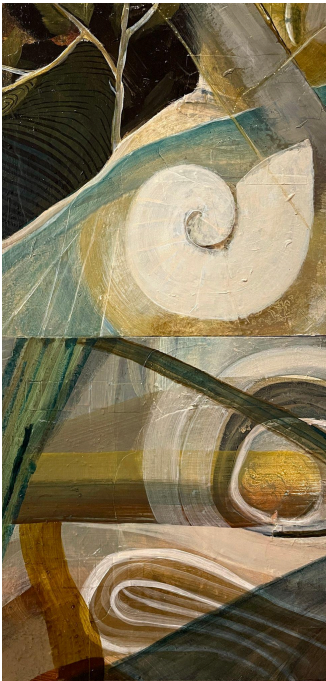


The Seed Pod Project by A. Crain Trundle

Seeds of intent

My interest in seeds began twenty-something years ago at a crowded Oregon Country Fair. I had wandered away looking for coverage from a blazing sun, and soon found myself elbow to elbow with others, kicking up orange dirt as we shuffled through a traveling seed library. With its flimsy tarp and plastic fold-up tables, I leafed through at least a hundred different hand-labeled seed packets when a person wearing a bumblebee costume informed me that all the seeds were free. I still



remember how surprised I was. My head filled with visuals of my soon-to-be garden full of waxy-leafed chard, spiky artichokes, squash, corn, oregano, juicy tomatoes, tulsi basil, and velvety-leaved mullein. After my return home, I discovered that mullein had been growing wild in my driveway for some time, and as a biennial, it had been replanting itself year after year. Nowadays, I always feel a little catch in my throat when I see it come back, marking any changes, wondering which pollinators the blooms will bring, and whether it will reach the 10-foot height it did several growing seasons ago. Sometimes, I make drawings and paintings of mullein and other interesting seeds and plants, enlarging them so people can see the design and elegance up close. One time, at an art show, a laughing urologist said that my paintings of mullein were phallic. At first, I dismissed it as a projection, but later realized she had a point. The crisscrossing of humans and plants and what we can learn from plant species is real. That meant to me that our work was intersecting, at least visually. We humans have a lot in common with plants, even a joint evolutionary history. Within seeds, there is individuality and variability, just as in people. Each seed has its

own unique genetic blueprint, ensuring biodiversity, and this biodiversity is what sustains and supports life.

Art idea- from the individual to the collective

Recently, I was invited to create artwork for an outdoor show. I considered sculpting large-scale, super-realistic-looking seeds. After further investigation, I decided to create my art from reused and/or recycled materials. I wanted to create something that was about the metaphorical aspects of

planting and growing. Something with a life cycle, like its inspiration. Also, it was for an outdoor public art showcase, and we have a lot of rain in the PNW, so it needed to be waterproof.

The plan

I planned to create five large pods from recycled containers and then cover them in natural fiber, waterproofing oil, natural pigments (coffee, tea, charcoal, indigo), and beeswax from local hives. The two halves of each pod would be held together by a hidden hinge and a covered locking clasp. Each pod would be filled with sandbags for stability once installed. The completed sculptural pods, which would (loosely) resemble seeds, would then be placed 2-3 feet apart in a circle. The pods would represent the collective.

To represent the individual, the pods would feature an interactive component during a downtown art walk. There would be a table, four or five chairs, and a 10" x 10" wooden tray of natural materials. As the artist, I would sit in one of the chairs, and the participants would sit in the others. Participants would work with a range of local and native seeds, small pieces of natural fiber, homemade bioplastic, and local dirt. Participants would also be shown a demonstrative mini-pod made from these items and how hand-gathered seeds can be placed within the homemade mini-pod and later planted. Upon completion, participants would wrap their newly made pods with string (including any written words they would like to add), and then the artist would sew or tie the smaller pod into the seams of the large pod vessel. The smaller pods would add texture and color variations to the sculpture. Thus, the individual pods become part of the larger sculpture collective.



Specifics

For waterproofing the sculptures, I chose tung and linseed oil, beeswax, waxed fabric, and a small amount of recycled plastic. My tiny models, precursors to the final larger sculptural seed pieces, were built using the same ratios and same materials. By using coffee-bag burlap and plant liners made from coconut, I hoped my full-size creations would look like large oblong seeds. Meanwhile, the prototypes reminded me of earthy, non-descript nesting dolls. My partner thought they looked like the speckled brown eggs we buy from our neighbor.

I built the larger versions, making them 4.5 feet tall with stout middles and wide feet. I could still move them myself, even when they were filled with sandbags, so that they couldn't be knocked over or taken away. They would be safe for the public to be around, and bonus, they wouldn't hurt any birds if nibbled on. No pointy edges that would gouge, no sharp overhangs for people to hit their head, no hard edges or low beams to trip on, and easy to approach if in a wheelchair. But unlike real seeds, they were static and lifeless.

Speaking of static, I didn't just want the viewer to watch, as stated earlier. I wanted to include them in the making of the art piece. As I was braiding wool roving to wrap the pods, covering the bases with torn fabric, cutting apart surgical tubing, weaving jute rope, dying thrift store linen, and sewing on dried lichen, I was reminded of how valuable it is to work with natural materials. For the bioplastic portions of the piece, I used a recipe concocted at a summer art camp I taught. The recipe called for sourced seaweed, vegetable starch, vinegar, and glycerin.

We carry the seeds

On the day of the sculpture installation, we drove onto a Washington State ferry with five preassembled seed sculptures, each with a hollow interior. After our watery voyage, we hit roads, then freeways, then a bridge, then more freeways and more roads. We arrived, somehow on time, near the installation spot, neatly marked on an electronic map sent to me earlier in the week. After barely fitting our truck into the city street parking slot, and with island mud still caked on our shoes, we began hauling the newly named "Seed Pod Project" sculptures onto the mapped green space using my mother-in-law's rickety but coveted garden handcart. Like a bird carrying seeds over water to new lands, the pods landed in their new habitat with us as their transport.

Look away

Often in my studio, when I am working on a new painting or sculpture, I think of artists who have served as a conduit, how their work has connected with me and others through the field and beyond. From staring at an Anselm Kiefer painting when I was eighteen, to seeing my first Faith Ringgold exhibit in my twenties, to seeing a recent show of Dyani White Hawk at the Walker in Minneapolis, being blown away by artwork and how it makes us think and feel is nothing short of radical. Nevertheless, of course, we are already connected. It is becoming increasingly harder to argue for individualism, the slippery myth, which, like a wind-swept plastic bag, is stuck, needing a hand to pull it gently from the trees, and for us to stop ignoring it.

City greens

Once we stepped onto the green park grass, we were enthusiastically welcomed by a city arts official who directed me to an area and explained why it was important for my art to stay within it. What was previously just an email and a DocuSign online contract was becoming a full-blown reality.

Quickly, we unloaded the work and nestled the pods onto the grass in a wide oval shape near a young maple tree. I then surrounded each seed pod with heart and fist-sized stones, making the pieces feel protected, and helping them blend into their new environment.

Do not touch

A few days later, on opening night, we drove back. I was nervous since I didn't know how many people would show up or how they would respond. The abstract *Seed Pod* sculptures weren't made of traditional materials like marble or metal, and they also didn't look much like seeds. What would people think? When I walked up, the arts program had printed do not touch signs for my exhibit, with my name on them as well. I left the signs up, even though I encouraged people to touch the pieces. I guess I just liked seeing my name on a cool-looking art show sign.

The seed table

Before the show opened, I set up a table full of wild-sourced seeds, which my friend, who was also a local seed farmer, helped me source from nearby areas. Months before the show, we scoured the downtown area, a nearby park, the heron rookery, and the riverbanks of the Sammamish River. We traversed city blocks, under bridges, and around a couple of fields. I remember finding native cottonwood seeds in an abandoned wooden box outside a Subway, huckleberry bushes squished between a fenced parking lot and a building (along with someone's recently eaten takeout containers), and the winged seeds of a maple tree outside of an escape room business. While searching, we talked about which plants were around when Native people were the only people in the area. Long before the software company came or any company, way before the riverbank area was lost to an engulfing city.

At one point, when my friend let me know I was holding nootka rosehips in my palm, I remembered that I was wild sourcing seeds with a woman who had devoted her life to seed farming. And she was seed farming without chemicals, and with a seed lineage that a person could follow like a delicately worn deer trail, both back into history, and providing a way to move forward. No megacorporation needed. Together, we walked further on, seeing more human remnants in the underbellies of city

bridges (drug needles, candy wrappers, single shoes) alongside salal berries, trailing blackberry and osoberry. I picked through some waist-high grasses to find yellow dock seeds, and she found serviceberry by a creek about a half mile from the art installation site. We also found lots of huckleberry, douglas fir cones, rose spirea, and Canadian thistle (introduced in the 1600s and invasive, however, like dandelion, containing useful medicinal qualities). We spotted and gathered small amounts of sword fern, Rocky Mountain maple, kinnikinnick, sweet gale, and stink current, to name a few. Also, red alder and thimbleberry, a favorite of mine, which is a native plant with clusters of sweet red fruits. Oh, and of course, we found nettles, another one of my favorites. Hard to pick a favorite though. We collected seeds under the canopy of huge evergreens, amid the cacophony of rush-hour traffic, all the while talking about our experiences in the wild *and* in our domesticated gardens.



Opening night

Fast forward to September, and I'm in the middle of a green space surrounded by traffic; the grass has been recently cut, and several other artists are also showing their work. Nearby restaurants and coffee shops are buzzing, boutiques and stores are full of people, and all of this activity is outlining the tiny art park, which is filling up rapidly. Once my installation was double-checked for safety, I set up the folding table with materials for making mini-pods, including lots of seeds, recycled paper, pencils, various twines and threads, cotton yarn, wool, twigs, clay, and some bioplastic sheets. I suggested to people that they “think about something you want to plant in the world”, then attach it to the larger pod. Seemed simple enough, like making a wish.

What I didn't expect was that my piece and those of the other nearby artists would attract over 300 visitors. We had a huge turnout thanks to the city arts program, which advertised well and included locally printed poetry in the surrounding eateries, dance and music performances on the stage by the fountain, and great people-watching for the night. There were elders and babies, people with dogs,

dancers from the Bollywood troupe dancing at 7pm, tourists who saw the flyers, locals enjoying the festive evening, and those just out for a stroll.



Strings attached

Each pod had strings attached, and visitors were encouraged to make a small pod and in turn, explore the link between the individual and collective by physically connecting the pods. If asked, I would tell people specifically where and when the wild seeds were sourced, and how some of the many non-native seeds like; chamomile, amaranth, pole beans, chia seeds, flax, blue indigo, ashwagandha, echinacea, arnica, yarrow, mullein, calendula, marigold, and many, many others, were acquired. I could even

look up a seed's specific heritage if they wanted. Note: No one wanted this, though a 5th grader *sort of* seemed interested and spoke to me about her family lineage.

Unexpected

One thing I did not foresee from this project was people talking to me about their connection to certain plants and seeds from growing up. While choosing seeds to make their mini pods, people talked to me about their favorite childhood plants. How their grandmother would grow chamomile for stomachaches, or how they learned to string marigolds, or how lupine or sunflowers were their favorite flowers. They also told me the names of many plants in their native language and what it meant to them to see the seeds now, on a table in the middle of a downtown area in the Pacific Northwest, many, many miles away from where they were born. People were waiting in self-made lines for a spot at the table to write words on scraps of paper, then roll their seeds up, and tie or decorate them further, before attaching them to the larger pods. They were writing their wishes and things they wanted to grow in their lives. Some wrote poetry, some scribbled letters, and several children wrote short stories. A few people wrote something private, folding their notes up fast and

asking if anyone would ever read them. Everyone wanted to write their own words with their own hands. Not one person asked me to be their scribe.

While creating their pods, people also spoke of vegetables, spices, fruits, and grains, and what they tasted like in certain dishes. We had participants from all over the world, including India, Vietnam, China, Spain, Canada, Mexico, Laos, Iran, and Florida. I ran out of ashwagandha and yarrow seeds early on, and I was taught other names for those. Discussions about naming and renaming reminded me of how the seed farmer resented the Douglas fir's name. While we were standing on the edge of a river which curled through the city, she kept saying there was another name for the tree, the one used before the botanist explorer. And she was mad about it, mad about forgetting that name, and also that most of us didn't have any idea that there was/ is another name. Understandably so.

Memory

What I remember most about that opening night was the curiosity and the willingness to participate. A couple, newly engaged, made a mini pod together. They picked out native seeds and talked about the hiking and camping trips they wanted to take together. A mother, her tiny newborn baby in a stroller, was bent over a pod for a while, tying a few of her creations onto it. At one point, there was a group of three tall young men, probably in their early 20s, around the age of my eldest. They came over, looked at the table, and each made one, then waited for each other to attach their work to the sculptures. They acted matter-of-factly, not awkwardly, like they had tied mini pods to seed pod sculptures thousands of times. They were even serious about it, pointing out the best spots to attach on each pod. I also saw teens making creations that reminded me of the artistic outfits they were wearing. They chose the vessel for their artistry, took photos, and tagged the event on their social media. At the end of a big rush of people, a grandfather waited while his two grandchildren took their time writing stories and making more than one pod. I asked the grandfather if he would like to make one or take some seeds home. He looked at me blankly, sighed deeply, and shook his head no. He wasn't interested; he was there for his grandkids.

Protection

At the end of the community action, the sculptures, with their new additions, were to stay in the city park for a little longer to grow. Weeks later, we returned to pick them up, noticing that the big pods looked more worn, and the mini pods were jutting out on all sides, adding to the circumference, still tied on, with knots or bows. They were more fragile than before, now that they had minipods

attached, so we wrapped them in blankets for the ride home. For seed pod protection. As I looked back through the rearview mirror, seeing the green space dissolve behind us, I felt that things *had*

been planted and that there was a possibility for growth.

If seeds aren't planted

I learned months ago that farmers on the island where I live are growing seed crops for farmers in war-torn regions. It's called seed protecting, and it is not new, although new to me, and is a way to keep seeds/foods from going extinct. It's also being done worldwide.

Evidently, since seeds are alive, although dormant, they have a life cycle that must be followed and respected to avoid risk. If

not planted, they can lose their ability to germinate over time, resulting in a loss of heritage and diversity if they aren't shared or cultivated. Also, growing plants for their seeds affects the seeds differently than storing them in a seed bank. Seeds can and will change over time.

Aftermath/Planting the seeds

I waited until spring to plant the mini- pods. Now those seeds are growing in the ground near my art studio. I can still remember the assortment of hands delicately tying the pods with notes and plant matter jutting out, and I remember faces as well. Reminding me that although our individualism is precious, our collectivism is even more so. Each planting is a part of the process, the development, and the fruition. Together.

