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THE GUIDE

Art exhibits focus on the journey of the banana

The ubiquitous and perishable fruit finds itself the center of attention in two new exhibitions opening this week from L.A.-based collective Fallen Fruit.

By George Ducker

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Consider the banana. All iconic yellow peel and soft, sweet inside -- you can find it at the nearest Trader Joe's for as little as 19 cents apiece.

But how much have you really thought about how it got there? Now the ubiquitous and perishable fruit finds itself the focus of appreciation in two new exhibitions opening this week from Los Angeles-based collective Fallen Fruit.

The first, "United Fruit," opened Tuesday at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. On Saturday, a concurrent exhibit, "Fresh 'n Easy," opens at Highland Park art gallery Another Year in L.A. Together, the two present a portrait of the human beings behind the cultivation and production of bananas, and also how fruit itself becomes an element of popular culture and the global economy.

"Our goal is, and has always been, to change the way you look at fruit as an object," says David Burns, who formed Fallen Fruit in 2004 with Matias Viegner and Austin Young.

"Buying a banana in a grocery store is not an intimate process, but the work that goes into banana harvesting is very personal. It's all done by hand, as opposed to a mechanized assembly line."

That much is evident in the photographs and video projections at LACE, most of which focus on a banana plantation in the coastal town of Ciénega, Colombia, visited by Fallen Fruit in March.

Stand-alone portraits of plantation workers, or *banañeros*, line the wall of one room, while in another the *banañeros* process newly harvested bananas into 90-pound clusters as, directly across the gallery, another set of images shows dewy-eyed teens from San Diego happily consuming the result. In another room, video projections play interviews conducted with workers and Ciénega residents.

"Apparently, we were the first outsiders to visit the area in a long time," Young says. "There was a documentary crew from the BBC, but they'd been through about 30 years before."

In 2004, Burns, Viegner and Young initially set out to produce a working map of all the fruit trees in their Silver Lake neighborhood. Trees bearing avocados, oranges, apples, loquats and many other varieties either grew on public land or had branches that hung over the edges of private grounds, making them technically public property. Fallen Fruit's manifesto called for the planting and cultivation of more public fruit trees and, ultimately, for a higher degree of social responsibility about food consumption at a local level.

Since then, Fallen Fruit has proposed public orchards and given lively tours and performances, including "Fruit Jams," where participants were invited to bring their own found fruit to barter and trade with others. "Fresh 'n Easy" expands on the public nature of Fallen Fruit's activities over the last five years while also putting a counter-spin on the perils of progressivism.

The exhibit is partly a response to a series of less than enthusiastic comments left on Fallen Fruit's YouTube videos. One in particular complained that this type of public works program is the kind of thing conjured by "liberals always looking for a handout." Undeterred, Fallen Fruit harvested the epithets and affixed them to domestic objects such as cutting boards and tablecloths.

In a winking nod to commercialism, everything on display at the gallery will be for sale, including "Neighborhood Infusions" -- jars of vodka infused with fruit directly from neighborhood trees.

"This isn't the end of the work we're going to do on this," Young says.

Fallen Fruit will have exhibits up later this year in Santa Marta, Colombia, and in the Colombian capital, Bogota. Future plans include a collaborative project with LACMA slated for summer 2010 and ongoing projects based on "The Colonial History of Fruit."

"This is really a movement for us, from looking at the local effects of fruit to taking a global perspective," Viegner says. "Each piece of fruit has an incredible history based on war, politics and social issues. Only now, in the 21st century, are those politics much more transparent."

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