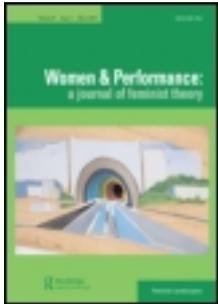


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### Fallen Fruit: United Fruit

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to approach “conventional” narrative drama, and imagine newly theatrical possibilities for Glaspell’s essential dramatic voice.

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***Fallen Fruit: United Fruit***

Fallen Fruit Collective

17 June – 27 September 2009

Los Angeles, CA, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

Fallen Fruit Collective, a collaboration between David Burns, Matias Viegner and Austin Young, grew out of a 2004 artists’ project for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to construct a positivist critique of the urban Southwestern landscape, the group has playfully initiated efforts to “reconfigure the relation between those who have resources and those who do not . . . and to investigate new, shared forms of land use and property”<sup>2</sup> with neighborhood fruit-scavenger maps. When invited to a particular community, Fallen Fruit plot fruit trees on or overhanging public space. Easy to distribute and free of copyright, their maps encourage local harvesters to discover nature within their urban environment and re-imagine land routinely navigated on a daily basis. This project has become their familiar trope within Los Angeles, but has traveled to cities outside of Southern California as well. Fallen Fruit’s activities have also expanded into other fruit-oriented projects, including a proposal for an “Endless Orchard” in 17 acres of downtown Los Angeles public green space; neighborhood jam-making sessions where all participants contribute public fruit and leave with a jar of confection; and civically minded media-based artwork and installations. Most recently, Fallen Fruit presented EATLACMA, a programming series and gardening reconfiguration of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

*United Fruit*, their 2009 summer show at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), is the group’s first solo showing. It is also a shift in scale, from the local to the global. Part of a longer, in-progress work titled *The Colonial History of Fruit*, Fallen Fruit Collective aims to intersect localized and subjective narratives of colonialism with the larger construct of “objective” history, all through the lens of fruit (next up, kiwi and arctic berry).<sup>3</sup> *United Fruit* developed out of a residency in Colombia, South America, and the piece responds to the legacy of the former United Fruit Company (UFC).

An early twentieth-century corporation that traded tropical fruit grown in Central and South America, UFC partially colonized Colombia through development of agricultural and industrial infrastructure in support of alien banana flora. In 1928, plantation workers of Ciénega, Colombia, organized the largest labor

movement ever witnessed in the country, striking out against UFC for fair working conditions. Sadly, the country's ruling political party squashed the movement with help from the army, resulting in an unknown (large) number of civilian deaths in the now infamous Banana Massacre.<sup>4</sup> To create the work of the show, Burns, Viegner and Young visited Ciénega where UFC still exists today in the much-reduced form of Chiquita Bananas.

Fallen Fruit splits their portrayal of this history between LACE's two viewing spaces, with the front gallery dedicated to pictorial representations of the Colombian industry's human and physical landscape. A concise wall-text explanation of the UFC accompanies four polished, monumentally sized photographic artworks, this institutional display feeling like a departure from the collective's goofily humored DIY efforts. Perhaps to offset a somewhat dour mood, the group plastered a monster, 134" peeled banana cut-out on the wall opposite the entrance. This contrasts with the more somber nine-panel photograph suites that mirror the opposing long walls of the gallery: *Banana Workers* (2009) depicts a different laborer per photograph and *Peligro Trampero* (2009) curiously splits a photographic landscape panorama—presumably of a banana plantation—across the panels. Opposite from the giant banana stands a giant 120" cut-out of a plantation guard holding a very large shotgun, perhaps alarming to a viewer accustomed to a less overtly threatening (though not by any means ethically perfect) agricultural industry in the United States.

*United Fruit* twists tropes of contemporary and modern art for a social-minded purpose. The 9-panel photograph series, each panel more than five feet tall and box-mounted six inches off the wall, recall minimalism's serial geometric format, while treatment of subject matter rings of the Düsseldorf school of contemporary photography. The workers, depicted from waist up, evoke Thomas Ruff's large-scale portraits, in their somewhat emotionless expressions and flat lighting, though without Ruff's stark passport-like posing and his theoretical insistence on the surface-only qualities of photography. The "tropical" landscape brings to mind Thomas Struth's *Paradise* series, in which Struth portrays dense, edenistic jungle landscapes in juicy large-format color photographs. Ping-ponging to a different generation of modern art, it's hard to look at a large, bright banana in an art context and not think of Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground. Between these references, you can almost hear the collective prompt, smartly but somewhat self-consciously: "Can artwork tell you more than the Germans did with their pretty pictures?" Although the front gallery raises this question, the prompt feels heavy handed. Other than the ominous rifleman, there's obviously no narrative depiction of Colombia's colonial violence.

The rear gallery quickly takes on the answer. *Los Bananeros* (2009), a wall-sized video projection, follows clumps of bright green bananas through an open-air plantation factory line. A fascinating how-things-work video sans narrator, viewers watch as bananas move through the hands of workers, onto conveyor belts, into mysterious washing pools, and are finally packaged into boxes that wind up in the grocery store. In front of this projection *Talking Heads* (2009) presents five single-channel videos, each a studio setting with a different Colombian resident discussing their knowledge of banana history and general feelings toward the fruit.

Transcripts on top of each television help those of us with lesser Spanish skills, but even then the history is piecemeal:

All I know about the massacre is that a war was waged to fight for plantation workers' rights. It was a very sad, violent, and bloody episode in our history, and what little I know about it was told to me by my grandparents, who had lived through it. There is a monument representing the plantation laborers. It is of a man who fought in the war, who put his life on the line to protect his village, the plantation, and the workers' rights. I personally don't eat bananas. I don't like them; they taste like tubes of flour to me. My favorite fruit is the strawberry – it has a bittersweet taste. But as a concept, I think the banana has had a positive impact on the people here – it's brought jobs and trade to the economy.<sup>5</sup>

Watching all five monologues and reading the transcripts, viewers make out a rough outline of colonialism via banana, yet not without acknowledging how truthful history evades even those within its fold. This troubling irony manifests across a chain of incomplete information: the events and details chosen as historical construct are subsequently passed on to the workers implicated within this narrative, which they impart onto the viewer through the artwork. The metonym of the misremembered past is well-formed, with sadness only further heightened by humorous anecdotes of the fruit's sexual qualities.

*The Banana Machine* (2009), another wall-sized video projected opposite from *Los Bananeros*, is less insightful. Mimicking the compositional format of *Talking Heads*, *The Banana Machine* cycles through a series of diverse and multiracial teenagers all happily eating a banana. Shot with a studio-white background, it seems a bit, perhaps purposefully, like a Benetton advertisement. The gesture feels pandering, however, and if there is sexual humor, it comes across thinly. It does clearly remind viewers that in the face of ruthless industry shaped by capitalism, we are all just passive consumers, and yes the banana really does look like a phallus. This conclusion would be more dynamic if Fallen Fruit trusted the viewers to reach it themselves, constructing their own meaning once outside of the gallery.

*United Fruit* displays the tricky problem Fallen Fruit encountered when it moved from orchestrating neighborhood-based jam sessions to commenting on the impact of capitalism (past and present) in a global arena. With local interactive work, the body acts like a fulcrum for a remapping of well-understood terrain. This strategy does not work as well within a gallery showing dedicated to post-colonial landscape. Despite a programming series including artist talks, a “banana meditation,” and a participatory performance during the opening reception, the hands-on approach is necessarily backgrounded. Perhaps the “A-Ha” moment now occurs in the day-to-day actions of the viewer, while out doing the weekly grocery shopping or enjoying bananas and granola for breakfast. It's a passive move, but a strong one: the landscape and history Fallen Fruit addresses isn't only accessible through a quirky artist-group project, it is embedded and available for reflection in everyday life.

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**Notes**

1. <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/>
2. <http://www.fallenfruit.org/index.php/about/>
3. LACE 2009, press release.
4. Bucheli and Read 2001.
5. Transcript from Mayra Melendez Garcia's interview.

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