

Jeffrey Allen Price's

'Potato House' opens at the Mills Pond House

Lowly spud elevated to cultural icon



BY ELIZABETH SOBEL

What conceptual artist Jeffrey Allen Price enjoys most about the subject of potatoes is its ability to spark conversation. Most would regard potatoes an odd topic of conversation. Price, however, believes that spuds are not only an excellent "conversation starter," but a wonderful vehicle for sharing information and knowledge between people, a "social unifier."

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Potato Festival

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"I always learn something through the people who speak with me about potatoes," Price said. "Potatoes have entered our culture, folklore and language (hot potato, couch potato, and meat and potatoes), and it's the breadth of their influence that interests me."

The historic Mills Pond House in St. James is showcasing Price's extensive knowledge and collection of potato memorabilia through September 21 with his fourth annual exhibit, "Potato House." This interactive and continuously growing exhibition coincides with the equally intriguing "Long Island Harvest Exhibition," which reflects all aspects of farming on Long Island including cultivation, planting and harvesting.

Celebrating the potato is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Price feels that the "Potato House" exhibit is particularly befitting to Long Island, once inundated by

potato fields, now a rarity on Long Island. Suffolk County's reputation as an agricultural center still holds, and the potato crop has been since replaced by the wine industry's grape crop, particularly on the North Shore. The importance of the potato to Long Island culture is one of the reasons behind Smithtown Township Arts Council Director Allison Cruz's decision to have the two exhibits coincide.

"The two exhibits naturally coincide," Cruz said. "We even have a potato garden on the grounds of the Mill Pond House now." Cruz also explained that "Potato House" will occupy two downstairs rooms and the second floor of the Mills Pond House. The harvest exhibition comprised of paintings, sculptures, and artifacts of interest will occupy all but two rooms of the main floor.

Although the "Potato House" exhibit is at this point a one-time event in St. James, Price has large visions for the spud. He pointed out that Levittown, once a potato field developed into affordable housing for post World

War II veterans, currently has a monument to the potato. "I want to not only make this exhibit an annual event, I want to create a potato institute, a museum where the community can acknowledge the potato as a part of our culture here on Long Island," Price said.

"Potato House" is designed as a collaboration between the Mills Pond House, the artist and visitors to the exhibition. In one way, "Potato House" is a celebration of the world's most important vegetable. On the other, "Potato House" is a unique exhibit consisting of potato art, memorabilia and events designed to educate, entertain and provoke thought.

Price's overall vision of "Potato House" consists of three main components: an indoor exhibition, potato performances and events, and the grand finale potato festival on the weekend of September 20 and 21 called "Think Potato IV." This is the fourth of Price's potato events. The first such festival took place in Price's Springfield, Missouri backyard in the spring of 1996. Two exhibits followed in the city's local parks.

In "Potato House," Price transforms space to accommodate the potato into their music— James Brown's *Mashed Potatoes USA*, James Taylor's *Sweet Potato Pie* and the Grateful Dead's *New Potato Head Caboose*, to name a few.

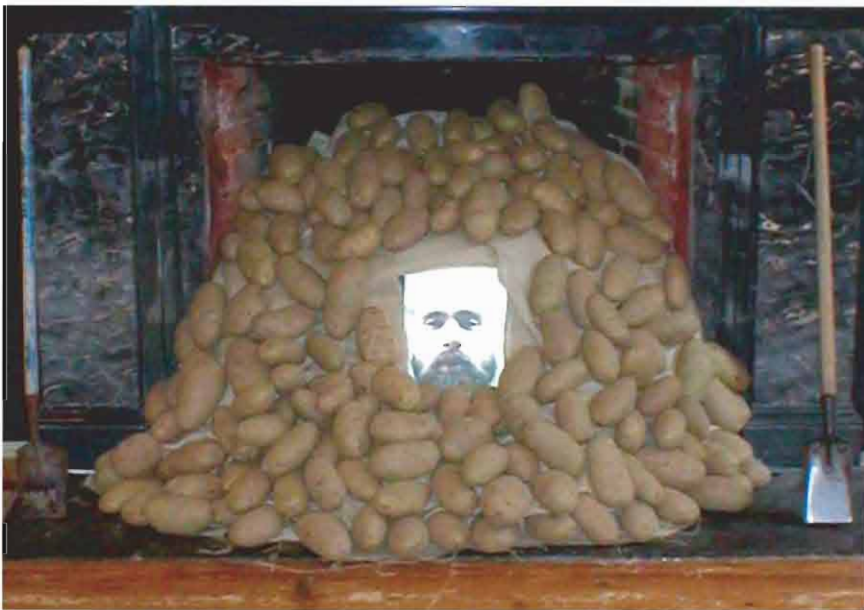
Price, who as a starving artist existed on a diet mainly of potatoes, realized through his research, that the potato is jam-packed with nutrients. According to Price, the potato consists of every nutrient except vitamin A, is 99 percent fat free and is cholesterol free. Its versatile nature is why so many worldwide cultures use this vegetable as a mainstay in their diets. What would the American diet be without the potato chip and the French fry? "People can literally survive on the potato with the addition of milk to their diet," Price added. "I did and still do."

Last weekend, Price delivered two performances of Katie's Puppets Puppet Show entitled *Mr. Mouse Saves the Potato*. This was followed by a day of potato-related reading for all ages. On August 30, Price will present his stand-up comedy and short play to an adult audience only at Potato Comedy Night. This is followed by the presentation of a unique art slide lecture on August 31 depicting the symbol of the potato in modern works of art.

Price is a serious artist who recently earned his Masters in Fine Art degree in studio art at Stony Brook State University. His studies of Vincent Van Gogh's early painting *Potato Eaters* became an inspiration for Price and who cultivated an interest in taking a banal subject like the potato to an elevated religious metaphor. Price will also touch on the influence of artist Joseph Beuys who developed what is now termed Social Sculpture "where even the act of peeling a potato can be considered art if it is a conscious act."

The "Potato House" culminates in a potato festival (Think Potato IV) where families can participate in potato games (potato sack races, hot potato), listen to potato-themed music, and participate in the great Potato Cook off. In fact, musicians are encouraged to perform their own potato-themed songs for the upcoming festival.

"What I want to stress in "Potato House" is that the potato emphasizes man's closeness to the land. It is also the community coming together. I will get to meet this community. I'm now a part of this community," Price said. Potato lovers can visit Price's potato website at www.potatoengine.com for additional potato facts and information. *Continued on page B12*



(above) "I Never Get Tired of Saying Potato," by Jeffrey Allen Price
Installation at Potato House 2003.

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Potato highlights

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"Potato House" and "Long Island Harvest" are on display at the Mills Pond House Gallery through Sunday, September 21.

Other potato-related events at the Mills Pond House include:

- Saturday, August 30, 7 to 9 pm, Potato Comedy Night, potato stand-up and a short play by Jeffrey Allen Price. Adults only at this free event.
- Sunday, August 30, 3 to 5 pm, Potato Art History, potato art historian, Jeffrey Allen Price will give a slide lecture (free event).
- Sunday, September 7, 3 to 4:30 pm, Potato Lesson II, historical, nutritional

and anecdotal potato informational lecture (free event).

Saturday, September 20, 10 am to 6 pm, Potato Festival, Think Potato IV, including potato games, potato music and a potato cook-off. There will be a 21 potato canon salute at noon and from 1 to 1:30 pm build the highest tower out of mashed potatoes. Attendees are invited to come in a decorated potato hat. Fun for the whole family. The rain date is Sunday, September 21.

The Mills Pond House is located at 660 Route 25A in St. James. Regular gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10 am to 5 pm and weekends from noon to 5 pm. Admission to the gallery is free. For further information, call 862-6575 or go to www.stacarts.org.

On the Cover:

The "Potato House" exhibit at the Mills Pond House in St. James, including potato battery, Mr. Potato Head and couch potato.

All photos by Robert O'Rourke