

HYPERALLERGIC

A Cornstalk Grows in Soho

Louis Bury

September 21, 2025

More than an artistic experiment in food production, Emily Janowick's latest work is a droll and earnest meditation on family alienation.



Installation view of Emily Janowick, "*Obsession*" (2025) (all photos Louis Bury/Hyperallergic)

The three rows of cornstalks currently growing in Kate Werble Gallery convey both heartache and hope, though not for reasons you might expect. Since the summer, artist Emily Janowick has been growing dozens of such plants within orange Home Depot buckets: first while in residency at Storm King Art Center, then in her tiny Queens backyard. At the gallery, the buckets are arranged on long wooden plinths based on their stalks' heights, as if the plants were schoolchildren lined up in size order. The installation is titled "*Obsession*" (2025), after the variety of corn being grown, which is the first clue that it's something other than an artistic experiment in food production.

The second is the bright yellow zine published to accompany the exhibition. It contains a laconic "Corn Diary," in which the artist, born and raised in Kentucky, reflects on both sides of her ancestry: sharecroppers and moonshiners who grew and relied upon corn, respectively. A Joan Didion quote about the difficulty of returning home serves as the diary's epigraph. Several grainy photographs document Janowick's artistic process, including an image of the "weeds growing sequentially in a row in a sidewalk crack" that inspired the cornstalks' size order arrangement in the gallery.



Installation view of Emily Janowick, *"Obsession"* (2025)

The exhibition's conceit — that growing corn might lessen the artist's familial alienation — is at once droll and earnest. Janowick peppers her work with whimsy, from the goofiness of the orange buckets to the zine photograph of two plants wearing seatbelts while being transported in her car. Yet the care she invests in the process is dead serious. The diary recounts not only her makeshift agricultural labor but also her psychic investment in its outcomes. She asks her father about his family history, which warms him to the project. She frets that she's not doing enough to cultivate the corn properly, and has multiple dreams in which the plants die before the show's opening.

The plants were alive and well when I visited early in the exhibition's run. To my surprise, tiny ears of corn were budding on the more developed stalks. The air was warm and sticky; the lights bright and white. The improbability, even absurdity, of Janowick's agricultural endeavor feels integral to the installation's aesthetic success. The artist knows that *"Obsession"* can't singlehandedly mend familial or cultural rifts. Instead, she's trying to experience those rifts from another perspective — not to build metaphorical bridges but to arrive at something like acceptance. The effort creates a small space for hope, even if, like weeds in a sidewalk crack, its flourishing has been hard earned, its continued viability tenuous.



Detail of Emily Janowick, *"Obsession"* (2025)



Detail of Emily Janowick, "Obsession" (2025)



Installation view of Emily Janowick, "Obsession" (2025)

Emily Janowick continues at Kate Werble Gallery (474 Broadway, Third Floor, Soho, Manhattan) through October 11. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

Louis Bury is an art writer, author of *The Way Things Go* and *Exercises in Criticism*, and Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.