Dave Hickey Naked
The landscape of the South Plains of Texas is wide, open, and flat. Hundreds of years ago, herd of buffalo would roam here, grazing on the vast and various grasslands. Today, from horizon to horizon, almost every square mile of the land is planted with one single crop – cotton – a monoculture that has decimated the biodiversity of the region, while creating a society of farmers dependent upon the massive-powerful agro-chemical companies that produce the genetically modified (GMO) seeds, insecticides, and herbicides that enable this form of farming.

Artist J. Eric Simpson grew up on a farm outside of Lubbock, Texas, growing cotton and corn. After receiving his BFA in painting from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, taking a short stint in Peru as a Christian proselytizer, and spending a semester traveling and studying art in the American West, Simpson attended the University at Buffalo, New York, home of the Coalesce Center for Biological Art, where he received his MFA in 2017. Simpson has now returned full circle, back to Lubbock, Texas, where he is currently working at the family farm and living as an artist-in-residence at the Charles Adams Studio Project. His latest work is intimately tied to the region, using the tools and materials of monoculture crop production to critique and subvert this highly destructive and environmentally destructive agricultural model, while proposing more sustainable and mutually cooperative alternatives.

Can you talk a bit about the nature of the corporate power structures at work in the agro-industrial systems in the South Plains and how your work addresses them?

My main interest in the agro-chemical industries focuses on the role they play in shaping the landscape of the South Plains. The types of products they create – transgenic seeds (GMOs) and accompanying herbicides – influence the type of farming practiced there. As an agricultural model, monoculture is a very destructive way of farming it is promoted as cost-effective, efficient, and profitable for the farmers. Ultimately, this allows the agro-chemical industries to focus on the production of three main crops: corn, cotton, and soybeans. One of the big catches to this system is that farmers are prohibited from catching, collecting, and replanting the seeds produced from their GMO crops. This is because the seeds are protected as intellectual property of the company. This creates a relationship of dependency between farmer and seed producer. The situation becomes even more problematic when you realize that the South Plains is the largest cotton producer in the United States. As of 2015, 97% of all cotton sown in the U.S. were controlled by four firms, many of whom have begun to merge with one another.

Responding to this, my practice takes on the nature of monoculture by utilizing its materials (transgenic seeds, herbicides, etc.) against it as a form of subversive exercise. I want to call into question the role played by these companies – how do they alter the landscape? How do they set up systems of reliance? Are they sustainable?

What are some of the materials that you employ in your sculptures and installations and what is the significance of your use of those materials, and how are the resulting color palette that is derived from those materials?

Since my research is focused on monoculture farming, most of my materials come off the farm where I work – transgenic cottonseed, herbicides, BIC chemical totes, cotton, etc. In order to cultivate the type of conversation I want around my work, I feel it necessary to be very particular about my materials. For instance, if I have an idea that needs to manifest itself as a painting, I’ll do it. But if it’s not enough to go to Hobby Lobby and buy tubes of paint anymore, I find that terribly boring. Instead, I’ll turn my interest to transgenic cottonseed into paint. In this way the medium is always adding layers to the work. The color palette is dictated by the color of the materials. For instance, some seeds are a deep blue color and others are purple. The herbicides tend to be an off-white or yellow color. To top all of this off, I will typically show the works underneath grow house lights. These artificial “sun” casts an artificial glow over everything. The result of these colors deflates any delusional hopes of monoculture feeling “natural.”

Something I was rather devoted to learn was that one of the most maligned weeds that Roundup is supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question the supposed to eliminate is edible and was utilized by Native Americans. This calls into question

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