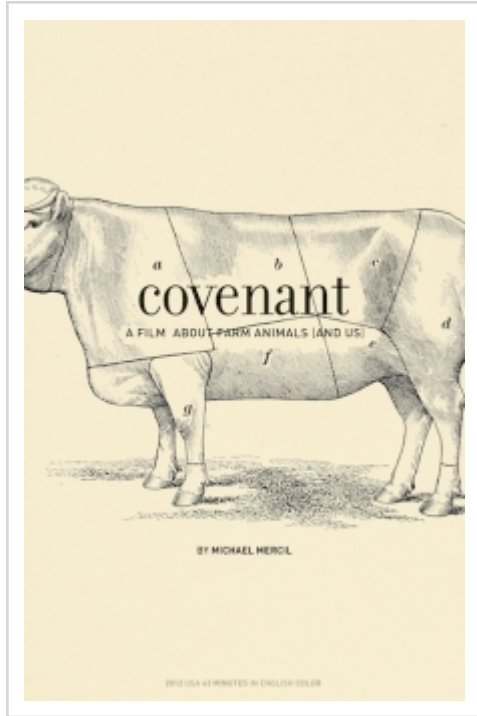


February 04 2013

Covenant: A Q&A with Artist Michael Mercil

Written by **Colleen Leonardi**

Michael Mercil is an artist, associate professor and the chair of graduate studies in the Department of Art at the Ohio State University. Over the last few years he has dedicated himself to the making of a documentary film about the lives of farm animals here in Ohio. On Thursday, February 7 his documentary film "Covenant" will premiere at the Wexner Center for the Arts. We asked Michael a few questions about the making of the film, his love of farm animals and why we should love farm animals too.

Colleen Leonardi: What drew you to the subject of farm animals and our relationship to them?

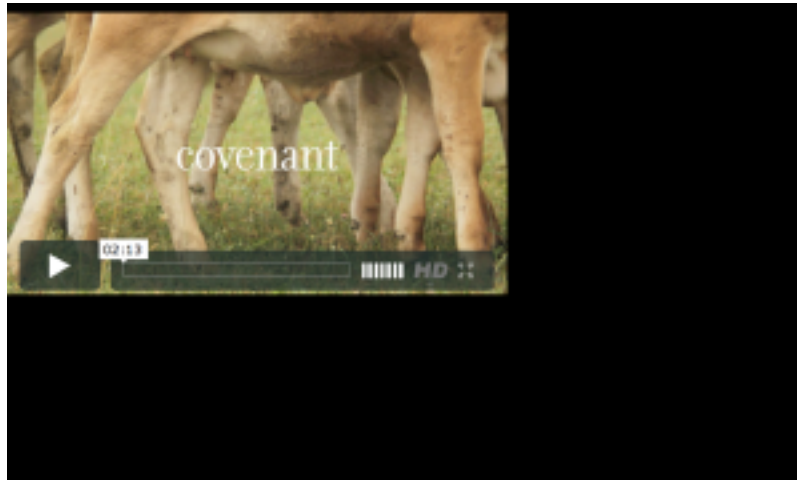
Image courtesy of Michael Mercil

Michael Mercil: In 2006, I began a series of "agri/cultural" artworks on the Ohio State University (OSU) campus. First, I planted "The Beanfield" at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Two years later, I converted "The Beanfield" into "The Virtual Pasture". Such projects are part of my effort to reclaim the land grant college as an agri/cultural commons; as a place wherein we might shape our thinking and actions as creatures that, like all creatures, live from the land.

Part of "The Virtual Pasture" project included my monthly transport of a small flock of Shetland sheep to graze on a plot grass outside the Wexner Center and across from the main campus Oval. On those days I stayed with my flock, and more than once I was asked, "What kind of animals are those?" So I knew I had plenty of work to do.

CL: Why did you decide to make a documentary film about farm animals?

MM: From my conversations with students and other visitors to "The Virtual Pasture", I realized most people have no everyday experience with livestock. It is as if these creatures on which we most depend have become the least familiar of animals to us.



This lack of familiarity breeds a kind of ignorance. Making a documentary film provided me a lens for looking closely at our most common farm animals—cows, chickens, pigs and such—and for presenting them as live beings that breath and suck and chew and twitch and piss just like we do.

Filmmaking also provides an opportunity for farmers—people who handle and care for livestock every day—to describe to us their own relationships to such creatures, as well as to address what those relationships mean to them. I made the film to start a conversation.

CL: What was the shape of your collaboration with Laurel Braitman and Jeff Dickinson during the making of the film? (See bios below.)

MM: Jeff Dickinson is farmer and director of the Stratford Ecological Center in Delaware, Ohio, where I kept my flock of sheep. He is one of the farmers I interviewed while making the film. Laurel Braitman is a friend from California who grew up on a farm. She is also a science historian, an artist and a writer whose work considers how our understanding of other animal minds challenges ideas of ourselves as uniquely feeling beings. I invited Jeff and Laura to lead a discussion and to offer their own thoughts about the film after its Thursday evening screening. But, otherwise, neither of them directly participated in the film's production.

CL: You raise the question in the trailer of "Covenant"— "Where do we encounter farm animals now?"— and I presume the film addresses this question, but I wonder if you would shed some light on it here, in your own words.

MM: The thought addresses the fact that today livestock is commonly raised in enclosed sheds—sometimes called "confined feeding operations," or CFO's. It's one reason we encounter farm animals less frequently than, say, 30 years ago. For example, how many cows might you count while driving between Columbus and Springfield?

CL: If you had to name one lesson learned during the making of "Covenant", one thing you came away with that you did not know to be true for yourself at the beginning of the film, what would it be?

MM: "Covenant" is an all-Ohio production. It was shot over three years at small family farms, at the state fairgrounds and at various county fairs. These are places where farm animals can still be seen.

Twenty years ago, I moved to Ohio from Minnesota. Although I have been happy here, I never felt Ohio was my home. While making "Covenant", people really reached out to help me with my work. Farmers opened their doors and invited

me in to sit with them at their dining room tables. Our conversations together were long and thought filled and heartfelt. It's funny, I am a teacher, but while making "Covenant", I got to do all the learning. What I learned is how much the people of Ohio love their home—this place, this land—and how deeply they care about their relationship to it. Farmers taught me how to love Ohio, and now it is my home too.

CL: What do you love about farm animals?

MM: Just as with humans, loving farm animals is a complicated affair. It's a relationship filled with wonder, joy and vexation. What I love about these creatures is how they call our attention to this world, and to our time and place within it. While we care and provide for them, what farm animals provide us—more importantly, perhaps, than food—is a way of being. The nature of our covenant has nothing to do with innocence: by a special kind of grace farm animals suffer through the world with us.

"Covenant" will premiere at the Wexner Center for the Arts on Thursday, February 7 at 7pm. Click [here](#) for more information. Following the public premiere, "Covenant" will be screened February 21-24 at the Colorado Environmental Film Festival in Boulder. In March, the film is being presented as part of the Fargo Film Festival in North Dakota nearby where Mercil was born and raised.

Laurel Braitman is a science historian and writer currently studying the history of mental illness in nonhuman animals—from compulsive hair plucking in gorillas, to separation anxiety in dogs, to depression in dolphins and whales. Her book, *Animal Madness*, is forthcoming with Simon and Schuster.

Braitman's writing considers not only the shifting relationships between humans and other creatures, but also how our understanding of other animal minds challenges ideas of ourselves as uniquely feeling beings. She has worked as a biologist and environmental conservation professional, was a 2012 TED fellow, and currently is an affiliate artist at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California.

Braitman received her B.A. in biology and writing from Cornell University, and is completing her PhD in the history and anthropology of science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jeff Dickinson is farmer and executive director for the Stratford Ecological Center—a 236 acre nature preserve, certified organic farm, and education center located outside of Delaware, Ohio. Before arriving at the Stratford Center in 1990, Dickinson worked for seven years at Meadowcreek Project, a non-profit environmental center in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. He received his PhD in entymology/soil ecology from The Ohio State University in 1995.

From 2009-11, the Stratford Center was home to the flock of Shetland sheep whose grazing streamed live to an LED monitor located outside the Wexner Center as part of Michael Mercil's project, "The Virtual Pasture".

Michael Mercil directed tonight's documentary video, "Covenant", and is Associate Professor and Chair of Graduate Studies in the Department of Art at OSU. In 2005—together with artist and OSU Professor Ann Hamilton—he began "The Living Culture Initiative," to engage "the core research framework of The Ohio State University" through a "diverse range of contemporary visual arts practices." Mercil's recent on-campus projects include "The Beanfield" (2006-08), "The Virtual Pasture" (2009-11), and "Reading the Daily News" (ongoing performance).

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