

In Effervescence

BY LAUREN FOURNIER

S.E. Nash* has long been enchanted with kraut. Part of his coming-to-fermentation was the time he spent at the Foundation for Fermentation Fervor residency in rural Tennessee (2014), the home of wild fermentation revivalist and queer activist Sandor Katz — fondly known as Sandorkraut. The experience shaped Nash in ways that continue to ripple through his work — from a tactile coexistence with the ferments he lives and works with, to a keen awareness of the ways the boundary between himself, others and the microbial world are nearly impossible to disentangle.

Fermentation, or the transformative action of microbes, paradoxically preserves as it transforms, leaving a resulting product that, while holding traces of the original constituent parts, is palpably different from what came before. Fizzy and sour, the fermented materials bubble up in ways that can exceed the containers that hold them, energetically dynamic and potentially explosive. In the artworks of “Krautsourcing,” Nash goes deep into the world of cabbage and other members of the Brassica oleracea species, finding within kraut all kinds of material and conceptual possibilities.

Nash moves between the garden, the kitchen, the studio and back again — all generative spaces for aesthetic and epistemological experimentation that serve as laboratories of a sort. The fresh promises of queer alchemy are realized through kraut — a deceptively simple foodstuff that Nash has harvested from their garden in Overland Park, Kansas, where he lives with his ferments and starters, his wife, Lori, his dog and billions of microbes. This is the most recent manifesto of Nash’s practice of “fostering the microcosmos” — a phrase they use to describe their art and

fermentation practice, attuned as it is to a feminist ethic of multispecies coexistence and trans, genderqueer and non-binary thriving.

Part of this work involves Nash reflecting on their family relationships to kraut — this vernacular of food in homes across Eastern Europe and Eurasia. There, households likely have kraut fermenting into sauerkraut in a crock somewhere, nestled in a corner or a cupboard; similar, perhaps, to kombucha in China, where a vessel of this fermenting tonic is an everyday part of life. While the ancestral aspects of Nash’s fermentation work remain somewhat speculative, they shape the work in imaginative ways. Nash wonders, for example, whether his German grandmother, who fled Nazi Germany and settled in Memphis, would have enjoyed or rejected this deep tradition of fermenting kraut once she reached America. The Yiddish word “Nosh” (Nashn) and the artist’s surname “Nash” are engraved on wood as “Nash’s Noshes” in “Projected Spaces for Sympoiesis: The Kitchen, The Studio, The Laboratory,” reconstituting a phrase Nash found on their grandparents’ cutting board.

Nash engages a range of sculptural, material, formal and alchemical experiments with kraut, revealing ripe transformations of color and texture, composition and tone, size and scale. He paints cabbage leaves and casts them in resin. He dehydrates kombucha SCOBYs (symbiotic cultures of bacteria and yeast) to create leafy, papery sheets that, when bundled together and put on display, uncannily look like kale. In “Making Kin (With Self and Other)”, Nash takes heads of cabbage and presses them onto fabrics that have been soaked in a vinegar solution. The result is a gorgeous watery dye, where the pH range of acid to alkaline determines the shades — a wash of grayscale purples and blues. The textiles are nestled within wooden frames repurposed from materials salvaged in Nash’s garden, along with assemblage and drawings,

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*Nash uses he/him and previously they/them pronouns.

and altogether create an ad hoc sense of exploration and play. Nash brings together materials like rope, burlap and wire with putty and paint to create self-consciously hybrid sculptures where representations of fermenting materialities and energies come in contact with materials that are literally fermenting.

In “Cabbage Looper Leaf Tracings,” Nash traces failed cabbages to commemorate those garden cabbages that “didn’t work” due to being infested by the cabbage looper — a worm that loops through cabbage leaves, etching holes that punctuate their surfaces. As a gardener, Nash observes these symbiotic relationships — where not all symbiosis is mutually beneficial — and extends this to an artistic consideration. The aesthetics of failure as outlined by theorists like Jack Halberstam meet the quaintly accessible materiality of cabbage and the haptic harvesting of food from one’s own backyard to prompt reflection on what it means for something to succeed. Compositionally, the works straddle contemporary art, folk art and science — with gestures to empiricism seen in microscopic views. In doing so, their work demonstrates a new critical framework — transsauerkraut, joyously sour, queerly rotten in the sense of being not quite rotten at all.

Fermentation and trans identity have been curiously parallel journeys for the artist — as intimately personal as they are collectively social and political. While they were healing from their recent top surgery, Nash found himself making strange little sculptural objects — turnips with nipples in different sizes, pigmentations and shapes. This relationship between fermentation and gender identity has been bubbling through their work since 2015, with their sculptures in “They/Them/Their” at Black Ball Projects in Brooklyn embodying the plurality of gender non-conforming identities. By having actively fermenting foods and beverages held in transparent vessels in a gallery, Nash invites living materials into art spaces that historically preclude life in favor of white-cube climate

control and the sanitizing imperatives of protecting institutional collections.

Nash’s practice is thoroughly multisensorial, an aspect of his process that comes through in the finished works, too. He becomes knowledgeable of the materials he works with through his hands, his mouth, his nose — dipping one’s finger into the pot and licking it. Here, the pleasures of physically creating meet the therapeutic pleasures of knowing through that creating — a knowledge that is as tactile as it is cerebral, as intimately sensorial as it is collectively accessible. The communal aspect of sharing these fermented foods and beverages together is an integral part of the queer feminist ethics of Nash’s practice, in which they move between the roles of artist and host, making space for others to partake in the bodily pleasures of nourishing ferments. For the opening at Kniznick Gallery, Nash put out a call for participation to the local community to bring sauerkraut to the opening: The artist will mix these together to create a big, collective “Stone Kraut” (like stone soup) that will be eaten at the opening and, for what remains, will become part of a sculpture that sits in the gallery and ferments for the duration of the show. There is an effervescence humming below everything that Nash is doing with his work — a genuine joy in their materials, in attuning to microbes, in deepening his relationship with his own body and, in turn, with the microbial and extra-microbial world within and around it. The invocation of they is like the invocation of kraut sourcing — prompting questions around what it means to work with what you have, the materials growing inside of you and around you. Through his perceptive way of approaching and working with materials, Nash cultivates a contemporary art of fermentation that embodies transgender and transspecies flourishing.

