our vernacular," says Price, whose spud fascination began when he organized a Potato Festival as a Missouri State University student in 1996. "We speak of a controversial political issue as a hot potato. Anything substantive is meat and potatoes. A lazy person is a couch potato. There's no other vegetable so embedded in our language."

He has a point. A stalker is not known as an asparagus, although a skinny guy may be referred to as a string bean.

"I Never Get Tired of Saying Potato," Jeffrey Allen Price's video installation, is part of the "Occupying Potato" exhibit.

WHAT "Occupying Potato"
WHEN | WHERE Reception: 1-4 p.m. Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, noon-4 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 18, Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip
ADMISSION $3 suggested donation; 631-224-5402, islipartmuseum.org

POTATO FIELDS

Recognizing Long Island's connection to the earthy harvest, the exhibit notes that Levittown was built on blighted potato fields. The same blight caused Ireland's Great Potato Famine, represented in a model of Brian Tolle's "Phytophthora infestans" (the scientific name of the infestation), an upended wheelbarrow with split potatoes designed for the Irish Hunger Memorial, and Italian-American Italo Scanga's "Potato Famine #1," a post on which murphies are impaled. Recovery is suggested in Irish artist Eimear O'Connor's 2011 glass sculpture "Regrowth (III)."

But "Occupying Potato" isn't just feast or famine, vodka and vichyssoise. "The potato is empirically funny," Price says. He cites Paul McMahon as a potatohead shaking hands with Soupy Sales. Fellow Missouri State alum and conceptual artist Chad Woody's 2012 "Potato Occupation," a Hieronymous Bosch-like landscape populated by brown-, gold-, red- and purple-skinned revolutionaries. (Several pieces were created specifically for this show, Price says.) An installation by Woody pays homage to Henry Spalding, who first cultivated the Idaho potato.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Price, who teaches at Nassau Community College, Suffolk County Community College and Jamaica's York College, created a performance video, "I Never Get Tired of Saying Potato," featuring the artist repeating the word in myriad contexts.

"Unpacking My Potato Collection," meanwhile, stuffs the museum's Historical Room with prints, tools and artwork gleaned from Price's two decades of research. In the museum shop, Archie Rand's potato prints include a mosaic of taters carved into stamp shapes.

"My long-term vision," Price says, "is to curate a show of major artists at a major museum." Maybe then he'd have the clout to attract one of the world's great masterpieces on his favorite subject — Van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters."

plus

Contemporary collections

WHAT If you're on your way to see the major "Chagall" exhibit, don't overlook Nassau's Contemporary Collectors Gallery upstairs. **Julie Tremblay**, left, made life-size sculptures and installations out of industrial debris, offering a peek into each work's interior. Sydney Chastain-Chapman mixes vibrant colors to create figurative scenes in her paintings and watercolors. Both are New York City artists.
WHEN | WHERE 11 a.m.-4:45 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays through Nov. 4, Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Dr., Roslyn Harbor
ADMISSION $4-$10, $2 parking on weekends; nassaumuseum.org, 516-484-9337

— STEVE PARKS