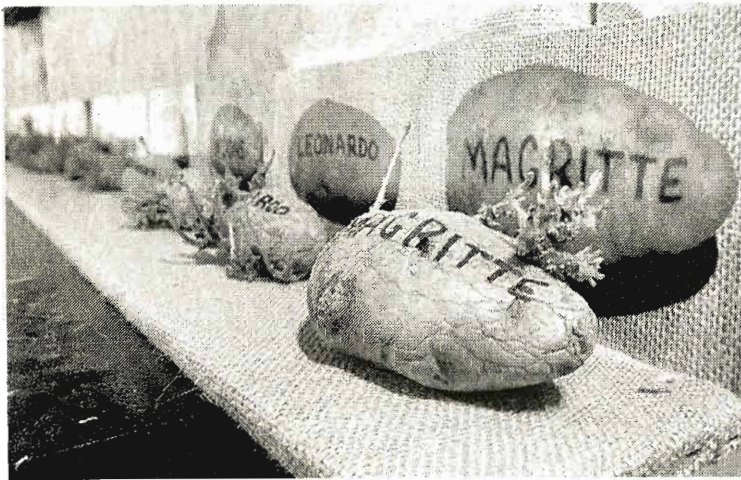


A Grand Passion For a Simple Potato



Photographs by Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

By BARBARA DELATINER

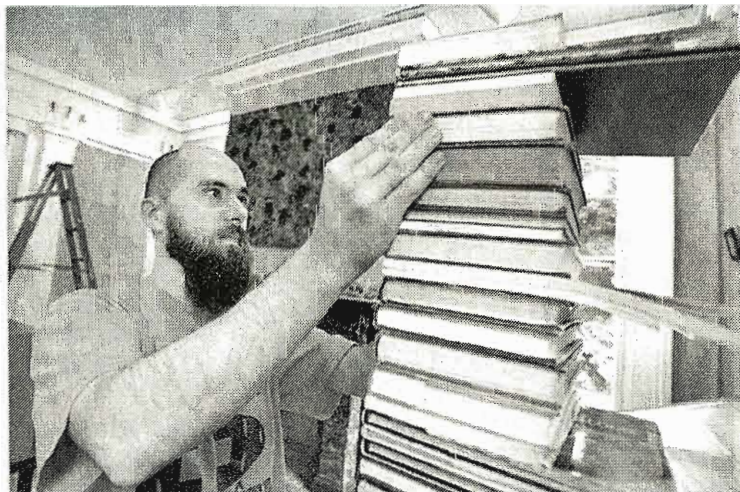
ST. JAMES
JEFFREY ALLEN PRICE admits that his artistic muse is unusual.

Not only does he, a strict vegetarian, eat potatoes; he also draws them, collects anything that mentions them, uses them realistically and symbolically in his sculptures, and immortalizes them in performance pieces.

"Potato House," his latest effort to raise public consciousness about the lowly spud, opened yesterday at the Mills Pond House Gallery here. The multi-media installation and its associated programs run through Sept. 21, accompanied by "Long Island Harvest," a group show of farm-related works by local artists.

The Mills Pond House, which was built in 1838, was closed for several weeks for emergency chimney repairs. It reopened last week, and has been transformed into a potato heaven. A potato garden surrounds the building. Inside, burlap covers the walls, which are hung with drawings and paintings that are about potatoes or made of potato products, and T shirts bearing slogans like "I Like Potatoes and Potatoes Like Me."

Potato-chip canisters line the gallery entrances. Mr. Price's sculptures, among them his "Potato Tomes Obelisk," a tower of books about potatoes, sprinkle the downstairs galleries, sharing exhibition



space with his collections of potato-related toys, games, clothes and tools.

The second-floor hallway is adorned with a "Potato Timeline," tracing the history of the vegetable from its discovery in the Andes to the present. In the game room, complete with a "Potato Couch" covered in burlap, recordings of songs about potatoes are played, and videos and films about potatoes are shown. Mr. Price's collection of large mechanized Mr. Potato Heads is also displayed there.

Mr. Price, 31, said his preoccupation with the potato began in 1995 in Springfield, Mo., his hometown, when he was "a starving artist living off potatoes." At that time, he ex-

plained, he began thinking about the vegetable's "variety and versatility and abundance."

Taken with Van Gogh's painting "The Potato Eaters," he began researching the vegetable. Impressed by its image of "humility, poverty and strength," he found himself "evolving from a painter to a more conceptual artist" with the potato as his "social vehicle and theme," he said, adjusting his "Potato Hat," a cavalry hat decorated with sprouted potatoes.

Mr. Price, who lives in Rocky Point, held his first "Think Potato Festival" in his backyard in Springfield and brought the concept with him when he came to Long Island to study for his M.F.A. in studio art

Jeffrey Allen Price's installation has a display of potatoes with artists' names on them, above left; a "Potato Couch," above; and "Potato Tomes Obelisk," a tower of books about potatoes.

from the State University at Stony Brook. While working on the degree, which he received in May, he taught art classes at Mills Pond House and perfected his potato-inspired performance art.

His performance pieces, some of which will be featured in weekend programs while the installation is up, include games like "Pin the Eye on the Spud" and "Hot Potato." The content runs the spectrum from "serious to stupid," he said. "I take it to an absurd level to pull people in to get the message."

He explained: "I want to elevate the potato to a very high level. Show people how rich the potato is. Not only in vitamins and nutrients but rich in content, too. While sometimes banal, the potato is also very necessary in life." ■

"Potato House" is at the Mills Pond House Gallery of the Smithtown Township Arts Council, 660 Route 25A, St. James, through Sept. 21. A Potato Festival will be held on Sept. 20. Information: (631) 862-6575.