

# The Soil Of Common Ground

BY JHERI ST. JAMES

At 7:00 a.m. on September 11, 2001, Gary Simpson was awakened by a call from a friend asking him to turn on the television. As he watched the twin towers fall, he contemplated if there were any one thing that all humans share, regardless of geography, politics, religion, economy, and skin color. He realized it was living on the earth.

With this in mind, he developed a conceptual art project, *Common Ground 191*, which would collect "ground" from each of the 192 (Serbia and Montenegro divided in 2006) member states of the United Nations.

"The foundation of my concept as a whole is composed, like the earth itself, of visible masses floating off tectonic plates, converging and diverging," Simpson explained. "The magma on which they all rest is common ground. The individual pieces will reflect the identity of each nation, but the implication of the whole is that there is an underlying unity, just as plate boundaries don't always correspond to continents, so too are national boundaries an artifact of human history. And just as the geography of the earth has changed and is changing through plate tectonics, this project expresses for me the relentlessness of change and the unifying wisdom of the process."

At the time, Simpson did not know what a rigorous adventure his undertaking would be, but the challenges soon became clear.

Each sample had to be sterilized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and each shipment carefully documented for certification of authenticity. Simpson was issued a license from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control to import soil from embargoed Cuba, Myanmar (Burma), Iran, Sudan, and North Korea.

Hundreds of collectors—personnel from 62

U.S. embassies, Sister City members, Doreen Virtue's global angel network (15 collections), many charitable groups, Peace Corps workers, armchair travelers, and nomads—helped garner 191 samples of our earthly dirt, with only North Korea remaining. The first U.S. sample came from the White House grounds, collected on the day of President Obama's inauguration.

Once Simpson receives the last sample, he will mix all the soils of our planet and build 196 panels, each measuring 42 inches by 42 inches. When combined, these panels will result in an installation 50 feet by 50 feet, a fresco art statement memorializing what all humans have in common—life's footprints on the soil of our planet. This should begin in early 2011.

Journal entries at [commonground191.com](http://commonground191.com) narrate the stories of each collector and site. Every individual and earth sample is unique and cherished: orange sand from Qatar, black loam from Bulgaria, African soils from slave-trading or pirate ports, earth from an Iraqi airfield collected anonymously during the war,

and a heartfelt sample from Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was jailed.

Simpson's interim art production includes a number of fresco pieces. One 2006 study included the first 38 countries' soils on 14 42-inch-square panels. Another, called the "Disparity Series," incorporated CIA statistics for each country. A Christmas ornament, commissioned in 2008 for the White House, used the soil amassed to date; 180 nations.

Common ground is shared on many levels, periodicals and "art dirt" being only two. This publication, Gary Simpson's vision, and the myriad "common ground" sites and activities listed on the Web must eventually bring people together on this land called earth and this earth called soil—this soil that hosts the panoramic theater of human experience. ♣

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