

Golden Moments: a visit with artist Alexis Elton

By Erin Elder, featured in Edible Magazine February 2016

On a cold sunny November Sunday, I take one of my favorite drives from Santa Fe to Chimayó. I pass the hilltop shrines that feel like divine antennae, the ancient santuario with its sacred dirt, the orchards and fields, the trading post that sells the best red chile powder in New Mexico. Although this is my third visit with Alexis Elton, I get turned around looking for the old plaza and the decommissioned post office where she has an art studio. I finally intuit my way there and park in the frozen mud. I am still awed how this plaza -- one of the first in what is now New Mexico -- feels more like an overgrown wildlife preserve than a civic center.

For six years, artist Elton has farmed this area with Brett Ellison. They specialize in root crops and have helped to bring back the native Hubbard squash. This season they managed ten acres and have developed an intimacy with both the land and their community.

Through tall skinny doors, I enter a large room with a blue ceiling and a wood floor patched with tin cans. The heat is blasting, Elton is beaming -- her energy is effervescent. The room holds bundles of pulled weeds tied discretely with surveying cord, cubes of pressed and dried roots, many piles of garlic. As I run my fingers through root balls of a plant I do not know she says, "When you farm, you begin to see the endless material, the scale of mass. You see the product and the life force. I wanted to document these cycles, and so I had to bring them into my studio."

We remove our jackets to perch on stools. Elton reveals layered clothing that incorporates polka dots and gold thread between her hefty boots and a wool hat. She pours lemon water from a Thermos into two small cups. Her fingers are wide and strong and they strike me as gorgeous tools. They work, they make. These are useful hands.

Raised on Waldorf philosophy and 4H, Elton didn't think of her rural life in the Hudson River Valley as particularly agricultural. With a fine art degree in sculpture from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she had grown to see the world as creative material. Farming only happened after moving to New Mexico to learn adobe building and after working as a preparator at SITE Santa Fe, where she met Ellison who was farming with two brothers in Las Trampas. As an artist she began to see that she was "living the work -- it was a creative ritual."

"It was in that first year when I had my aha moment, or what I call *The Golden Moment*" she says. The farm -- then called Gemini Farm -- had produced hay for their own livestock, a process that took several years, and now it was time to bale. Four mules pulled a cart and baler across a golden field of grain. "I was struck by the importance of that moment. The mules were baling the hay that would feed them all winter. I saw it as a closed loop of production and consumption. It was hard, loud work. It involved land, machine, human, animal, time: all the elements. I thought it was beautiful and I wanted to insert some kind of intention and lightness into it." This eureka moment

led to an art performance during which Elton wore a golden suit, a platinum wig, and red lipstick, while doing the difficult work of baling hay. “It was hilarious to everyone watching, but for me it was about consciousness. This has been pivotal to my work as an artist.”

With a knife that looks like it has a story of its own, Elton cuts two gold turnips into slender slices. “When does it become art?” I ask as I reach hungrily for a snack. The turnip is delicious and I gobble it too quickly. Answering my own question, I become aware that this woman in front of me has planted, tended, harvested and now presented me with this incredible treat. She notices my delight in eating, holds those hands up to conceal a giggle, smiling eyes behind bold glasses.

“Like everything else, it’s how you show up. I show up as an artist,” she explains.

“So you are what makes it art?” I ask.

“It’s the intention that makes this art. Art is about transformation. It’s about making something through intention... Now I see that even as I’m farming, I’m also in the studio. The land is source. The water is source. There is timing and ritual and many unknowns. How to transform a field into food? It takes all of this to make the artwork.”

Elton has cultivated a porousness that welcomes the world into her studio but also allows passage from the studio out into the world. Her artwork spans from dinners to objects, all of which aim to address a specific place and what it produced there. She describes a sculptural piece called *When Grace is Nourishment* that involved a garland of garlic, a photo of where the garlic was grown, and a stack of baled hay from which emanated the sounds of clinking mule harnesses and of people harvesting garlic. Still other artworks take the form of seed- or food-sharing events; once she worked with people to dig holes as a form of community building.

“Is feeding people sort of like having an audience,” I ask.

“People complete the piece!” she exclaims excitedly. “The culmination of all this work is a moment, an experience, the taste of food. You can’t have a dinner party without guests!”

But Chimayó is not an easy place for outsiders. It is a tiny town of primarily generations-old families; it is steeped in tradition and some of the highest rates of heroin-related death in the country. “When I came here, I wondered how I could relate,” she ponders. “How could I honor the local traditions while integrating myself as an outsider? I knew we had to work with the older generation. We had to share and teach and feed people. We had to honor them in the best way that made sense for this place.”

We talk about how far she and Ellison have come in the last few years. They continued running Gemini Farm after the brothers took the mules to Washington. This year they renamed the farm Jubilee and, with a growing fleet of solar-powered equipment, have found their way into the heart

of the community. Elton tells me that Ellison was even elected mayordomo for the Ortega ditch, one of the village's main acequias.

Our time is short. Now that the last of the garlic has been planted and winter is settling in, Elton can finally take a break. She heads home to New York for the holidays, planning to surprise her family. I can't help but think of her trip home as something coming full circle. As the season ends, another cycle is complete. I point out that going home might be some kind of golden moment.

"Maybe I'll wear the platinum wig!" she exclaims.

"Then they're sure to be surprised!" I shout.

Laughter comes so easily to Elton.

As I open the tall, antique doors, she squeezes me, stuffing into my arms a bottle of apple wine and two Hubbard squash. As I make my way back over the landscape, I think about Elton, for whom art is a way to cultivate meaning; who frames her own life as intentional, as ritualistic, as part of a cycle of creation and consumption. Just as the mules harvested their own food in that golden moment, art fuels Elton. It feeds the boundless energy that her work requires.

More of Elton's work can be seen at www.alexiselton.com.