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How Far Are You from the Farm: A Mile or a Generation? The Agricultural Art of Laura Parker

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My fields have become a crazy quilt of cover crops, a wild blend of patterns, some intended, some a product of nature's whims. The different plants grow to different heights and in different patterns, creating a living appliqué. The casual passerby might not notice my art. . . . But the farmer walking his fields can feel the changing landscape beneath his boots, he can sense the temperature changes with the different densities of growth, and smell the pollen of blooming clover or vetch or wildflowers. . . . Just as a quilter may stitch together emotions with each piece of fabric, I weave the texture of life into my farm.

— David Mas Masumoto¹

Relationship to place is powerful and fundamental to human experience. Each of us was born somewhere and has an ancestral lineage that connects us to that place, or to distant locales, known and imagined. We crave the experience of travel, and we insert visual notations of our journeys into our everyday lives with bits of natural detritus, mementos and photographs. Each object, relic or image, imbued with the distilled essence of its place of origin, is reframed by and reframes its new surroundings. Although we may appreciate a saved pebble for its essential qualities as a stone, it also holds its own history and has the potential to evoke deeply personal, experiential memories.

Artist's expressions of their relationships to place have long served as important indicators of the shifting formal innovations and philosophical tenor of their times. The Impressionists' aspiration to capture the transient light and color in a landscape with fleeting brushwork and a subjective palette was central to their desire to represent modernity in the nineteenth century. For the emerging middle class at that time, the rapidly changing urban world had stimulated a desire for scenes of rural landscape and life. Such scenes reassured them there were still places where timeless values could be found. The duality of this situation opened the possibility for a technically and conceptually innovative avant garde, and as artists expanded the paradigm for modern subject matter throughout the twentieth century, some began to merge formal radicalism with social commentary about the changing landscape.

The importance of the relationship between nature and culture intensified during the late 1960s, as artists began to eradicate the boundaries between form, process and meaning, shifting their relationship to the location and presentation of their work. Two major trajectories eventually emerged. Land- or Earthworks artists asserted their relationship to nature with performance-based works or large-scale sculpture in remote locations. Minimalists responded to this institutional shift and telluric urge by transporting

earth and other natural materials into the white cube of the gallery. As artists embraced this new aesthetic, their work also evolved to incorporate formal eclecticism, performative practice, and the primacy of conceptual expression.

The legacy of this period has been a generation of artists who have adapted these methodologies to establish ideational, emotional and aesthetic bridges between the personal and public. Their confrontation of the not-so-delicate balance between nature and culture has compelled many of them to create works that commingle elements of the natural world with personal narrative to showcase issues that might otherwise be overlooked.

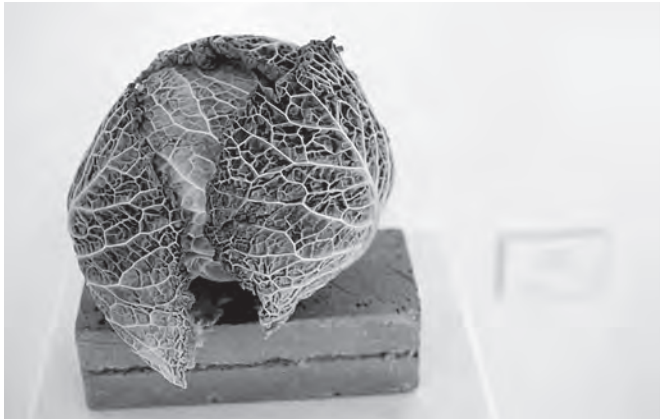
The Farmer as Artist

Among the artists currently working with this paradigm is Laura Parker. She has spent several years investigating the role of the farmer as artist and the notion of fruits, vegetables, and living herbage as art objects. Typical of this work was her project "LandScape: The Farmer as Artist," which first was shown at the Jewett Gallery, San Francisco Public Library, Main Branch, in 2001. It includes sculptural installations comprised of earth, hydroponically sustained vegetables, and a living pasture; photographs of farmers with whom she has collaborated; and paintings based on her responses to the natural landscape. As she explained to me during our conversations over the past three years, it forms a sort of self-portrait which grew out of her childhood summers spent on her family's farms in the Midwest:

As the city kid, I was always the one sent to the garden to harvest for dinner and for supper. I learned to love what it means to pick things when they're ripe. There had to be one for me and one for the basket so that I really knew what I was taking into the house. I think it was during those times when I was in the garden by myself, picking and looking and feeling the soil between my toes, that I became totally enamored with the farm. I would take books out and read them, laying in the dirt. It was heaven to go and lay in the beans between the rows and have the sun on my back, reading my book. . . .

Parker's direct artistic engagement with natural materials also grew out of her belief in the essential nature of fruits and vegetables, which she discovered through a decade of using them as models for drawing. She describes how viewers of her pastels typically comment on the beauty of the rendered pear or peach. To this, she often replies, "Yes, it was an incredibly beautiful pear. It's the beauty of the original pear you're seeing, not my drawing."

For Parker, the significance of such an exchange is



both artistically and ideologically motivated. She wants her audience to “see” what she sees — the mystery of the living things farmers cultivate for physical and emotional sustenance as aesthetic objects. She explains: “As a culture we denigrate farmers, what they do, and what they grow. Ironically, we value food when someone else is reinterpreting it — the chef or the artist — but the appreciation is not about food in its original form.” This experience motivated Parker’s desire to put vegetables and fruits in a gallery, next to paintings, so that people would look at them and think, “oh yes, those are art too!”

There are beautiful onions grown by Phil Foster from Hollister. His soil is a black clay, but it’s coarse — lots of little clods and things. When the light hits his onions they have a golden patina on the skin around them. I wanted them to stand up and hold the space, like sculpture. All I needed were two onions that just sat perfectly against each other. No sculptor could have made anything more remarkable than these two onions.

Natural Materials as Art Objects

Parker’s deep artistic and philosophical connections to the materials of nature is shared by a growing number of contemporary artists involved with liberating natural materials from their utilitarian identities and presenting them for aesthetic, symbolic and scientific contemplation. Among them is Wolfgang Laib, whose art is largely concerned with gathering pollen, which he exhibits as material and art object. Laib’s sensibility is similar to Parker’s in that he allows the pollen to retain its own character and meaning. His process of gathering it also mimics the bee’s rites of collection.

Laib’s holistic attitude toward his primary material, the creatures that cultivate it, and his reference to nature as “his monastery” have poetic resonance with Parker’s empathy toward the land, its output, and place.² But Parker also



says her “personal hunger to have connection with the land is a form of spirituality.” She speaks of her paintings, which reduce the landscape to geometrically patterned fields of color, as “more about the spirit of the land than a direct replication of it.”

The material and pieces that speak most deeply of Parker’s connection to the land are those that are comprised of earth or that tell stories about it. For several years she has been collecting soil samples from various farms, which she uses as subject and medium. “The soil is really the palette, and you can’t make anything if the soil isn’t of quality.” During her exhibition’s opening, Parker glamorized the experience of soil quality by setting small portions of damp soil in wine glasses for people to test its aroma. For “Palette,” she displayed small samples in see-through containers in a box, creating an earth palette of assorted colors and textures.

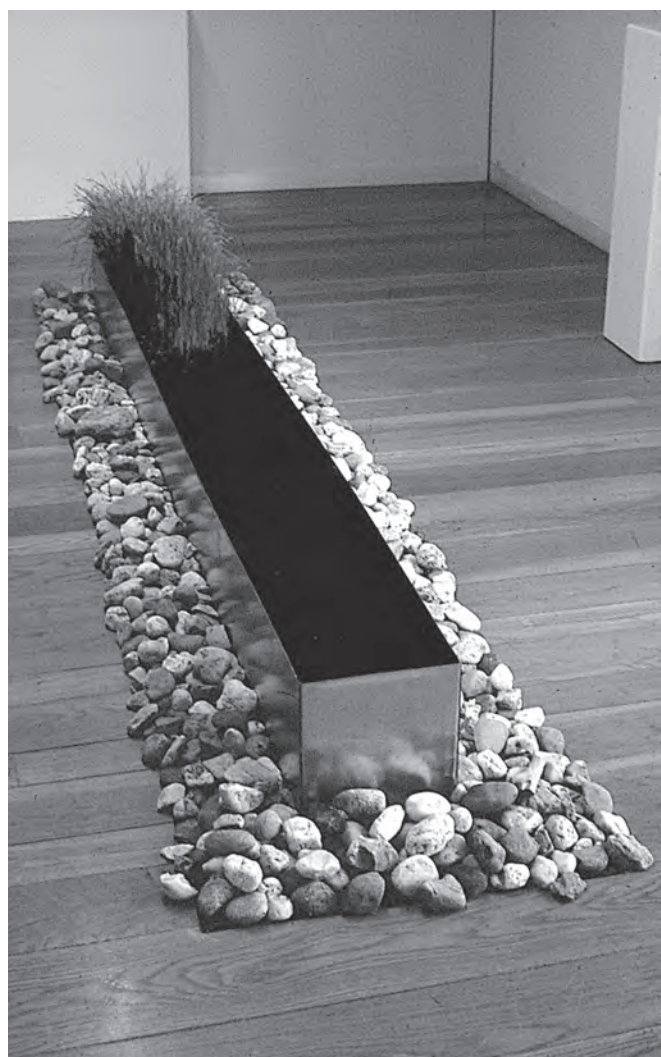
One particularly meaningful soil sample was gathered from her partner’s family farm in France, which “had not been disked or turned over for a hundred years. There was something poignant to me about these people living on their land, who don’t turn some of it over; who don’t impact it in any major way. I loved that soil and the idea that there’s a place where people don’t mess with the earth.” Parker’s personal identification with the soil is distilled in “Clod,” a chunk of earth which floats serenely atop a transparent Plexiglass pedestal, as her emblematic alter ego.

The World of Dirt

The form and content of Parker’s work have been inspired and sustained by her collaborative relationships with the farmers and scientists who understand its organic

Left: Cabbage on a pedestal.

Right: “Palette.”



composition and logic. One such protagonist has been Tom Willey, a farmer and soil expert, who stimulated her desire to showcase the diversity of land belonging to different farmers she has known. As part of this process, he introduced Parker to USDA maps, which explicate the various types of soil on individual farms. She describes the Soil Survey books inspired by the experience:

I have soil from what was originally an Indian campground at The Apple Farm. Right next to that is a flood plain and the soil is totally different. One is black and loamy and rich and the other one is also rich, but it's gold and copper. It has a little more rock in it. I decided to glue the soil down and then build a book that opens out so that you have a topography and it becomes three dimensional. With the soil survey maps you can, in fact, read the soil. The number of books I made about a farm are the number of different kinds of soil there are on that farm. . . . The point is looking not only at the specific soil, but the environment around it as well. All of those things impact how that soil became that soil, and in some way, how we become who we are.

Parker's interest in the stories embodied in the earth was intensified one evening while she was sharing a meal with Willey and his wife Denise. As she describes it, during a conversation Tom leaned across the table with his hand open and said, "There are more microorganisms, more living things in a palm full of dirt, than there are people on the planet."

Parker was astounded by the microcosmic/macrocosmic implications of this statement: that a two-inch circle of dirt on one's palm could contain billions of microorganisms. It motivated her to contact a soil biologist to obtain their names, which she intended to write on the gallery walls as part of her installation. However, when she received the extensive list, she decided to write their names, layer upon layer, in ink on earth-stained canvas, to emulate the vertical strata of the microorganisms in nature. The legibility of the names was not as important as the way the surface became progressively dense over the weeks of writing them. Parker realized that the process was "like a record of the soil growing. It's like when you make your own compost and put it into the soil: it just continues to grow. So this painting may never be finished."

Farmers and Artists: Interchangeable Roles

The collaborative nature of Parker's project, which reflects the communal necessities of farming, is evident in

Top: Hydroponically sustained beets.

Bottom: "Cover Crop." A section of living pasture.

the relationships she first felt compelled to cultivate with the subjects and materials of her art, and later with the stories they have inspired in her audience. She discovered that when she brings certain living organisms indoors to maintain hydroponically — especially beets and grass — they stop growing after a few days. She also learned that despite being mechanically fed and watered, their ability to flourish is directly proportional to the amount of attention they receive: the more people visit the gallery, the more they seem to thrive. As Parker explains, “Outside they get a lot of attention from the insects and the environment: the wind caresses the grass many times every day.”

Visitors have had somewhat erratic responses to their discovery that the beautiful object they are viewing on a pedestal is a real cabbage or onions; and sometimes they express frustration or anger that “it’s not art.” Yet, when asked “How far are you from the farm: a mile or a generation?” many seem to reach an epiphany about Parker’s intentions and become willing to contribute their stories to her project.

The outcome of this process has implications that are poetically communicated by and transcend Parker’s artistic intentions. On one level, such work creates a somewhat unsettling metaphor for the human ability to sustain and dislocate natural processes, a factor which has contributed to the burgeoning artistic involvement and interest in work like Parker’s. By cultivating her audience’s empathetic interest in her stories as well as stories of farmers and the land, she has also been able to communicate the political implications of our estrangement: the loss of family farms, the alimentary ramifications of corporate agriculture, and the threats posed to the land as well as world nutrition by genetic engineering.

By choosing to spotlight farmers who are themselves artists, Parker also reveals the inherent similarities between the two. Among these people are Kristie Knoll, who is a soprano; Paul Buxman, who is a painter; and Karen Bates, who is a designer and chef, and whose family runs The Apple Farm. These choices reflect Parker’s respect for Wendell Berry’s philosophy:

*The good farmer, like an artist, performs within a pattern. He must do one thing while remembering many others. He must be thoughtful of relationships and connections, always aware of the reciprocity of dependence and the influence between parts and whole.*³

There is a certain irony in this body of work that so beautifully delineates the strong affinities between artists and farmers. Both have had great difficulty existing within

the structure of American society, suffered financial marginalization, and share the experience of having their work taken for granted. Laura Parker turns the mirror around, using art to urge us to reconsider the bigger picture: our personal relationship to food, the significance of the natural landscape, and how we are not going to get any closer to Eden. As she so simply and eloquently states it, “place can be an emotional space where you are fully present, and can appreciate something as simple as a pear.”

Notes

1. David Mas Masumoto, *epitaph for a peach* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 11.
2. Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), p. 43.
3. Wendell Berry, “Whose Head is the Farmer Using? Whose Head is Using the Farmer?” in Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman, *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship* (Berkeley: Northpoint Press, 1984), p. 28.

All photos are courtesy of the author.