

# take me to the apple breeder

artwork by Jessica Rath

porcelain sculptures based on the living collection of apples at Cornell University's Plant Genetics Resource Unit

large-scale photographs of the diverse tree architecture from the tandem experimental agriculture station



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## introduction

Over 2,000 years ago, in Kazakhstan in the Middle East, the first apple tree was discovered by Alexander the Great. Since then, over the course of hundreds of years, humans have changed and improved upon that wild ancestor. Today there are more than 7,500 known variants and cultivars of apples, and in 2014 the worldwide production of the fruit was 84.6 million tons. Apples are so ingrained in human cultures around the world that they feature in mythology and fables, wives' tales, sayings, and religions across the globe.

Even in our region apples have featured prominently in the culture and practices of the area. Garden Valley, to the North of Highway 49, was once a lush cornucopia of orchards where farmers bred special local varieties shortly after the Gold Rush; sadly, most of these trees have not survived. However, along Highway 50 in Camino, "Apple Hill" grew and flourished after a blight took out the pear trees that used to dot the landscape. Every year thousands of people flock to the area to enjoy the fruit, often visiting a "you-pick" location.

Apples can be canned, cooked, milled or pressed into juice, fermented into cider, alcohol or vinegar. They are made into oil or pectin, dried, baked, stewed, reconstituted, pureed, jellied, turned into butter or eaten raw. Yet most people are unaware of the fact that apples do not breed consistently when planted as seeds, as each seed is genetically different within the same apple. Grafting is generally used to produce new apple trees, and through such a process we can dictate the size, variety and yield of their fruit.

Artist Jessica Rath's *take me to the apple breeder* is a combination of two exhibitions: *Ghost Orchard* which features porcelain apple sculptures (the glazing process of which took up to two years to refine), and the photography of *Apple Shadow* which focuses on hybrid and clone apple trees. Rath's inspiration and research took place at Cornell University's Plant Genetics Resource Unit in Geneva, New York where she worked with apple breeder Dr. Susan K. Brown, who has planted thousands of seed "sisters" from each of her cross breeding of two apple trees.

Rath's practice considers how we shape the aesthetics of agricultural production and of our immediate landscape. Jessica attained her Master of Fine Arts from California Institute for the Arts (CalArts) in 1996 and also studied at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, and received a BA in Sociology from University of Missouri, Columbia. She is the recipient of a 2014 California Community Foundation Mid-Career Fellowship, 2013 City of Los Angeles (COLA) Fellowship, a Center for Cultural Innovation Artistic Innovation grant, among others.

Her 2012 project *take me to the apple breeder* has garnered reviews in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Xtra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, and *LA Times*, and her working process is archived at the Center for Art and Environment Archive Collections at the Nevada Museum of Art.



*Clone water sprout.* 2011. archival pigment print on exhibition fiber.

## from the artist

When my daughter was five years old, she first used the word "nature" to speak of something outside of herself, a place to visit. To her, nature had already become a lost paradise we seek to reunite with, while she was being cultivated apart from its influence. Apples symbolize humans' initial separation from the Garden of Eden in the story of Adam and Eve, that point of departure from our place in a complete and unaltered nature. This is an apt metaphor, considering the great lengths to which humans have gone to alter natural selection in establishing the edible apple as we know it today. But what do we lose when we limit our understanding of a species to a small fraction of its genetic potential? And why is humans' long history of capturing sweetness and beauty through agriculture thought of as something outside of nature? Inspired by a foray into the esoteric world of the apple curator and breeder, *take me to the apple breeder* explores the aesthetic impulse behind our attempts to shape this complex fruit.

Each seed from an apple is genetically different. Six seeds planted from a Fuji apple result in six different trees, each with wildly varying tree architecture and apple shapes, colors, and taste. In America in the early 1800s, the odds were thought to be only one in 80,000 apples planted from seed would be sweet enough to eat and round enough to delight.<sup>1</sup>

Grafting began thousands of years ago to counter these slim odds. By taking hundreds of buds from one sweet apple tree to make an orchard of the same, humans essentially took over the process of natural selection, replacing it with the manmade process of cloning. The porcelain apples in *take me to the apple breeder* exemplify this moment of attraction and attainability, and of what art and literary critic Elaine Scarry describes as the specifically human desire to beget and distribute beauty.<sup>2</sup>

Each sculpture represents one of nine rare or endangered apple varieties chosen from hundreds being kept alive in pairs on a Noah's ark of orchards, the USDA-ARS Plant Genetics Resource Unit (PGRU) at Cornell University, the grand project of apple curator Dr. Philip Forsline. Bringing home dozens of apples to work with, I amalgamated the most striking aspects in form and volume of several apples representing one variety; for example, the oblong lilt of *Yellow Bellflower* is accentuated to the point of teetering in the sculpture. Conversely, I kept the actual scale true to the original, whether the small cluster of *Sunset Cluster* or the behemoth size of *Deacon Jones*.

While the rich color and luster of the originals were important inspirations for the sculptures, final surfaces, which required two years of glaze experimentation on porcelain, are meant to poetically evoke the same attraction and bewilderment in the viewer that the true apple would; thus the speckles in the blush of *PI 588933.12 (unnamed cluster)* look as if one is peering into a snowy dew. Such exquisite details within these strange objects allude to what science journalist Michael Pollan describes as the plants' attempt to lure humans into acting as an agent of reproduction, thus pointing to subconscious human desire as a key component in the larger web of life.<sup>3</sup>

With the sculpture *Kazakhstan Elite* and *Kazakhstan Ash*, I was considering the history of the edible apple and the section of PGRU dedicated to preserving the diverse genetic pool from some of the last wild apple orchards on the planet, those in the mountains of Kazakhstan in Central Asia. Having been left to actual natural selection for thousands of years, these trees represent possible genetic answers to some agricultural challenges as we face climatic breakdown. With *Kazakhstan Ash*, I sought to remind myself of the fragility of this forest. After dissolution of the Soviet Union and the laws protecting these forests while Kazakhstan was a Soviet republic, these forests are now prone to harvesting for firewood.

In contrast to the collection of clonal specimens grown at the PGRU, the project's photographic series is based on the production of thousands of unique new apples. Apple breeder Dr. Susan K. Brown creates apple varieties by cross-pollinating two established clones whose characteristics (taste, architecture, disease resistance, shelf life) are worthy of reproduction. The cross produces thousands of seeds that are then planted out and left to grow unobstructed as seed "sisters."

Using a 20 x 30 foot muslin back drop, I photographed Brown's work in early March 2011 to capture the trees' leafless silhouettes and the hint of future buds about to burst, flowers that would then begin the natural cycle of reproduction again. Within the titles, words like "weeping," "columnar," and "central leader" refer to the specific architecture of a tree, while "resistance" and "perseverance" reminds us of the strength required when faced with disease, all alluding to more human characteristics and possible states of being.

The photographs' scale balances the viewers' focus between the recognizable tree and its more sensuous details: the visceral texture of its skin, its unique and often extreme shape, and the dense earth from which it grew. The altered horizon line, created by the backdrop hitting the ground, makes the subject appear to be both of the earth and a human fabrication, which the edible apple is by its very creation. Measuring between 3 and 7 feet tall, the images vie for physical space in the room, as trees in an orchard. The parental clones stand older, larger, oddly formed in their genetically frozen state, while the sisters, hardly more than saplings, waver while holding infinite possibilities. In these portraits, one might discern the same kind of individualism that is so highly regarded in humans.

Agriculture and food production have always been as much cultural as scientific practices, with human preferences and desires influencing biological outcomes. In focusing our gaze on the curating of the idealized beauty of apples plucked from natural selection and the extreme diversity found in breeding left to nature, *take me to the apple breeder* examines our sublime but fraught relationship within nature.

Jessica Rath, 2017

<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, *Botany of Desire* (Random House, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Pollan, *Botany of Desire* (Random House, 2001).



*Deacon Jones (Artist Proof)*. 2010. high-fire glazed porcelain.



*Sisters smiling*. 2011. archival pigment print on exhibition fiber.



*Sisters weeping*. 2011. archival pigment print on exhibition fiber.



*Clone weeping with resistance.* 2011. archival pigment print on exhibition fiber.



*Kazakhstan Elite.* 2010.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.



*Kazakhstan Ash.* 2010.  
high-fire glazed  
porcelain.



*Roxbury Russet.* 2011.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.

*Sisters small and different.* 2011.  
archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.



*Clone with central leader.* 2011.  
archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.



*Clone spreading with scab resistance.*  
2011. archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.

PI 588933.12  
(Unnamed cluster). 2011.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.



Yellow Bellflower. 2011.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.



Drap d'or gueneme. 2011.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.



Sisters columnar with difference. 2011.  
archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.



*Clone with perseverance.* 2011.  
archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.



*Sisters normal.* 2011.  
archival pigment print  
on exhibition fiber.

*Sunset cluster.* 2011.  
high-fire glazed  
porcelain and bronze.



*Whiteness.* 2011.  
high-fire glazed porcelain.

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