

February 24-March 2, 2005

Food for thought

The Contemporary Arts Collective celebrates the potato

BY JAG GREENSPON

Something interesting has happened at the Contemporary Arts Collective since the most recent First Friday. Instead of art, it

organic has become the site of, according to photographer.

Rebecca Stees, a "Barn Raising." You can tell something is different the moment you enter the front room at the Arts Factory and smell the dirt and organic matter. Then you see the potatoes. (Or is it potatoes? Note to self: Better ask Dan Quayle.)

Everywhere you look, there are potatoes and potato products and byproducts. The word "cult" is spelled out in used celophane chip bags.

Indeed, potatoes are the unifying theme of this touring show, the brainchild of "spud lover" and artist Jeffrey Allen Price.

The tuber has captured Price's interest for a number of years, as it combines his fine-art training with his love of gardening and nature. He has collected written works about the potato, studied its role throughout history and incorporates it into most of his original work.

For Price, the process of working with the organic is more important than the final product, something that's evident in two pieces he has on display, "Potato Venus" and "Self Potato." Both of these sculptures are constantly evolving, due to the natural dehydration of the potato used as the base. "Self Potato" is a self-portrait carved into a small spud that is forever shrinking and morphing as it ages. "Potato Venus," meanwhile, is a fancy facsimile of a primitive culture's goddess made from different sized homegrown potatoes. Where it will differ from the version seen at the end of the show's run is in the "antler-like" protrusions emanating from the figure's head.

For the rest of the artists participating in *Cult of Potato*, the perennial plant is more of an idea than a way of life.

Andrea Avery sees the potato as something to be protected, categorized and separated out. In her piece "Potato Chip Sampler," she has built a nine-pocketed holding pen, and a plastic-encased display of the top styles and tastes of — you guessed it — potato chips. The ridge is represented, as is the red chip and the sour cream and onion. But they are not accessible to the viewer in anything other than sight. You can't smell, taste or feel the chip, only enjoy the aesthetic pleasure of how it looks.



Jeffrey Allen Price's "Potato Venus"

With "Potato Jackets," Avery again whips out the magic number nine, embedding a 2 1/2-yard-long strip of cloth with pockets, each of which holds a single yam. The pockets are protecting the sweet potatoes, keeping them warm — and, yet, with their smaller ends peeking out, they seem to yearn for escape.

Avery has taken the food of many and turned it into an item to be carefully protected rather than mashed and dished out.

Photographer Rebecca Stees brings the vegetable into direct human contact. Her lens captures the joy a small brown lump can bring to a child, even after its importance as a starchy staple is removed and it becomes a simple plaything. Stees' work is the most accessible in the gallery, the bright colors and intimate, tight compositions inviting the viewer into the world of her child subjects. Of particular joy are two pieces in a group of four. The many uses of the potato — like, say, for juggling — are expressed in "Potato Three," a shot of a small boy clutching three potatoes under his chin as if he's just caught them, desperate not to let them fall to the ground. "Potato Four Eyes" is a close-up of a young girl, her eyes crossed as she holds two spuds against her cheeks.



Jeffrey Allen Price's "Self-Potato"

In fact, with all of Stees' work, a certain humor is required to fully appreciate what she's saying.

Conversely, the least accessible of the participants is clothing designer Nina Ganci. The founder of the Skif clothing line is the most prolific artist on display, and yet most of her work seems to involve the potato so peripherally as to be almost nonexistent or, worse, thrown in as an afterthought as opposed to an inherent part of creation.

That said, *Cult of Potato*, while not causing me to rush to the nearest Frito-Lay vendor, does provide much food for thought. Now if we could only get Mr. Quayle to downtown Las Vegas ... **CL**

Cult of Potato
The Contemporary Arts Collective
In the Arts Factory
101 E. Charleston Blvd., #101
702-382-3886
Through March 5