

# ART AND FARMING

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An introduction to Georgina Barney's *GB Farming, An Island Journey*

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There are artists who find their language early and whose work consists of retelling the world in their own voice. It's what makes a watercolour by Samuel Palmer or Eric Ravilious distinctive and recognisable. There are others whose discovery of the world is the means of finding an artistic language. Georgina Barney may be one of them. The difference is not in talent or sensibility but in their relationship to things, to the world around them and to themselves. Hesitation and doubt nourish the desire for truth. They make bold leaps – then stop; and question. Their course is jagged and can be hard to follow. With frequent breaks and changes of direction it can appear chaotic but is better understood as exploratory.

These artists – if they make progress at all – tend to be appreciated critically in this uncertain postmodern world, sceptical of progress and yet entranced by ideas. To other tastes their work can seem difficult. Fragmentary, searching and tentative, it's like the field notes of a lost expedition. But if we invest some imagination and respond actively to exploration's traces, it can be immensely rewarding.

This book works in just that way. Part journal, part essay, part sketchbook, it records one artist's engagement with farming – the idea and the experience – over a long period of time. At its heart, is a logbook documenting a journey across Britain made by Georgina in the winter, spring and summer of 2007 and during which she lived and worked on some very different farms. But that story has been unpicked and remade several times in the intervening years, as the artist undertook a succession of projects, exhibitions, installations and reflections around an experience that, like grass in cow, has taken a lot of digesting. Sometimes in fleeing her own work she has gained distance and insight to understand it better on her return.

What emerges is not one story but several. There is a story about farming, certainly, rooted in the physical realities of production and consumption. But there are stories about politics, the environment and aesthetics too. There are human stories – of people met and of the artist's own life, including her emergence from depression. And there is the story of the telling itself as straw is spun into gold. Each reader will follow their own thread. Every reading, re-spinning each book, is unique.

Still, all this circles around farming like flies on ripe fruit. Perhaps the fascination remains because watching farmers at work allows her to unearth what it is, at least for her, to be an artist at work. Nothing clings like the clay on your boots.

The physicality of farming life is a constant. Muscle, milk and shit. Meat. The fragile transience of fruit and flowers. Rain, cold, sunshine. Rain. The embodied knowledge of men and animals, their actions not unthinking but unselfconscious. Stone underfoot, brambles snagging, hills: the land imposing itself on calves and thighs. The varied textures of soil and the variety of what they produce. Flat land, garden land, reclaimed land. Animal warmth and aching muscles beside the fire. Birth, sometimes quickly followed by death; blood and placenta and piss. The hand on a cow's flank to reassure before another to the teat. The calm of the abattoir conveyor belt; the stun; the slit.

Underlying it all, the knowledge that, whatever else we might be, we are animals who must eat to stay alive. What we eat and how we get it raises questions about economics, justice, science and morality, but eat we must. And shit too, whether on rustic planks above sawdust, chemical toilets or porcelain bowls flushed clean out of sight and mind. We too are part of a food cycle that lets nothing go to waste. Egg shells are ground up and fed back to the hens that laid them; unsold radishes rot in the furrows whence they were pulled. Pigs will eat what we will not. And when our time is over, we will go the same way: earth to earth. You know the rest.

It's not a thought to cheer a sad heart, you would think – the shadow of death on animals sent to market on Friday morning, before a breakfast of bacon and sausage. But the demands of other beings, who must be milked at seven whatever the state of your hope or your hangover, cannot be ignored. Hay must be made while the sun shines, pregnant ewes helped now, when they are in trouble. Hail, frost and rain can make you flush or broke in days. Such realities take no account of opinions or spirits. So the young artist finds something good in hard work, in monotony and repetition that has a purpose and is not about herself; in companionship with others, for whom this work will still have to be done tomorrow, next week and next year; in seeing her dexterity grow with her understanding; in knowing that the dairy floor is clean enough to eat off, or at least

make cheese on; in callouses on her hands and the browning of her skin; in finding the courage to watch death come to an animal unaware; in getting on; and getting through.

There's much to think on too, food for contemporary art's critical feast. Farming economics are not straightforward. There is vast capital but it is not always productive or even accessible. Many incomes are low, and not only for the Poles picking leeks and potatoes while they save for something better at home. They cut, wash and prepare carrot sticks for office workers who can pay to eat well *and* easily. Children visit the city farm to learn where their food comes from, but most of us think little about the origin or moral cost of our meat and two veg.

Curious that all this movement, skittering from one farm to another, is inspired by stasis. Farming is, quite literally, rooted in place. Businesses relocate; families move house. Farms stay put, adapting to change where they must. They make the most of the land they have: lettuce from Fenland peat, lamb off Cumbria's hard fell. There is an old lesson there for a globalising world mesmerised by further and faster movement.

Still, farms don't escape those forces. Mechanisation has steadily plucked workers from the land. Agriculture's version of offshoring is to bring people here to do the backbreaking work that's left. Worcestershire strawberry beds and Lincolnshire potato fields are harvested – for now – by hands from the poor parts of Europe. Some are not beyond sending Chinese cockle-pickers illegally into Morecambe Bay: the cost is lower than the tide.

It would be sentimental to mourn the labour that once crippled agricultural lives, though scything for self-sufficiency appeals to some. But the passing of Thomas Hardy's world is one cause of our ignorance about what sustains us. We watch Lambing Live on the BBC but think little about the chop on our plate or why the mange-touts came from Kenya. Unlike John Gray, we don't see that '*intensive agriculture is the extraction of food from petroleum*'.<sup>1</sup> Machines and fertiliser have enabled us to feed billions but without hydrocarbons – they stop.

It is oil that shifts food from pack house to distribution centre to supermarket to fridge and then, shamefully, often to landfill. More journeys criss-crossing the island, the continent, the world. Another turn of the food cycle from here and back again.

Georgina's journey offers glimpses of all this and more. She brings an artist's tools and training to the huge, complicated, vital world of British farming. She is curious. She wants to see, to smell, to touch. To understand how and why things are done. But she wants to experience it too. She knows that a few days packing vegetables beside those

who do it to put food on their own table is, in some ways, an indulgence. She sees the hitches, both in what she observes and in what she is doing.

But the artist as witness is an honourable role. She reports not only what she sees and thinks, as a journalist would, but what she feels too. Vulnerability can be a unique resource and Georgina does not balk at putting herself into difficult situations. She ups sticks and moves on every couple of weeks. Each time, there are new people to befriend, new ways of life to learn. Temporary homes, transient shelter. Belonging and outside. Wanting to learn, she does not hide from others her ignorance, her incompetence. And she accepts the need to explain, sometimes even to justify her self-imposed mission.

Weeks pass, winter becomes spring becomes summer, and the journey maps an artist unfolding the physical, cultural and emotional realities beneath the abstract 'farming'. She finds parallels between an artists' life and a farmer's. Materiality, again, is part of it – or it was until artists freed themselves from stuff with virtual means of expression. Planting seeds, gathering seaweed, trimming vines or milking a goat: like carving stone or handling a pencil, such skills unite hand and mind. Their truths are partly rational and partly felt, conscious and unconscious in the same breath. The sculptor's embodied knowledge is counterpart to the shepherd's. Such labour teaches respect for the otherness of things and beings which, resisting malleability, must be worked with or destroyed. And, like the weather that decides how you will use your day, it can be a path to patience and humility.

Georgina sees that few farmers or artists are in it for the money and it's true that both jobs make more sense as vocations. They are a way of living in the world whose choice enacts beliefs about what matters. Farmers and artists earn to sustain their occupation. They pay for their choice, in time, uncertainty and loss of things others deem essential. They gain what Epicurus considered essential to a happy life: freedom from orders, being among like-minded people and having time to think. For all their doing, artists and farmers are deeply concerned with being.

Artist and farmers both have a sense of shared enterprise with others on the same road. They are members of a community of practice that stretches back beyond memory and forward in hope. Above all, they are creative – not in the sloppy, easy way the word is used today but literally, factually. They bring things into existence. Animals, stories, fruit, pictures, crops, music, vegetables, performances and so on, and so on... Their creativity is life affirming and life sustaining. Without it, everything stops.

As days become weeks and months, the seasons turn. Warmth returns to field and byre, animals are born, plants grow. Like time itself, none of this is stoppable. And slowly, one

spring evening, Georgina looks at some plastic bales of silage and she wants to draw again. The journey's arc returns, bringing with it a changed person, someone beginning to be reconciled with a role – a vocation – and its place in the world. This is not fairy tale, though. There is no easy ending. There is no gallerist waiting to pay a premium, no hungry collectors: in fact, years will pass before the artist even knows whether she has anything to send to market. As to what it's worth, both farmers and artists know to mistrust the auction price. There are other benchmarks of value.

The journey goes on. Like all pilgrimages, it uncovers its purpose in its progress, not in a destination that, if it could even be reached, might only disappoint. It has brought growth, though; and on that both art and life depend.

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<sup>1</sup> John Gray, 2003, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to be Modern*, London: p.68