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**FARMING PIXELS:
FOOD, PHOTOGRAPHY AND
THE BEAUTY MYTH**

Aileen Blaney & Chinar Shah



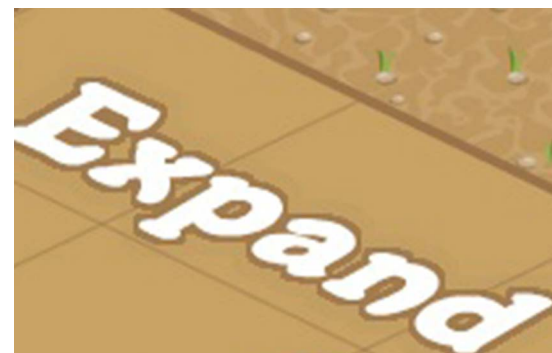
Chinar remembers sitting in class in what must have been second standard when she learned for the first time that India was an agriculture-based economy. The news came to young Chinar as a surprise for she had never set foot on a farm. Neither was she aware of the importance of farming to the approximated 60% of the population who made their livelihood from the land.

All these years later, Chinar is planting seeds, growing crops, and raising farm animals and livestock on virtual plots of land in an online game called Farmville. The measure with which game developer Zynga's invitation to 'take a nostalgic journey into the countryside' has resonated worldwide is evident in the 36 million likes garnered by its facebook fan page. However, for all its likes, Time magazine in 2012 named it one of the '50 worst inventions' for being predicated on a 'series of mindless chores on a digital farm'. As for Chinar, she has been known, at the height of strawberry season to rush home, go online and harvest her berries before they spoil. It is out of this tension between being, in her words, 'a farmer online and photographer on land' that the body of work in question has emerged.

'We are clearly in a 'Post Documentary' photographic

world now'' are the words of photographer Paul Graham at the first MOMA photography forum in 2010. It's no coincidence then that the images we find here are of photographs taken neither with a camera, nor in real time and space. In their place are screenshots of the isometric graphics and illustrations that portray a farm and its holdings as featured in Farmville. So far so good, in terms of symmetry between Graham's theory and Chinar's practice as a photographer. But the times that are changing don't change so fast for despite awareness that photographs are often transformed in postproduction into fictions, they continue to be read as reliable representations of 'the real'.

This work, by contrast, is a child of Graham's 'post-documentary' times in its refusal to the viewer any such illusion. In a series of highly compressed jpeg files, images are cropped and resized to the point at which vision is completely destabilized - in the blown-up images and blurred out, almost wobbly text it is image distortion above all else that we see. In making visible these effects, even if they are produced out of screenshots from an anyway unrealistic online game, attention is drawn to the digital processes that have deviated Cartier Bresson's 'defining moment'

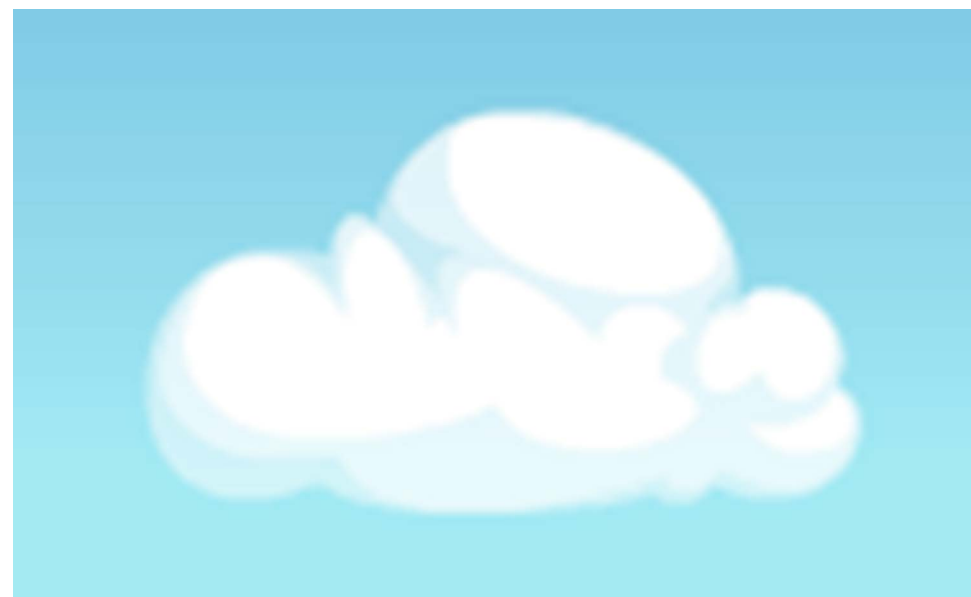


from the second the shutter button is released to when the image gets reproduced in applications such as Photoshop. The picture that can tell a thousand words can also tell a thousand lies. But however much the food industry has found in photography a machine with which

to dream, this work uses the machine's same tools to show the constructed nature of what we see in advertising's dreamscapes and what, subsequently, we get to put our

hands on in the supermarket.

'Food has travelled far from the land and soil into the world of visual pleasures', Chinar shares with me. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the expectations consumers bring with them when they visit





their local green grocer: the expectation is for the blemish-free skin of apples, vegetables that match mentally ingrained colour charts, and of course size does matter: we like our banana and blueberries not too big but not too small. The same photogenic imperative motivating changes to the DNA of images in food advertising is at work in the scientific laboratories

where genetic modifications are made to the DNA of seeds. In the period since 1994 when GM tomatoes became the first GM food to be introduced to US consumers - ironically, today, nowhere in the world are genetically engineered tomatoes available for sale - consumers, by and large, have become remarkably accustomed to the manmade character of organic

produce. These Frankensteins of the plant world assembled on petri dishes to outsmart natural selection barely raise an eyebrow. 'Farmers disappear in death and food disappears in genetics' says the photographer of this work in a stark summing up of the growing number of fruit, vegetable and grain species sanctioned for genetic engineering by governments

worldwide. The jpeg images in her work, pixelated almost to breaking point, pose as metaphors for the changes introduced into the natural world by science and technology. It is almost as though the images very molecules break apart and reform, an analogy perhaps for the reorganization of food genomes by now everywhere around us, modifications made rarely to enhance taste, sometimes for nutritional reasons, and more often to extend shelf life and cosmetic appeal.

The photographer in this case uses the precise editing tools that are the bulwarks of digital photography to as it were break into images pilfered from the online game and which for the sake of argument she treats as photographs, alluding in the process to how unreal 'real' photographs are anyway. There is an irony to be found in the work in how in upping the ugliness of these images, by making their pixels show and breaking every rule of composition, photography's hyper-aestheticisation of food elsewhere finds its way into the focal plane. Walter Benjamin famously viewed the film image as an 'orchid in the land of technology', and this

photographic series indirectly refers to the nectar available in abundance in visual culture. The brilliance of photography for how it has reimagined food for the consumer has made it as indispensable as a limb to the multinational food industry and, equally, the arm that this photographer would like to cut off.

There are giveaways of political sympathies in the work, images – that of a headless farmer for example – that are effective in their function as the blunt instruments that suggest the pressures, temptations and elusiveness of financial reward or even stability for growers with resources that are oftentimes too limited to keep up with market demand. In recent years, reports have shown that prohibitively high GM seed cost, in the case of cotton for example, force many farmers into debt. Meanwhile fluctuating food prices make for extreme volatility in income levels. In the state of Maharashtra, for every day in the last ten years, there have been 10 farmers who have killed themselves. Accounts for why the figures are so high invariably conflict with each other, and regardless of all the hard and soft evidence gathered by social scientists, their theories cannot explain the every why and wherefore of the one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Similarly,

this work is not reducible to a simple message equating progress in industry and science with farmer suicides in Maharashtra and other states in the South of India.

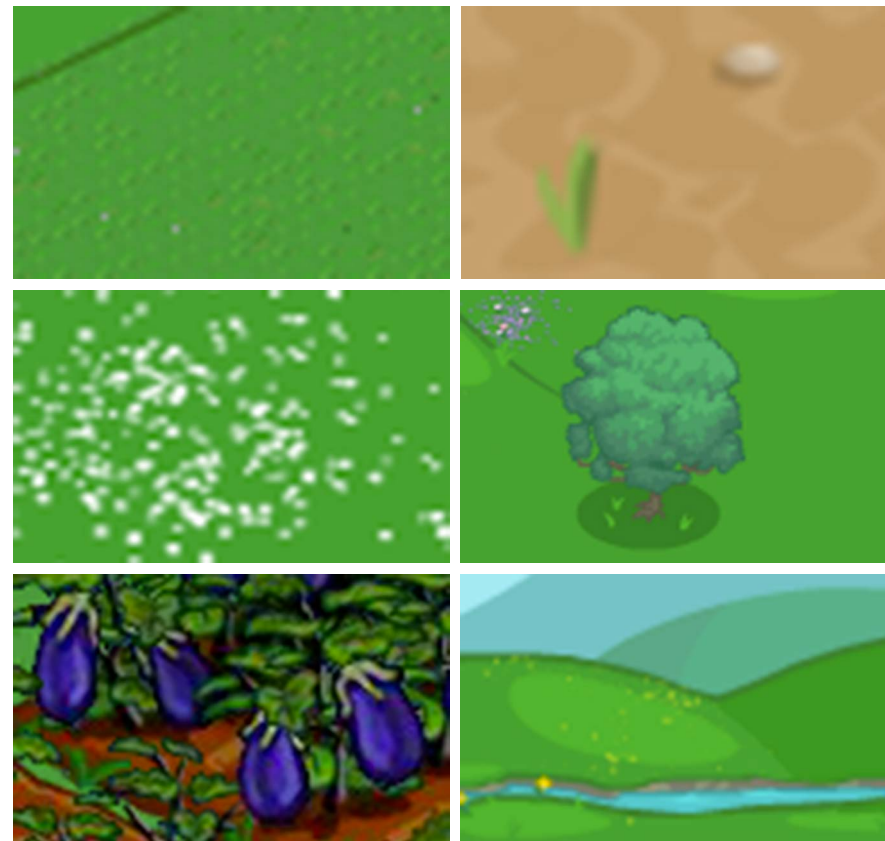
However in producing images distorted to the extent that seeing them is hard to do, reception of the image is slowed down; in the slow motion contemplation that arises, there is plenty of time and space to join up the dots – or pixels by another name – and to see the full picture.

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All images by Chinar Shah,