

## **Occupying Potato: The Cult of Potato 2012**

### ***An Exhibition of Contemporary Potato Art***

Occupying Potato takes its name via the various Occupy movements activating around the globe, with a theme inspired by that most nutritious and abundant vegetable on planet Earth – *Solanum tuberosum*. The potato's great value as a staple crop is well known and appreciated, but it has also been a symbol and subject of art since its discovery in the ancient South American Andes Mountains.

Cult of Potato artists continuing this tradition today are almost as varied and diverse as the 5,000 species of potatoes known to exist on the planet. From paean to parody, the works of these 30 artists from a dozen countries unveil the potato's vast potential in a wide range of methods—revealing that the potato is as rich in meaning as it is in vitamins and minerals.

Potato History is invoked or directly memorialized by some of the works in the Occupying Potato exhibition. The Irish Potato Famine is given tribute by the Italian-born American artist Italo Scanga (1932-2001) in a poetic potato-covered totem called "Irish Potato Famine #1" (1979). The same potato tragedy is also the focus of the "Model for the Irish Hunger Memorial" (2010) in New York City co-designed by Brian Tolle. The Irish artist Eimear O'Connor portrays the fragility of Ireland's potato by translating its earthy matter into a delicate glass form with flowering vines, in "Regrowth" (2010).

In another potato sculpture by Brian Tolle, "Phytophthora infestans," (2009) we see that the same Late Blight that destroyed Irish crops in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century also devastated potato fields a century later on Long Island, scaring many potato farmers into selling their lands at reduced rates, helping pave the way for Levittown and suburban sprawl.

In Adam Taye's didactic sculpture "Esto Perpetua / I will fight no more forever" (2011), the Idaho-born artist chronicles the beginning of Idaho's potato history and the end of the native way of life in the place where he grew up. He honors important figures of the era with sports jerseys bearing their names—one in burlap to commemorate the planting of the first potato in Idaho by the Presbyterian minister Henry Spaulding, and another in cowhide for the Nez Perce Chief Joseph, whose eloquent surrender included the phrase inspiring the end of the work's title. The large wooden cross the jerseys hang from directly references the 75' electric cross that stands atop Table Rock in Boise, Idaho, connecting the importation of Christianity with the transplantation of the potato in the region.

The Colombian artist Adrian Villa blends potato historical fact with potato fiction in an intriguing set of documents discovered and translated by the artist. The apocryphal "V.G. corresponding with past, present and future potato eaters / Evidence to prove that Victor

Grippo and Van Gogh could have been the same person" (2011), presents a dialogue between two well-known Potato Art masters in a notebook purportedly from the hand of Victor Grippo, and a four-page letter by Vincent Van Gogh.

There are a number of works in the exhibition by women artists who connect potatoes to different aspects of femininity. Rika Ohara pays tribute to the women's role in building society and civilizations in "Potato Woman"(2006), a segment from her award-winning film *The Place of No Heart* (2009). In this Potato Myth, a woman gathers potatoes and lays them out in a field, forming a foundation in the shape of a square. She then looks to the sky as though in prayer and suddenly potatoes rain down like healthy bombs and stack together like bricks to form a towering Potato Monolith.

The German artist Judith Samen relates potatoes to domestic roles in sculptures, drawings and photographs. In "Kartoffelhemd" (1999) a hanging undergarment is stressed by the weight of the potatoes sewn to it. Further suggesting the heavy responsibility of female domestic roles is the documentation from her performance "Reibekuchenwand" (2002) when she cooked up more than 750 potato pancakes in a skillet and pressed them against the museum wall, covering it with a grid of greasy patties resembling a tapestry.

In the video installation by Viviane Le Courtois, "Génération d'épluchures (Generations of Peelings)" (2011) the artist connects with the females in her family and their tradition of preparing potatoes back in France. The video documents her speedy hands ritualistically removing the skins off potatoes for her potluck events, which she dehydrates and displays in a pile on burlap sacks on the floor like sacrificial remains.

London-based sculptor Lucy Kippin has been making works from and inspired by potatoes ever since discovering one resembling the well-known Venus of Willendorf fertility symbol. In "Diamonds are Forever" (2012) a vagina-like potato is displayed on a small table covered in faux diamonds. In "Dig for Victory" (2006) and "We the Made Lucky Few," (2011) the artist includes delicate little potato forms cast from wax and arranges them in communal gatherings.

Potatoes are even associated with sexual perversity in the photo collage series "Sado Potato" (2012) by the Italian artist known as Mongobì. In her native language the term for potato—"patata"—is also a slang term used to refer to female genitalia. In relating potato and vagina, the artist reveals the fecund and creative aspects of both.

The potato also has a humorous side, and back in the 1980s Paul McMahon tapped into a deep well of puns and wordplay associated with the potato that led to his writing an entire book called *Potato Jokes* (1988). Taking his act to the appropriately absurd level, McMahon crafted a potato costume and performed his potato jokes in public. The exhibition includes video clips from Paul McMahon's television appearances as a giant potato, including "Dueling One Liners" with Soupy Sales on *Comedy Nite*.

Romanian artist Ciprian Muresan's funny “(untitled) Potato Peelers” (2010) video begins with five expressionless soldiers resigned to the mundane task of peeling a giant heap of potatoes as if this was their punishment for some unknown offense. The monotony of the men’s repetitive whittling away of the skins is broken only by the occasional sound of the potatoes being tossed into the waiting pots of water, slowly dwindling down to piles of peelings.

In 1989, potatoes found their way into every work of art Martin Bromirski made that year—inspiring photos, drawings, conceptual art, and paintings, including the hilarious “Texas Potatoes,” where two cartoon potatoes in 10 gallon hats face off for duel because that “State Ain’t Big Enough” for the both them.

W. David Powell has included potatoes in his surreal photo collages like “Nukin’ Taters” (2003), showing mad scientists subjecting potatoes on conveyor belts to unknown experiments. This piece hints at a dark and controversial side of the potato, with real life genetic modifications taking place in the labs of corporations like Monsanto who patent their New Leaf Potatoes like operating systems on computers.

There are several artists in the exhibition that personify potatoes as if they were people or see them almost as a race of human-like creatures. The Lebanese artist Ginou Choueiri translated photographic portraits of people directly onto the skin of real potatoes and re-photographed their morphed results in her “Potato Portraits”(2008) series. The Polish born artist Andrzej Maciejewski also elevates potatoes to personhood in his large photographic portraits of uniquely shaped spuds he calls “V.I.P. Very Important Potatoes” (2010), going so far as to invent names and biographies for them.

Chad Woody is an artist and writer from Missouri who has also found personalities in potatoes, ever since he began holding mock birthday parties for an actual potato he named Toober and kept in his freezer for years. His sense of humor and skills as a draughtsman, have brought to life a series of drawings and etchings from his illustrated book called “Life and Death of Potato Guy” (2002-2012). For last year’s Potato Revolution and this year’s Occupying Potato exhibition, Woody manifested the first two panels of a delightfully detailed Hieronymous Bosch-like triptych, where potato protagonists play out their various roles in “The Potato Revolution” (2011-2012).

Mixed media artist Ryan Seslow postulates that potatoes might actually be extraterrestrials, visiting earth to influence and collaborate with mankind. In the eye-popping “ipotatoi”(2012) he shows a spud-headed humanoid surrounded by huge tubers, as if *Homo sapiens* and *Solanum tuberosum* co-evolved and formed a species of human-potato hybrids.

The Potato Muse has also been immortalized as a model and a subject of still-lives. Fran Beallor saw the challenge of drawing potatoes as a natural follow-up to her “Ugly Fruits” series, and has skillfully rendered potatoes in a new series of colored pencil drawings

showing all their imperfections in minute detail. Allan Innman is another realist in the show, whose interest in making photorealistic paintings of his childhood toys led him to create a colorful and playful oil painting of the pop culture icon “Mr. Potato Head.”

Jean-Louis Gonterre is a photographer that has been immortalizing uniquely shaped potatoes for years. In his most two most recent series he presents the viewer with huge photographs of bulbous tubers placed in a variety of positions. In the series “Heat” (2010), potatoes are piled-up like barricades between geometric structures and in “Tension” (2010) they are stacked in various balanced configurations.

Some of the artists in the exhibition use the potato itself as a medium in their work, carving or incising them into sculptures, potato stamps and even architectural models. The curiously named Peter Root from Turkey carved an entire potato cityscape from 130 pounds of potatoes using almost nothing but a bike tool. “Plot” (2012) is a series of photographs documenting the decaying expanse of his organic architectural fantasy.

In 1988, Archie Rand and Jon Cone pioneered a sophisticated Potato Printing system while collaborating during a sleep-deprived three day work period, cutting up 300 pounds of potatoes to create the large scale “Assimilation” print and over two dozen other works that are included in the Museum Store Gallery exhibition “Archie Rand: Potato Prints” on view concurrently with *Occupying Potato*.

The London-based duo Joffe & Pye saw humor in using Potato Stamps to create “Warhol (Red)” (2012), a crude but cute Master Study of Warhol’s famous self-portrait. Their Potato Stamp concept was part of an experiment in making works of art that would be affordable to anyone, creating a series of prints priced at only 99 cents apiece.

Salvatore Scarpitta used Potato Stamps to create the screenprint “Race Car Driver with Idaho Potatoes” (1990). With Sal himself at the wheel, a flurry of potatoes appear to fly out the back of his car and dance around him as he speeds around the race track.

Altoon Sultan brings a Potato Zen vibe to the exhibition with two of her elegantly effortless potato prints, “Two Blue Ovals” (2012) and “Blue Cloud” (2012). As an artist who also grows and cooks her own potatoes, her close connection to them allows her to understand their inner nature and create powerful works with minimal means.

Of all the artists who have looked inside the potato for inspiration, perhaps Anna Alicja Feitzinger has penetrated the greatest depths of the potato, with scientific investigations at their cellular level. Using her microscope to observe and photograph the microcosmic world of *Solanum tuberosum*, she seems to reveal to the naked eye the origin of life itself, in the light box installation “Solanum Univerosom” (2011).

The discovery of a heart-shaped potato led to the creation of a series of photographs celebrating it, by the Chicago-based artist Eric Bartholomew. His relationship with this love-spud turned into an entire Potato Enterprise he dubbed *Uber Tuber*, after creating

numerous potato-inspired books, t-shirts, buttons, postcards and other potato memorabilia.

The Dutch artist Michiel Brink has been writing and singing potato-themed songs for over 30 years with his band *de Aardappeleters*, who named themselves after Van Gogh's famous "Potato Eaters" painting of 1885. Stylistically varied, his songs range from the sincere to the absurd and have inspired other potato-themed bands like POTATOTRON. Michiel Brink was one of the driving forces behind the creation of an international potato art coalition. Along with myself, Gerard Immerzeel and the artists Topp & Dubio, Brink co-founded the Cult of Potato in the Hague, in December of 2004.

Occupying Potato is a manifesto of Potato Art. The Potato Muse has been enchanting artists for centuries, and in Modern Art alone there are copious examples of Potato Symbolism found in the work of masters as revered as Millet, Van Gogh, Dali, Beuys, Immendorf, Polke, Oldenburg and Warhol<sup>11</sup>. As we have seen, Potato Art is also prevalent in the work of contemporary artists. Raucous tributes to the potato in all mediums have emerged—from the sacred to the profane—and in such a wide spectrum of intention that a complex multi-layered Potato Symbolism can be proclaimed. From the microscopic world of cells to the outer reaches of extraterrestrial fantasies, the potato's broader implications and influence in art can now be more fully examined and hopefully better understood.

As Potato Curator, I would like to thank all of the participating artists that I had the pleasure of dealing with directly while organizing this exhibition. There is a generosity of spirit and a humbleness of character possessed by many of these artists—personality traits that I also associate with the potato. Thanks go out to other lenders of works to the show like Jim Kempner Fine Arts, Kenny Schachter and Bill and Katherine Scanga and the Italo Scanga Foundation. I am also very grateful to all the helpful volunteers, especially my former and current students, who generously loaned their time and talents to the cause. Without their help and that of many others, it would not be possible to produce such an ambitious series of exhibitions with our modest potato budget. Finally, I would like to thank the Islip Art Museum for their outstanding support and appreciation for this project, and especially to Beth Giacummo for her visionary role and extraordinary efforts in helping to bring a world-class Potato Art exhibition to Long Island, USA.

-Jeffrey Allen Price

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<sup>11</sup> In the 2003 essay "The Dialectical Potato: Potato in Art, Art in Potato," I examined Potato Symbolism in works of avant-garde artists, published in *Art Criticism*, vol. 18 no. 2, 2003.