

B E N R U B I G A L L E R Y

Mel Frank – *When We Were Criminals*
Benrubi Projects, Woodstock, NY



Benrubi Gallery is pleased to present *When We Were Criminals*, the gallery's second solo exhibition from **Mel Frank**. Frank, the pseudonym of James J. Goodwin, is the author of three books on cannabis cultivation which have sold more than one million copies. His *Marijuana Grower's Guide Deluxe* was the first serious manual on cannabis cultivation, and has been called by the New York Times "as accessible a study at this high level of seriousness as one is likely to find."

In addition to growing and instructing others on how to grow, Frank has also been documenting the process visually for more than forty years. *When We Were Criminals* features images from the late 1970s and early 1980s, when marijuana use was popular but far less acceptable than it is today. His images are playful and sometimes sly without being coy, seductive and fecund and sometimes almost nerdy. In one image, a grower's face is concealed behind an iconic digitate leaf; in another, a grower seems to be disappearing into a dense stand of fully-grown plants. The hidden identities are no doubt a reflection of the plant's illegality, yet they can't help but recall a newly self-aware Adam and Eve in Eden, hiding behind their fig leaves.

Yet there's no shame here. Frank's images are purely celebratory, from the conviviality of a passed joint to a circle of harvesters manicuring buds like a family shucking corn or shelling peas. Details of leaves and flowers delight in the subtle shades of gray and purple amid the textured green, while even more extreme closeups of resin glands have the hallucinatory quality of altered states of consciousness. The overall impact of these images is of harmonious collective activity, cautious but celebratory, and years ahead of its time. As the stigma falls away from cannabis usage and the emphasis shifts from recreation to wellness, Frank's images acquire new significance in movement to legalize marijuana in the Northeast and the rest of the country.

Significant for this New York exhibition, most of his field shots were taken within an hour's drive from Manhattan. During that time, New York authorities were still unaware of what the state's fertile fields were yielding, unlike in California where helicopters scoured mountainsides, and the DEA searched the countryside looking for cannabis grows.

It's been said that if you've ever consumed marijuana the plant you imbibed probably has its origins in the horticulture of Frank and his colleagues in the 1970s. *When We Were Criminals* gives a visible narrative to that evolution.

Mel Frank is the pen name of James J. Goodwin (b. 1944). He served as a shipboard electronics technician in the US Navy from 1963 to 1967 and began growing cannabis in 1968 in his West 78th Street apartment. He received his BS in biology from CCNY in 1975. From his first cannabis growing article published in Rolling Stone's NY Flyer in 1971 through publications of photographs and critical texts in magazines, beginning with High Times and currently with Cannabis Business Times, to his recent career as lecturer and consultant for the burgeoning marijuana industry, Frank has earned the moniker "godfather of marijuana growers." His life's work in the field has been honored by two industry Lifetime Achievement awards. His work in photography is as consequential as has been his instruction: curious, careful, comprehensive, and charming.

For press and other inquiries, please email: info@benrubigallery.com

Gallery hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 12pm - 6pm

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