

brandon ballengée

BRANDON BALLENGÉE grew up in central Ohio surrounded by cornfields and twenty five acres of woods. "As a kid I was out every day catching things and studying them." He started to selectively breed certain species of fish and amphibians. Ballengée is a bit of an academic hybrid himself. Despite his proclivity for science, he pursued degrees in art and art history. "I thought if I went with art, I could do both," he says.

Ballengée's research drew him to the amphibian version of canaries in a coal mine. "Frogs are extremely sensitive environmental indicators because they exist as aquatic-born embryos and land-based organisms in a single lifetime. They are like sponges, absorbing anything that comes into contact with their sensitive membrane. Changes to the environment and pollutants are expressed in deformities, declines and other anomalies in amphibians." His ongoing amphibian breeding project involves selectively breeding a type of African frog back to its original, pre-domesticated phenotype. Ballengée calls it "sculpting through breeding."

"Instead of using a chisel to carve stone, I am using scientific techniques to sculpt a species back. It's a very plastic phenotype. I have changed the way they look as well as their behaviors." But Ballengée is not trying to play God; he combines art and science almost exclusively for the sake of education and to increase our appreciation of the natural world. When people enter the exhibit, they are greeted by hundreds of curious, tiny frogs in a succession of tanks at various stages of domestication. "The human-to-frog interaction is fun to watch. The frogs swim right up to the glass. They are adorable living sculptures. There is always a visual component to my installations that is attempting

to seduce the viewers, so they leave inspired to learn more."

Ballengée sees his work as "contemporary storytelling," an extension of the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School, artists who used their medium to describe how perceptions of the environment were changing in their day. At times he leans further toward the artistic realm and at times more to the didactic and scientific, as with his multilingual text panels explaining which fish are sustainable and which to avoid at the fish market.

What started out as artistic curiosity turned into a "mind-boggling" research project. Exploring the fish markets in Queens, New York, he encountered hundreds of species of aquatic organisms from all over the globe. "Live fish from Vietnam, sharks from New Zealand . . . every day there would be something new. It's like a dead zoo," he says. "It can be very emotional, especially when you see a 40-square-foot tray of orange roughy, each only a couple inches long, and you realize that they are the young of the year. Unless something changes, they are the last of their kind . . . being sold for 99 cents a pound. These beautiful creatures have been sculpted by evolution for tens of thousands—in some cases millions—of years. They are incredible expressions of this world and the environment we live in." Ballengée spent a year cataloguing fish market species for the Queens Museum of Art and generating awareness campaigns that will be translated into a multilingual online database. "If we make information available, it will make a huge difference."

