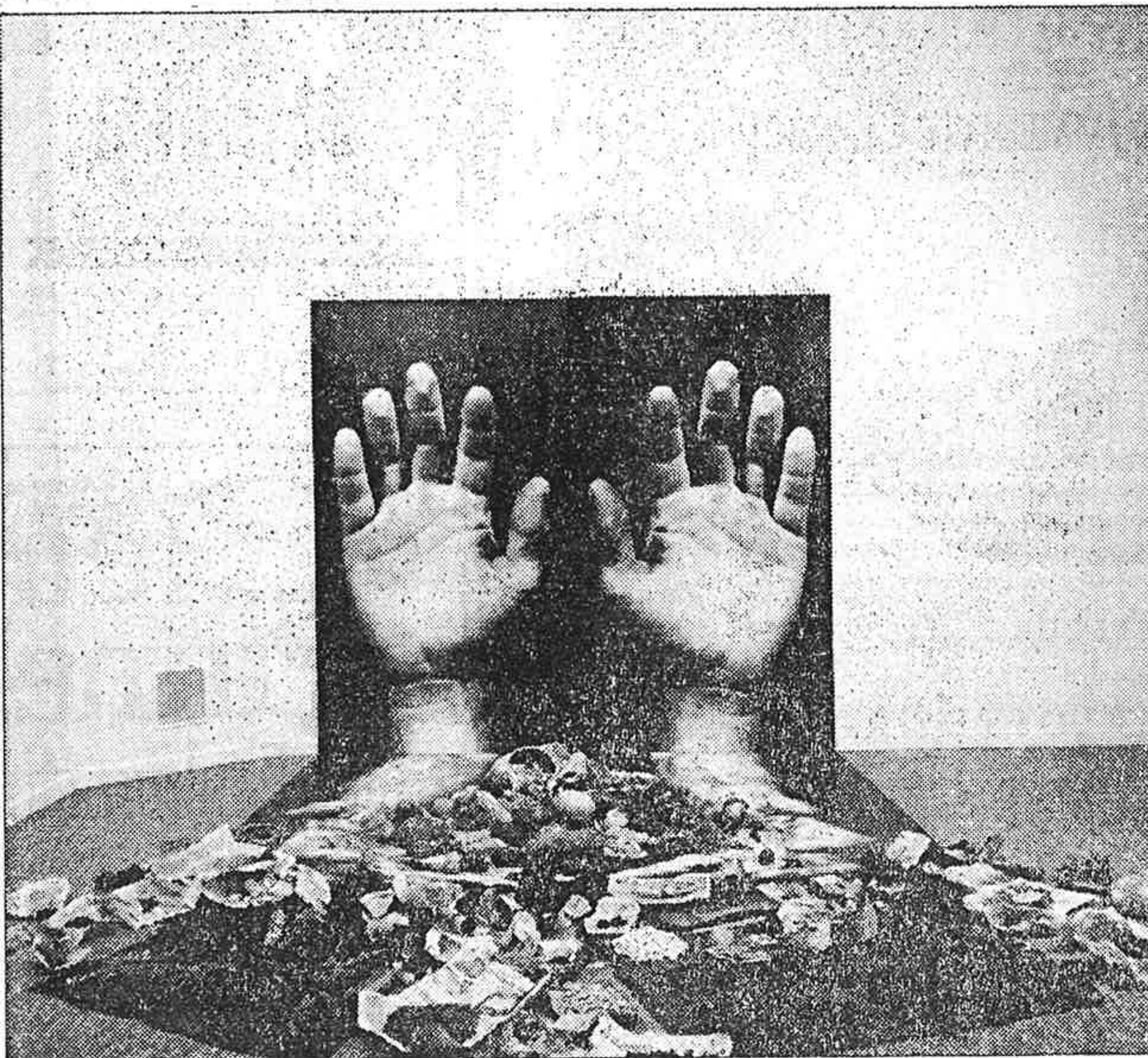

AND THE TREES GREW INWARDS: the piece was dedicated to Manuel Scorza, a Peruvian politician and novelist who was killed in a plane crash in Spain in 1983

Sadness and decay highlight the destruction of species

ALL THAT HAS VALUE
An exhibition by Ron Benner
Presentation House Gallery (333 Chesterfield), until May 12

MICHAEL SCOTT
Sun Art Critic

The odor of rotting fruit is unmistakable. Art galleries usually smell of clean carpet and oil paint. But here, grapes and strawberries and tomatoes moulder in the warm, still air, bringing a sense of decay and sadness to an installation work by Ontario artist Ron Benner. Entitled *And the Trees Grew Inwards*, the piece is an early example of Benner's enduring interest in food, and the tangle of cultural, economic and even political meanings that it can have.

This particular work, completed in 1980, was later dedicated to the memory of Manuel Scorza, a Peruvian politician and novelist who was killed in a plane crash in Spain in 1983, and whose poetry provides the title.

Two large photoprints of hands and forearms form the backbone of the piece. One pair laid out along the floor, grubby and acquisitive, seems to gather Benner's colorful pile of fresh fruits and vegetables between them; the other pair, running up the wall, palms toward the viewer, sends the message: No more.

Arrayed in front of the rotting fruit is a jumble of dried beans, peppers, potatoes and other indigenous foods of Peru, wrapped in scraps of Peruvian newspapers as if they'd just been bought at an open-air market in Cuzco.

Benner wants to get us thinking about food and food production as a metaphor for the way we treat other people. In *Valia la peña?* (Was It Worth It?), for instance, he juxtaposes the names of hundreds of valuable plants native to the Americas, with a painfully short list of things that native Americans safely adopted from their European conquerors: horses, chickens and beeswax candles.

"In asserting the rich and often not well known natural heritage of the Americas," guest curator Peter White explains, "Benner draws a contrast between traditional agricultural methods and values, and the large-scale, industrial practices of contemporary food production.

A statistic that hovers close to each of Benner's works is the fact that since the arrival of Europeans, more than 70 per cent of native American plant diversity has been lost. The economic juggernaut that created iceberg lettuce and Utah 52-70 celery and other mono-culture foodstuffs has already cost the world 75 per cent of the genetic diversity in 20 key food crops.

In *In Digestion*, Benner traces a cardboard carton of Showcase brand bell peppers from a merchant's stall in a market in London, Ont. back to the fields in Mexico where the vegetables were grown. He

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Meaningful parts of culture ignored

builds a a life-size reproduction of the interior of a semi-trailer to house the work, and adorns the entrance with floor-to-ceiling stacks of food crates.

Follow the peppers' trail back far enough, Benner explains, and the massive agro-business of North America begins to blend with older, more fragile systems of food production.

By the time we reach the pepper fields of Sinaloa, the artist has brought us face-to-face with the ancient precursors to our rubber-strewn highways: foot paths through the Sonoran desert that have carried trade goods inland for more than 70,000 years.

Now in middle age, the sometime railway brakeman and poet, has never taken formal art training.

"I always wanted to be a farmer," Benner says. "But I only lasted one term at the University of Guelph in 1969. You could say I survived agricultural engineering."

The most potent work in this impressive exhibition is a meditation on a line uttered by an Aztec noble in the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest. "All that has value was then counted as nothing," the despairing man is recorded as saying.

The European adventurers were ready enough to strip the continent of its gold and silver, but paid scant attention to other, more meaningful parts of Meso-American culture.

Benner displays this comment, written large in both English and Spanish, in indigo letters on a crimson field. The pigments he uses turn out to be two of the uncredited benefits of ancient Zapotec culture: the dark blue vegetable dye we now know as indigo; and the red-orange stain made from the remains of the cochineal beetle.

The blue dye gave us denim and the red gave us cardinals' robes and British red coats.

Although almost forgotten now in their natural form, indigo and cochineal do still exist. A pile of each punctuates Benner's installation, insisting that we pay new attention to the cultures that came before us.