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Flora Fantastic: Eco-Critical Contemporary Botanical Art

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Working from global perspectives of Europe, the United States, South-East Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean this exhibition considers indigenous and imported plants as active agents in colonial history, through the lens of visual culture both past and present. Topics that will be addressed include subjects that pertain to nature as well as humans, including the economics of plants, indigenous and Western medicine, imperial and local state-supported science, plant and human migration, bio-contact zones, nationalism, as well as plant diplomacy in the modern period.

"Flora Fantastic" provides an unexpected perspective on questions researched both within academic and art discourse, based on unique stories in the history of colonial botany, and highlighting versatile artistic forms that highlight complex relationships between East, West, and South in the 20th century and how those ramifications manifest in the present-day. If the traditional representation of plants has worked as a tool for imperial worldviews, how do contemporary artistic tools offer us strategies for resistance while making visible structures and patterns of oppression that have been historically elided?

The artists we selected to represent and engage with these topics have been chosen based on their deep dedication and highly compelling work, which raises intriguing questions regarding entangled histories which are not only about this national context or another colonial past.

The first artist explores a wide range of art mediums with an interdisciplinary approach and focuses on the discourse of food. Through food, she intends to scrutinize power, social and economic inequality in this world. In 2015 she initiated Bakudapan, a food study group with colleagues from different disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy. With Bakudapan she has researched food within the socio-political and cultural context. The second artist explores the spatial and pictorial conditions of history and memory, focusing on blind spots of representation and forms of haunting. Orlow brings different image-regimes and narrative modes into correspondence, looking to the botanical world as a stage for politics at large through film, photography, installation, and sound. The third artist's art is best characterized as a dialogue between urban society and the natural world, contextualizing humanity's constantly evolving accord with its natural vessel. In a salvo of color, the distinction between plant, animal, and human is broken, leaving only understanding. The fourth artist addresses issues of collective memory and forgetting, and the memorial uses of public space, she often searches for ways to physically and symbolically intervene in the environments in focus. Her recent films challenge questions of colonialism, gender representations, and botanical perspective towards both femininity and

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belonging. Her works poignantly reflect on the difficulties of entangled histories and the relationships between “perpetrators” and “victims”.

While botany has received little systematic attention within art history, its visibility and significance have grown concerning the threats of environmental exploitation and destruction. By engaging contemporary artists’ visual and political engagement with botanical legacies and environmental conditions globally and highlighting theoretical, political, and cultural developments—this book offers a significant contribution to the intersecting fields of art history, botany, visual culture.

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