S.OIL

As an incurable nomad, I have lived the better part of my life at the extremes of habitation – either in a large, dense city or at the edge of wilderness. Musings about rootedness and 'what would it be like to live on a farm' would come and go. Like many people, what I imagined farm life to be like was coloured with a highly saturated brush of greens, yellows, blues and reds – the idyllic picture of a quaint family farm. Over the course of the last three years of working on this project, many visits to farms have altered my perception. Concern for my only real home – the planet – led me to change the direction of my art contexts from the personal to the planetary.

S*OIL is the first installation in a series of works addressing industrial impact on the Earth's ecospheres. The railway handcar, the human-powered mechanism at the helm of this project, is used as the entry point to the installation. The handcar references the train, an early mode of transportation, which was pivotal to the quick progression of the Industrial Revolution. The train, or more precisely, the steam engine first arrived in the colonies in 1753 and was used to pump water from mines. The first use of the steam engine as a railcar makes its appearance in 1804. The combination of steam locomotion and industrial machines made production and distribution (including farming) easier and specialized, changing the mercantile system to a system of efficient mass production.

Agriculture was not immune to the advancing technologies; it is currently, I believe, experiencing a pas-de-deux – an intricate relationship between farming and manufacturing. Complex and ethically sensitive questions arise. With increasing global populations, will we use precious land and diminishing topsoil resources to grow food, develop housing, or harvest raw material for fuel? Is our current agricultural method of using biotechnology a responsible way to ensure ecologically sustainable production for future generations? We can no longer allocate and ignore waste, byproducts and pollution. Accepting the fact that chemical and synthetic nutrient runoff is not ecologically sustainable is the first step to acknowledging that the dance between farming and manufacturing needs to be re-assessed honestly, inclusive of the known ramifications in its formula. The bottom line can no longer be the driving force to our activities.

The plants growing in the installation's planters are hybridized perennial wheat, sorghum and sunflower. They are grown from experimental seeds that represent a potential for sustainable food production without chemical inputs. Their deep root systems not only prevent topsoil erosion, but also build topsoil. Can these seeds provide large yields? Would growing mono-crops of these plants create the same fungi or bug problems as the current monoculture system? Can these plants produce robust seeds, enough to feed the world? With our collective knowledge and understanding these questions are answerable. But in order to answer such questions or even expand upon on them, I believe a shift in our view is necessary toward a whole systems approach. The Earth has been perfecting these natural processes for billions of years. Would it not make sense to learn by example?

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