

Sacred Thing

Emilia Bergmark

Potato The Great

Screening online from 24th June 2020

www.sacredthing.art

Emilia Bergmark (born 1986) is a visual artist who lives and works in Copenhagen and Malmö.

Upcoming exhibitions include a commission for Roskilde Festival (DK). Recent solo exhibitions include 'Landskaber', Kunsthal Varte, DK (2019); 'Burnout', Kunsthal 44 Møen, DK (2019); 'Heaven and Earth', Marwan, NL (2018). She has received MFAs from The Royal Danish Art Academy (DK) and School of the Damned (UK).

'Potato The Great' is a sculpture edition by Emilia Bergmark for Sacred Thing. It is an edition of 25 resin casts of the potato that came second place in the 2019 Harrogate Giant Vegetable Competition. Each cast has been hand-painted by the artist with a unique abstract motif.

The first of these casts was 3D-scanned and animated to create a film, entitled 'Potato The Greatest'. In this film, our potato-protagonist tells us the tale of his genesis and his close brush with glory at the Harrogate Giant Vegetable Competition. He goes on to deliver a brief but aggrandized history of the potato in an attempt to dispel the potato's reputation as a lowly "working class vegetable" and to re-align it as a vegetable of illustrious lineage, hence why he has now been immortalised as a contemporary sculpture.

For Bergmark, who has described herself as a "Kitchen sink realist", the potato is a significant emblem which has featured in several of her works, indeed the biology of the potato could be a fitting analogy for her entire practice.

A potato is a tuber. When a potato is planted it becomes the "mother tuber" which grows stalks, leaves, flowers and fruit above ground, while underground more potatoes grow from it. Mother tuber provides sustenance to the baby tubers throughout the year, while she in turn is sustained by the plant above ground. This "tuberous" mode of growth is analogous to the way in which Bergmark organises and disseminates knowledge, it is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizomatic" way of thinking in its decentralised, networked nature, but in a tuberous way of thinking any single node can be separated from its root system and gain a life of its own. In this way Bergmark presents information through narrative, history by way of recital of a memory, politics via feelings and smells: for her, personal anecdotes are as important as facts.

An ongoing research strand in Bergmark's practice is her exploration of non-human objects from an anthropocentric viewpoint, she analyses and critiques the systems by which humankind imposes order and meaning on the world. By giving voice to the non-human she creates tragicomic and satirical scenes which poke fun at the idiosyncrasies of modern humanity. Therefore it makes perfect sense that Bergmark has embraced the potato as a source material, for the potato is the archetype of humanity's imposition of organisational structures upon the natural world as a means to extract value from the earth.

In 'Potato The Greatest', Bergmark parodies "corporate storytelling", a sales technique that employs narrative to engage potential customers with a product by capturing their imagination. In this case, the narrative is that of the rich cultural heritage of the potato. A cursory google search shows that several potato producers include on their websites a potted history of the potato and understandably so! The history of the potato makes for a captivating read and, like Bergmark's practice, it is tuberous. It runs in parallel to 10,000 years of human history, osmosing into and out of numerous genre-tubers along the way, repeatedly finding itself at the centre of momentous junctures. It is clear that the potato is not a passive passenger in our journey, but rather an active participant to which numerous cultural developments can be attributed. To list a few: population growth, economic development, trade liberalisation, globalisation and the industrial revolution.

The potato was domesticated in its ancestral home of the Andes in southern Peru and northern Bolivia between 8,000 and 5,000 BC. In around 1570 it first arrived in Europe on Spanish ships returning from the Andes, alongside silver ingots and other valuable spoils pillaged from the Inca Empire. The potato is now cultivated on every continent except Antarctica and is the fourth most important crop in the world in terms of human consumption. Because of its high yield and its nutritional content, per acre the potato's nutritional value is unrivalled. Thanks to the species' biodiversity it is naturally very adaptable and humans have been able to further improve it through hybridising, shaping and moulding the potato to grow in most conditions and to maximise its already high yield.

So, on paper, the potato sells itself. It is a "down to earth investment" says Bergmark: a potato can be eaten now, or planted to reap future reward. During the Klondike gold rush, miners traded these nutrient rich earth apples for precious nuggets of ore, so there was a time when the potato truly was worth its weight in gold! However, as vegetables go, the potato is not a sexy one. On first appearances, in its raw form, it is quite unremarkable: its flavour is subtle and bitter, it grows underground, it is wonky and often covered in soil. For these reasons, among others, the potato's European début was not an instant success, but then a star isn't born overnight. Over the next 200 years the working classes of Europe quietly embraced the potato, predominantly as animal feed. It wasn't until the 18th Century that it reached the attention of society's upper echelons. King Frederick the Great of Prussia administered seed potatoes to families throughout his kingdom and made it compulsory for families to grow potatoes. It was in a Prussian prison camp that the French physician and agronomist Antoine-Augustin Parmentier first ate a potato. He saw that the prisoners survived very well on their potato-diet and upon his return to France set out on the potato campaign trail. He went on to stage one of the world's first publicity stunts by enlisting King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette as influencers, he bestowed them with potato blossom bouquets and threw potato-themed feasts in their royal courts. Whilst their efforts are partly to thank, it was the peasants of Europe who are the real proponents of the potato's proliferation. The population boom that ensued from this dietary improvement made certain that European countries could continue to build their empires, thereby sowing the potato across the globe.

Bergmark's sculpture edition 'Potato The Great' and accompanying film 'Potato The Greatest' are tuber in thinking, research and form. Her potato-personified has an overinflated ego charged with the narrative - immensely proud to compete with the finest and most sizeable specimens in the country and, what's more, the immortalisation as contemporary art so rightfully earned by an incomparable heritage. The video and the sculpture editions offer further opportunities for the unassuming potato to be elevated, admired and propagated in line with its legacy.

Further reading:

The Cambridge World History of Food, edited by Kenneth F Kiple & Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas
<https://web.archive.org/web/20110511095952/http://www.cambridge.org/us/books/kiple/potatoes.htm>

How Peru's potato museum could stave off world food crisis, Dan Collins

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/29/how-perus-potato-museum-could-stave-off-world-food-crisis>

How the humble potato changed the world, Diego Arguedas Ortiz

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20200302-the-true-origins-of-the-humble-potato>

Spud we like

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2008/02/28/spud-we-like>

The global dominance of white people is thanks to the potato, Gwynn Guilford

<https://qz.com/quartz/1148452/potato2/>

Propitious Esculent - The Potato in World History, John Reader

International Potato Center

<https://cipotato.org>

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