



*“An ear of corn is the point of convergence for my dual careers in farming and art. Corn is not a typical subject in art. But for me, the lines, rows, numbers, higher prices, lower prices, color spectrums, mapping, information technology, air masses, and species have all combined to have unwittingly become a catalyst.”* Mick Meilahn

**MICK MEILAHN'S  
PRIMORDIAL SHIFT**

by David J. Wagner, Ph.D.

Mick Meilahn creates sculpture installations that deal with the implications of genetic engineering for agriculture and the ecology of food, in particular, corn, which was introduced by Native Americans to Europeans over 500 years ago.

Meilahn learned glass making as a student in Wisconsin in the 1960's and, along with other glass artists of his generation, subsequently formed a wave that established The American Studio Glass Movement. As a kid, Meilahn grew up on his family's Midwestern Wisconsin farm, and ultimately took the farm over as a third generation farmer.



PRIMORDIAL SHIFT  
2012, Blown Glass, Bronze, Cable, Audio/Video, 30'x30'x16'H  
Peninsula Art School, Door County, Wisconsin

PRIMORDIAL SHIFT is a quintessential example of Meilahn's later installations. It is about change . . . that is, the broad arc of change from early domestication of corn by indigenous peoples in the area of what is now southern Mexico to genetic engineering induced by science in the 20th Century; namely the paradigm shift which enabled scientists to unravel genetic code of organisms contained in DNA; and the modification and commodification of plants and animals and implications for consumers.

PRIMORDIAL SHIFT consists of 32 hand-blown glass ears of corn averaging 4' high suspended on stalks of cord with leaves of cast bronze, and a backdrop of video projected to create an illusion of gentle swaying in the breeze. The dimensions of the installation vary depending upon available space. To replicate a field of corn, best might be a square space of approximately 30'x30' hung from a 16' ceiling, surrounded by video of corn fields on Meilahn's own family farm projected in the round on gallery walls, and nestled in surround-sound audio which includes the chirping of birds and rustling of leaves.

PRIMORDIAL SHIFT is, of course, a work of art. But underlying the artist's aesthetic is an agnostic, if not ambivalent philosophy concerning agronomy, in other words, crop science, and the application of that science by horticulturists to plant production, for the enhancement and improvement of nature for human and animal life:

*“With today’s sophisticated technology and global positioning, a 24-row corn planter can plant 500 acres a day with laser accuracy, 35,000 plants per acre with placement exactly 6” apart, and 1¾ “deep. The instant the seed hits the ground, germination begins. That germination is as primal as it gets. Its everywhere! Just look. The shift part is engineered; with results that are all so convenient. Is this shift good? You decide.”*, says Mick Meilahn.

In that sense, PRIMORDIAL SHIFT along with most of Meilahn’s other installations (the most overt exception being FIELD OF MINES), are not agents for or of change, but rather, artworks which illuminate the pros and cons of genetic modification.

Mick (Michael) Meilahn (b. 1946) grew up on a family farm near Pickett, in Central Wisconsin. After graduating in 1964 from high school in Ripon where he excelled in art, he entered the University of Wisconsin-River Falls to study agriculture. He subsequently switched his major to art, after he realized agri-business was not his passion. At UW-River Falls he took his first course in glass, and in 1966 he started blowing glass, this at the same time that Harvey Littleton was running the studio glass program at UW-Madison that he made famous by graduating a slew of glass evangelists, the most famous of which would be Dale Chihuly. As an undergraduate, Mick Meilahn spent a Quarter abroad working with glass legend, Erwin Eisch in Frauenau, Germany (on the Bavaria/Czech border, an area with a rich tradition of glass making). After graduation in 1971, he spent a year in Bolivia as an idealistic Peace Corp volunteer intent on helping people in South America by sharing knowledge he’d learned from farming. After that he enrolled at Illinois State University, Normal, where Joel Philip Myers had begun a glass program, and earned his Masters degree in art.

Ultimately, though, Meilahn’s roots drew him back to his family’s farm in 1975 where he and his wife, Jane, raised their children and where he alternately operated the family farm and the hot glass studio he built.

In time, Meilahn’s passion for art and farming became one-in-the-same as a form of creative expression. Since 1996, when he turned 50 and began planting genetic seed, Meilahn’s artwork has focused on genetic modification, which has symbiotically shaped his life and work, both as an artist and a famer. His installations afford viewers the opportunity to view and contemplate the production of corn, from the dual perspective of an artist who knows the subject from life. For the past 15 years or so, this convergence has been the basis for a number of important works.

Meilahn’s choice of corn as an icon is not only relevant to The Midwest where he has roots, but also to the nation and beyond. The nation’s (and the world’s for that matter) reliance on corn production is broad. But The Upper Midwest is particularly immersed

in corn production. In the U.S. the top ranking corn producing states in descending order of production are: 1. Iowa, 2. Illinois, 3. Nebraska, 4. Minnesota, 5. Indiana, 6. South Dakota, 7. Kansas, 8. Wisconsin, 9. Missouri, 10. Ohio. In 2016, the nation's top twenty states produced over 100 million bushels of corn, 2 billion of which were produced in Iowa and Illinois (source, NASS/USDA). Whereas corn has personal meaning and value for Mick Meilahn, corn is broadly iconic these days in terms of food, agribusiness, and culture.



FIELD OF MINES  
2006, Blown Glass, Cable, Audio/Video, 40'x40'x18'H  
Ripon College, Wisconsin

In 2006 Mick Meilahn installed FIELD OF MINES at Ripon College (photo above), near his family farm in Wisconsin. Anything but ambivalent, it is a literal visual statement about the potential of genetic modification gone bad. In 2008, The Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa commissioned CORN ZONE (photo below), an installation measuring 18'x40'sx40', which was so popular that staff now re-install it annually each Summer, as a tradition, much to the enjoyment of Iowans throughout the region. In 2012, Meilahn installed the first iteration of PRIMORDIAL SHIFT (photo, page 1) at the Peninsula School of Art in Door County, Wisconsin. In 2019, Meilahn's BONANZA BLUE (photo below) was unveiled at The James Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, as one of a number of installations featured in the block-buster, traveling museum exhibition, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT II. It was combined with PRIMORDIAL SHIFT in a retrospective of the artist's broader body of work from April 23 to August 21, 2022 at The Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass in Neenah, Wisconsin with the subtitle, THE ART OF MICHAEL MEILAHN.



**CORN ZONE**  
2008, Blown Glass, Bronze, Cable, Audio/Video, 40'x40'x18'H  
The Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa



**BONANZA BLUE**  
2019, Blown Glass, Wood, 25'x40'x6'H  
The James Museum, St. Petersburg Florida

From there, PRIMORDIAL SHIFT and BONANZA BLUE, were combined for display at The Health Museum in Houston, Texas, from September 24, 2022 to May 29, 2023, and that museum leveraged Meilahn's work to promote science education. Staff there subtitled their display, THE SCIENCE AND ART OF GENETIC MODIFICATION. To make the most of it, they placed the exhibition in a large gallery adjacent to the museum's science lab, and created didactic text panels (photos below) to educate visitors about corn, its history, and genetic modification. On their own website, they posted the following introduction: "Primordial Shift is an installation dealing with the implications of genetic modification of corn. In the 20th Century, a paradigm shift occurred in genetics, when scientists discovered how to unravel genetic code; the genetic code itself, DNA; and the commodification of GMOs and the positive and negative implications for consumers."

**10,000 YEARS AGO**

The teosinte plant can be found growing in ancient Mesoamerica (modern-day Mexico). Its few kernels are very hard and taste like dry, raw potato. Over a period of thousands of years, indigenous tribes domesticated this plant into what we now know as corn or maize.

**1494**

Christopher Columbus returns from his voyages to the New World with corn, which is then dispersed throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. Researchers believe that the introduction of corn to countries outside of the Americas played a large role in the rapid human population increase between 1650 and 1850.

**1922**

Botanist and geneticist George Shull develops hybrid corn and revolutionizes corn farming. Based on the work of Gregor Mendel, this intentional crossing of select inbred strains of corn lead to huge increases in corn yield and was considered one of the most important advancements in the history of farming.

**1996**

The first genetically modified corn is developed by inserting a bacterial gene into its DNA. This gene produces a naturally-occurring toxin that kills insects and reduces the need for pesticides.

**TODAY**

OVER 1 BILLION METRIC TONS of corn are produced globally every year. It's grown on every continent except Antarctica.

The U.S. produces over 1/3 of the world's corn

92% of which is genetically engineered

Corn accounts for 6% OF ALL CALORIES consumed by humans.

Equivalent to the weight of X 1.8 MILLION

**ARE YOU TALLER THAN CORN CROP?**

# GENETIC MODIFICATION AND THE SEEDS OF CREATIVITY



Meilahn's art has been heavily influenced by his roots as a farmer. Of particular interest to him is the genetic modification of corn and its influence on the evolution of agriculture in the Americas. Meilahn began planting genetically modified seeds on his farm in the 1990s. Over time, he began incorporating references to genetic modification in his art.

In Primordial Shift, each ear of corn is tagged with a genetic identifier. Genetic identifiers are unique codes assigned to genetically modified plants that have been approved for commercial use.

In Bonanza Blue, the zeroes and ones pay tribute to the binary digit or "bit." Like the bases that make up DNA, bits encode information. They are the building block of computing, and advances in computing have paved the way for advances in genetic modification.

# LA MODIFICACIÓN GENÉTICA Y LAS SEMILLAS DE LA CREATIVIDAD



El arte de Meilahn ha sido fuertemente influenciado por sus raíces como agricultor. De particular interés para él es la modificación genética del maíz y su influencia en la evolución de la agricultura en las Américas. Meilahn comenzó a plantar semillas modificadas genéticamente en su finca en la década de 1990. Con el tiempo, comenzó a incorporar referencias a la modificación genética en su arte.

En Primordial Shift, cada mazorca de maíz está etiquetada con un identificador genético. Los identificadores genéticos son códigos únicos asignados a plantas modificadas genéticamente que han sido aprobadas para uso comercial.

En Bonanza Blue, los ceros y unos rinden tributo al dígito binario o "bit". Al igual que las bases que componen el ADN, los bits codifican información. Son la piedra angular de la informática, y los avances en la informática han allanado el camino para los avances en la modificación genética.



Encouraged by these successes, we hope that other venues will also host PRIMORDIAL SHIFT. And we are working toward that end.

David J. Wagner, Ph.D.  
Curator/Tour Director

Mick Meilahn: *"I recognize and thank the indigenous peoples of the Americas for their contributions to agriculture; particularly, the birth of corn. Some ten thousand years ago in Mexico, two grasses, Teosinte and Zea Mays, were cross-pollinated. Since the time when communal survival depended on development of the terrace method of farming, the corn plant has gone through staggering change and growth. . . . Over eons of time, corn was as sacred to Native Americans as the cross was to Christianity. . . . [But] in the last 25 years, agriculture and science have advanced exponentially faster than social acceptability. . . . For me, the challenge is whether we can feed a billion more humans on a shrinking planet and at what price."*



Students visiting PRIMORDIAL SHIFT at The Health Museum, September 2022

Video about the Production of PRIMORDIAL SHIFT: [youtube.com/watch?v=rzAfboceaMo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=rzAfboceaMo)

Video of Mick Meilahn Talking About PRIMORDIAL SHIFT:  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Kmy\\_7t2vsh0](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Kmy_7t2vsh0)

Michael Meilahn Studios: [michael-meilahn.com/](https://michael-meilahn.com/)

The Health Museum Primordial Shift Webpage: [thehealthmuseum.org/content-page/primordial-shift-science-and-culture-genetic-modification](https://thehealthmuseum.org/content-page/primordial-shift-science-and-culture-genetic-modification)

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT II Exhibition Webpage:  
[davidjwagnerllc.com/Environmental\\_Impact-Sequel.html](https://davidjwagnerllc.com/Environmental_Impact-Sequel.html)



Mick Meilahn recently served as the President of The Board of Directors of the Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass in Neenah, Wisconsin. He has taught at Penland School of Craft in North Carolina and The Archie Bray Foundation in Montana. His work has been exhibited in the traveling museum exhibitions, Wisconsin's Glass Masters and Environmental Impact, produced by David J. Wagner, L.L.C., the annual Smithsonian Craft Show, and at The Corning Museum of Glass, which has also featured the artist's work in its New Glass Review for over four decades.

**Current PRIMORDIAL SHIFT Tour:**

**April 28 - August 21, 2022**

Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass  
165 N. Park Avenue, Neenah, WI  
920-751-4658, [www.bmmglass.com](http://www.bmmglass.com)

**September 24, 2022 – May 29, 2023**

The John P. McGovern Museum of Health & Medical Science  
1515 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX  
713-521-1515, [www.thehealthmusuem.org](http://www.thehealthmusuem.org)

The PRIMORDIAL SHIFT Museum Tour is Produced by David J. Wagner, L.L.C.,  
The exhibition is available for display at other art, cultural, and scientific institutions.

**For further information, or to book PRIMORDIAL SHIFT, Contact:**

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David J. Wagner, Ph.D., Curator/Tour Director

Dancing Star Foundation Research Fellow; Recipient, SKBF Black-Parkman Award of Art Industry Leadership; Member, American Alliance of Museums; International Council of Museums



The installation of PRIMORDIAL SHIFT and BONANZA BLUE at The Health Museum in Houston is strategically located adjacent to the museum's Science Lab.

