



Gastro-Vision | From Seeds to Sprouts, Greens Across Manhattan

May 18th, 2012 by Nicole Caruth



Rob Carter. "Faith in a Seed (Darwin)," 2012. Video still. Courtesy the artist and Art in General.

For the past couple of years, I've been tracking artists who grow food as part of their practice. Trust me when I tell you that there are plenty. I won't go too deeply into the artist-as-cultivator trend here, though I will say that these types of projects are often steeped in greenwash and two-word phrases that people like to hear—environmentally conscious, locally grown, sustainable minded, and socially engaged. However well-intentioned they might be, artists can sometimes fail to give us new ways of thinking about and seeing food production. But there are also artists like Rob Carter and Jenna Spevack, both of whom have solo exhibitions right now in Manhattan, who help us to reimagine foodways and make the practice of growing food something to behold.

Rob Carter: Faith in a Seed

Rob Carter's multimedia installation *Faith in a Seed* is the latest in Art in General's New Commission Program. On approach, it doesn't look like much more than a big plywood box. Ocular lenses embedded along its perimeter afford a look inside. Allow me to wax sentimental: this is how the character Mary Lennox must have felt when she unlocked the door to *The Secret Garden*. The landscape before you is small and wonderful. Plants of dandelion, bush bean, and corn surround three miniature paper houses, replicas of 19th-century estates that belonged to Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, and Sir John Bennet Lawes. Each represents a different way of seeing the world and, as Carter told me over the phone, "the shifting role of architecture in the ongoing dialogue about feeding mankind."

Faith in a Seed began for Carter some four years ago when he “came across a random article on the BBC” that discussed Lawes’ scientific institute, Rothamsted Experimental Station, one of the world’s oldest agricultural research centers. Carter’s installation has been “slowly germinating” ever since. In time, he came to Darwin and Thoreau. Darwin’s house represents “a life of research, looking, and investigation,” Carter explained. Whereas “Thoreau was a natural person to go toward because he straddled both worldly thinking and artistic point of view.”



Rob Carter. "Faith in a Seed (Rothamsted Research)," 2012. Video still. Courtesy the artist and Art in General.

With recent shows, Art in General’s main gallery has felt cavernous and disconnected from the world outside. Carter gives us a lot to take in, from plants to soundtracks to photographs to stop motion videos, but leaves ample room to move about and also grounds the space in the living. An elevated platform offers an aerial view of his triangular indoor farm. From this standpoint, the work isn’t as enchanting. It’s rough and ready. Plastic tubes, fluorescent lights, cameras—behind the scenes reality show type stuff—are all exposed. Male voices echo from speakers mounted along the structure but it’s hard to decipher what they’re saying. Are they narrating the view? After a long, ear-pressed-to-the-speaker listen, all I know is that they sound like British academics presenting research. Carter offers us no explanation. He avoids didacticism by using different media and shifting our perspectives of the whole.

One can never really know how their crop will grow, if some blight or bug will pop up and ruin the harvest. So, Carter tested plants in his studio before the show. The actual installation has still given him a few surprises, including weeds. “It’s great. I’m really happy,” he said. You see, Carter cares more about scientific processes and philosophies than feeding his viewers, even if his crops are, in spite of the weeds, totally edible. I asked about his thoughts on local food movements and he expressed support. “*Faith in a Seed* naturally ties into that,” he said. But creating large-scale and global change is more his kind of thing. Rather than growing food in his backyard, the Britain-born artist says you’re more likely to find him in Washington rallying for fundamental changes to the Farm Bill that would better support farmers and allow people to just eat better.

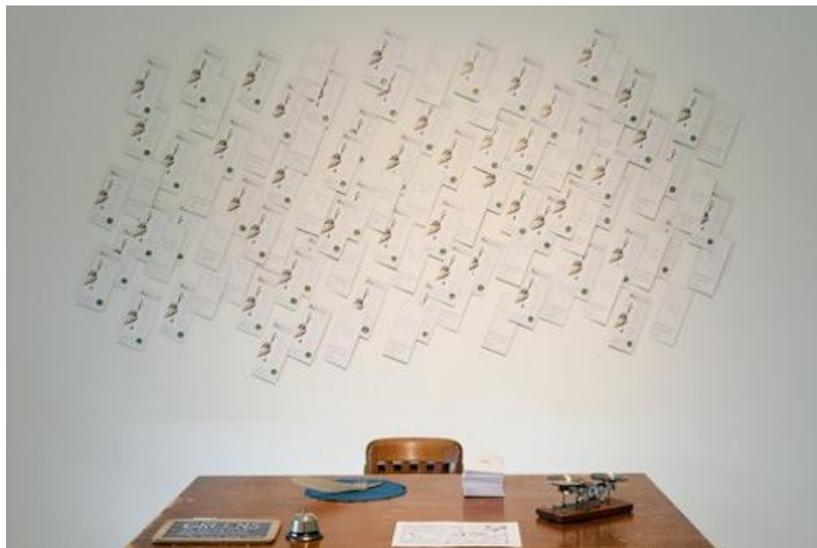
Where Carter explores food production “from a scientific point of view in a global way,” artist and ecological designer Jenna Spevack brings the process of growing greens literally close to home.

Jenna Spevack: *Eight Extraordinary Greens*



Jenna Spevack. "Eight Extraordinary Greens" at Mixed Greens, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Mixed Greens.

On view at Mixed Greens—a commercial gallery in Chelsea that just happens to sound like a salad joint—*Eight Extraordinary Greens* smacks of Brooklyn, the borough in which Spevack resides and where all things farming, small batch, and vintage-looking have become hallmarks of the culture. Stainless steel planters shelved on refurbished wooden furniture sprout baby arugula, mizuna, mustard, tat soi, chard, beet, kale, and cress. Some of these "domestic mini farms" are nestled inside old suitcases, complemented by worn books and other aged props. A central work desk and bookshelf act as the farm stand, the space for harvest and transactions. Modeled after a stage set, the installation feels out of place against the gallery's slick car-dealership-like floor. And the plants glow über green under white fluorescent lights. Even in this age of vertical farming and electric cars, growing greens indoors can still look like a mad science experiment. I'm always a little apprehensive about eating the produce. But I hear from Carter that Spevack's microgreens are "incredibly delicious." In interviewing him, I learned that he works at Mixed Greens and assisted with this installation. That his exhibition coincided with Spevack's, and that I decided to write about both of them this month, is good ole serendipity.



Jenna Spevack. "Eight Extraordinary Greens" at Mixed Greens, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Mixed Greens.

Almost everything in *Eight Extraordinary Greens* is for sale. You can even purchase the furniture with the greens. How much anything costs is anyone's guess. Spevack leaves it to her viewers to determine value. Purchasers are presented with information about four local urban agriculture nonprofits: Added Value, Bed Stuy Campaign Against Hunger, Bushwick City Farms, and Just Food. Then, they must make a choice: take home a bag of greens by paying what they think they're worth or what you think your selected organization merits. Or even better I think is this option: leave the greens behind for donation to a local food pantry or soup kitchen. The artist observes that most people want to do the latter.

Spevack conceived of *Eight Extraordinary Greens* before Mixed Greens approached her. Originally, she imagined the installation living in a nonprofit space. Eventually, she came to like the incongruencies offered by a for-profit setting. "People don't expect to be greeted in Chelsea galleries," Spevack explained. True that, gallerinas/os are notorious for acting like they don't see you at all. Mixed Green is among few area galleries known for friendliness. To my point, I tried to slip into the space undetected one afternoon but was soon met by director Steven Sergiovanni. I'd been curious why galleries and museums are increasingly devoting space to live farming projects, so I took the opportunity to ask him about the appeal. Sergiovanni said it wasn't so much the greens that drew them in as Spevack's ideas about value.

A self-described activist, Spevack set out to develop an economic system that would allow her to grow food by donation and "provide healthy greens to extraordinary people with ordinary incomes." On the face of it, her plan is working and doing more: *Eight Extraordinary Greens* prompts us to consider the potential reach of our daily spending on food and consumption in general, not to mention our individual criteria for determining worth. (Redolent of Leslie Labowitz's early 1980s performance *Sprouttime*, Labowitz once said that sprouts "radiate consciousness.") Spevack expressed hope of drawing in "a completely different group of people than the normal [Chelsea] crowd." Though she can't say for sure if that's happening, her efforts are not without reward. That visitors are expressing interest in growing their own food, joining their local CSA, doing volunteer work and giving back beyond the life of her show, she finds pretty gratifying.