



Ron Benner

Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize

January 20 - November 17, 2019



LK 65 JAN 21 1933

Ron Benner *Transmission: Barley-Corn-Maize*
January 20 - November 17, 2019

Barley, corn, and maize are three of the most important crops in the world. They are also three of the most ancient. In this exhibition, Ron Benner explores the history and cultural significance of these grains through a series of photographs and a large-scale installation of grain samples. The installation consists of two long, narrow tables filled with various types of barley, corn, and maize, arranged in a way that suggests a journey or a path. The grain samples are displayed in a way that highlights their unique textures, colors, and shapes. The exhibition is held in a large, open-plan space with a high, vaulted wooden ceiling and white walls. The space is well-lit by natural light from windows and recessed ceiling lights.

EXIT



Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize

An installation by Ron Benner

Essay by Sandy Saad, Curator of Exhibitions and Education,
Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

2019 marks the first time the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC) has invited an artist to create a year-long site-specific installation in the Loft Gallery. The project's purpose is to offer a space in which artists respond to the VAC's place and history through a work created in its site. This commission program invites Canadian artists to engage with the history and place of the VAC in the context of a larger conversation explored through their practices. *Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize* is Ron Benner's mixed media installation in response to the VAC's existing structure, formerly known as The Cream of Barley Mill. His work looks critically at the VAC as a former barley mill and uses food to bring a more complex narrative to its history.

Ron Benner has devoted his artistic career to researching the economy of food and the impacts of contemporary industrialized food systems. Concerned with seed circulation, farming methods, local community and globalization, his installations offer visual accounts of his extensive investigation tracing the origins of our food. They provide a unique and critical perspective on the modern food systems' essential elements. In many ways, these systems have had a significant impact on the history of the VAC and the wider Clarington community.

The site of the VAC has a history that dates back to 1814 when Timothy Soper purchased 94 acres to build one of the first sawmills in the region. The Mill eventually was owned by John McKay, who specialized in the manufacture of pot and pearl barley. In 1904, the wooden structure of The Mill caught fire and was quickly replaced with the present red brick building that sustained a booming business.

During the First World War, a wheat shortage and the demand for barley products kept the facility operating 24 hours a day. The Cream of Barley Mill produced cream of barley cereal sold across Canada, the USA and Commonwealth countries. This business drew people to the site, and by the 1930's, new owner James Lake Morden capitalized on its popularity to build a tourist destination. The land surrounding The Mill was developed into a golf course and the Cream of Barley Camp, equipped with a tennis court, swimming pool, archery range, quarter-mile cinder track and tourist cabins. After the boom, the popularity of prepared cereals and low demand for barley products led to The Mill closing in the 1950's. The building stood empty until the Rotary Club purchased The Mill property in 1965 to be used as a drop-in centre. In 1973, the town of Bowmanville acquired The Mill and Council voted to convert the building into a Visual Arts Centre. Today it serves its community as a place of gathering and exchange.

Today's structure has gone through varying phases of success, attraction, struggle, abandonment, and revival. Many features of the building hint at its long history: its physical architecture, brick construction, clerestory windows, and carved initials and dates in various places. The Loft Gallery, a unique open space with concrete walls, wooden pillars, and high angled ceilings, is the least altered room within the building, lending itself to a more direct response to the site's history. Ron Benner's installation has turned it into a place of exploration of the entangled relationships between place and history vis-à-vis

food. It employs food to map history, bringing many new places into the site and offering a more complex and intertwined narrative.

Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize traces back the production of corn and barley along with a series of other foods that have circulated throughout the world. The installation includes lines of longitude and latitude that meet in the centre of the room and diverge to their points of investigation. At the centre of the room lies a collection of various seeds, grains, and cultural deposits: objects from Iraq, Mexico, and Curve Lake First Nation, and London, Ontario. They are a combination of unlikely objects in juxtaposition, reflecting the vast displacement of food crops and culture through various imperial, colonial, and industrial efforts. Benner's installation creates a room that is both united and divided. At the centre of the room, on either side of the collection of mixed objects, are two long harvest tables, which serve as non-hierarchical tropes for gathering and mutual exchange, despite their holding a sharply divided grid of foods that expand into the divided room. Benner suggests the dual nature of the power of food: to bring people together through social and communal gathering, and to separate communities through imperial and commercial enterprises. His cartography breaks the room into various parts that point to the sites of his travels and research: from the edges of the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, his map extends to South America, the United States, Newfoundland, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Each divided section correlates with a different plant



that is encased within one of the harvest tables. Benner brings in a series of other landscapes, water bodies, continents, countries, and cities where the import, export, domestication, manufacturing and commercialization of food have impacted communities and cultures.

Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize includes black beans, sunflower seeds, wild rice, potatoes, maize, amaranth, chili peppers, quinoa, pinto beans, lentils, chickpeas, fava beans, wheat, barleycorn, soya beans, sorghum, flax, and rice. They are varied foods we enjoy and have access to, linked to different places and histories. Benner has traced their origins and their ways into the markets, having travelled to various sites in North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America to find these plants being grown and harvested in both local and large-scale agriculture. The installation layout follows a path between east to west with the name of each place he has visited inscribed on a floor plan and punctuated by a wall-mounted photo, offering a visual documentation of his investigation.



As part of this journey, Benner anchors the room with a study of how corn and barley were originated, named, used, consumed, and how each became a coveted good of the colonizing enterprise in the past and an indispensable resource of the market economy in the present. Benner outlines their meaning and their diffusion throughout the world.



Remains in Association with cultural deposits: 8000 years before the present era, Tehuacan Valley, Mexico

(NOTE: installation text with information in brackets added)

CORN/MAIZE

Maize (a Central American cereal plant that yields large grains set in rows on a cob; corn)

Family: Gramineae (the scientific name for a large and nearly ubiquitous family of monocotyledonous flowering plants known as grasses or grass)

Species: *Zea Mays L.* (the scientific name for a tall annual cereal grass bearing kernels on large ears: widely cultivated in America in many varieties; the principal cereal in Mexico and Central and South America since pre-Columbian times, also known as corn)

Origin: Mexico, Peru

Etymology: Ma-Hiz-Arawak (the Arawak language is the name of the overall Arawakan language family, also known as Maipurean, a language family that developed among ancient indigenous peoples in South America. Branches migrated to Central America and the Greater Antilles in the Caribbean and the Atlantic)

Vectors: Spanish- Columbus, Portuguese- Magellan - 1492-1521 - Mexico - Spain - Philippines - China - Japan. Portuguese - Cabral - 1500 - Brazil - Portugal - South Africa - India - Vietnam. Mughal Empire 1526 - India - Burma - China. (Benner traces corn's route around the world and the various times in which Imperial and Colonial undertakings affected its circulation)

BARLEY CORN

Barley Corn (meaning a grain of barley)

Family: Poaceae (also known as Gramineae, the scientific name for a large family of monocotyledonous flowering plants, commonly referred to as grass)

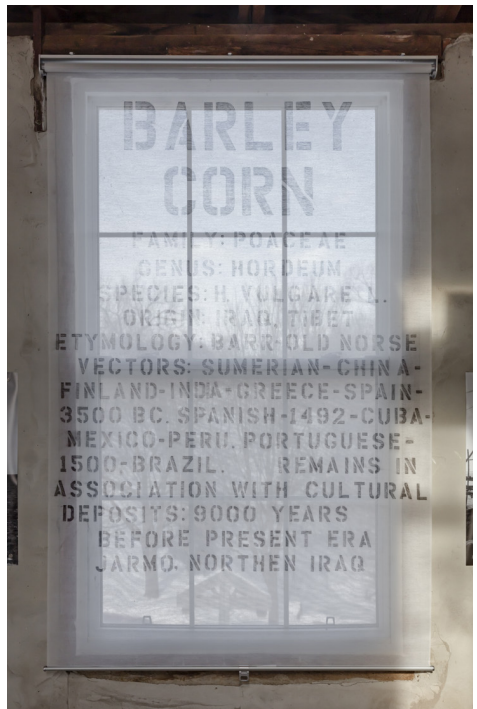
Genus: *Hordeum* (a widely distributed genus of grasses having the flowers in dense spikes often with long-awned glumes and the one-flowered spikelets in clusters of two or three at each joint of the rachis. They are native to Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas)

Species: *H. Vulgare* L. (the scientific name for a grass-yielding grain – used for breakfast food, for animal feed, and in malt beverages – also referred to as barley. It is of major commercial importance as a cereal grain used as a fodder crop and for malting in beer and whisky production)

Origin: Iraq, Tibet

Etymology: Barr-old Norse (Old Norse is a Germanic language, the etymology of the word barley is also noted to come from Middle English *barly*, from Old English *bærlic* of barley; akin to Old English *bere*)

Vectors: Sumeria - China - Finland - India - Greece - Spain - 3500 BC. Spanish - 1492 - Cuba - Mexico - Peru. Portuguese - 1500 - Brazil (the various places and times barley has moved through the world due to Imperial and Colonial undertakings)



Remains in association with cultural deposits: 9000 years before the present era, Jarmo Northern Iraq



Ron Benner takes great pains to accurately research and articulate the science, history, and politics of food circulation. He routes the voyages of plants from one continent to another. Although plants are not human products, humans have domesticated many by the deliberate selection of best-yielding, fastest-growing, more drought-resistant stock¹. His work pays attention to the level of intelligence, manual dexterity, and artistic comprehension of the societies that domesticated these plants and were shaped by them in turn.

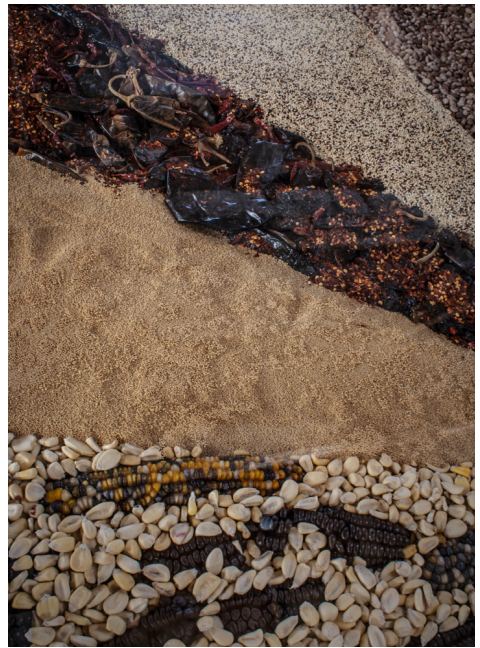
Benner shows that the plants' function in history is decidedly linked to place – site specificity and time. The place in which a plant is harvested will determine how and when it grows, its use and cultural value will determine its demand, and its demand will determine its market and the role which human meddling and politics will play in its dispersion. Ron Benner fills the Loft Gallery with multiple “elsewheres”, where food has been domesticated². He employs mapping, photographs, and food as visual representations to emphasize physical settings associated with economic, political, and social interactions. By drawing vectors throughout the space, referencing them, and adding their images and food seeds, Benner brings other places into the VAC and creates a

¹ Findley, Len, “Re-seeding Justice, Ron Benner’s Native to the Americas”, *Gardens of a Colonial Present*, Ron Benner, Ed. Melanie Townsend, London: Museum London, 2008

² Patton, Andy, “The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician”, *Gardens of a Colonial Present*, Ron Benner, Ed. Melanie Townsend, London: Museum London, 2008

three-dimensional diagram that is a conceptual representation of various other locations. This site becomes a place comprised of many layers of places and histories. Within it, one could trace the origins of barley that made its way from Iraq and Tibet to Canada where it would inspire a manufacturing site that would define the rural community of Clarington. One can also imagine the chapters of history within the physical space of the Loft Gallery, its barley production lines that ran 24 hours a day, its life as a tourist destination, its abandonment, and its revival.

Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize documents how plants have been transmitted globally, becoming crucial to the diets and cultures of peoples throughout the world. Through his work, Ron Benner conveys the transmission of local customs and traditions within international cultural environments and political contexts. In bringing this complex and contrasting narrative to the VAC, Benner punctures its history as a former barley mill, offering a broader awareness of the political and cultural implications of the food we eat.



Biography

Ron Benner is an internationally recognized, London (ON) based artist whose longstanding practice investigates the history and political economy of food cultures. Benner originally studied agriculture at the University of Guelph. Finding himself ethically opposed to bioengineering, he began to travel and research the politics of food. In 1995, he began working with Rural Advancement Foundation International, Ottawa (RAFI). In 2000 he was awarded the Canada Council Studio in Paris. In 2005 he participated in *Art, Geography and Invisibility* at an international geography symposium in Olot, Catalonia, the University of Barcelona, Spain. In 2010 he was appointed Adjunct Research Professor in the Visual Arts Department, Western University, London, ON. Benner's work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Museum London, Art Gallery of Ontario, and many other galleries, museums and cultural institutions in Canada and internationally.



CONTACT US

The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington,
P.O. Box 52, 143 Simpson Avenue,
Bowmanville, Ontario L1C 3K8

Ph: (905)-623-5831
E: communications@vac.ca
Visit: www.vac.ca

Follow us on social media: [f visualartscentre.clarington](https://www.facebook.com/visualartscentre.clarington) [@ visualartscentre](https://www.instagram.com/visualartscentre) [t c_vac](https://www.twitter.com/c_vac)

© The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, 2019, in collaboration with the individual contributors. Essay by Sandy Saad. Photography by Toni Hafkenschaid and Visual Arts Centre of Clarington. Catalogue data available from Library and Archives Canada. ISBN: 978-1-926772-32-5. Designed by The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.

Publication to accompany *Trans/mission: Barley-Corn-Maize*, An installation by Ron Benner at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, January 20 - November 17, 2019. The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington is supported by its Members, Donors, the Municipality of Clarington, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Ontario Arts Foundation.

GALLERY HOURS

Please visit our website to learn about our gallery hours.

Clarington



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Ontario
Trillium
Foundation



Fondation
Trillium
de l'Ontario

ONTARIO ARTS
FOUNDATION
f fondation
DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

An agency of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario