

apexart

2016-17 Unsolicited Program Proposal

Proposal Submitted by:

Clelia Coussonnet

from Aix en Provence, France

Botany Under Influence

The exhibition "Botany under Influence" investigates the economic and diplomatic implications of nature's uses and exchange flows. In the colonial era, for instance, Western powers built their wealth looting human and natural resources; systematically appropriating or exporting workforce, plants and minerals. As an aftereffect, control over flora and seeds has become a symbol of national, political and food sovereignties.

Exploitation

In "Herbarium of Artificial Plants" (2001–ongoing), Alberto Baraya (Colombia) collects and classifies synthetic specimens (plastic, cloth, paper) found following the ancient routes of colonial scientific or naturalist expeditions (17-19th centuries). In this parodic re-enactment – from the Americas to Asia or Australia – he investigates the economic and political agendas lying behind the inventory and categorization of the colonies' indigenous flora. Baraya denounces how those missions' botanical plundering opened the way to territorial domination and requisition. Presented as photographs, his fictitious flowers reflect the constructed nature of colonial taxonomy and its dangers.

Likewise, Joscelyn Gardner (Barbados) plays on natural history illustrations' aesthetics in "Creole Portraits III" (2009-2011). Grounded in Caribbean colonial archives (diaries, abolitionist publications, plantation records), she addresses gaps in the history of slavery such as the masters' sexual abuses on women. Despite abortion being prohibited, female slaves secretly used natural abortifacients. If the 'miscarriage' was discovered, they were whipped and had to wear iron collars. Gardner intertwines depictions of the tropical plants swallowed with torture tools and elaborate feminine African hairstyles. She pays homage to those anonymous slaves 'naming' them in her prints' titles.

Remembrance

Another tribute is "Flowers for Africa" (2011-ongoing), celebrating African countries' liberation struggles and access to sovereignty. Reproducing floral decorations found in archival photographs of those independences' formalisations, Kapwani Kiwanga (Canada) comments on postcolonial transitions. The recreated arrangements revive the solemn historical testimonies they once bore. Inspired by official ceremonies embodying the passing of power, she hints at the everlasting decorum and staging of diplomatic negotiations. As her fresh bouquets sculptures naturally wither during the show, Kiwanga also questions us on what we choose to commemorate and why.

Pia Röncke (Denmark) explores herbariums' documentary potential to record disappearances and moderate loss. In the context of a war-torn Syria, the transfer for safeguarding of food crops from Aleppo's grains' bank to Svalbard Global Seed Vault inspired Röncke's multimedia installation "The Pages of Day and Night" (2015). She mixes photogravures of plant samples collected during the 1760s Danish Arabia Expedition to Egypt and Syria; Syrian species recently sent to Norway; video; press clippings and poetry books (Adonis and Tomas Tranströmer).

The artists in "Botany under Influence" share counter official histories around flora, drowning us in an abundance of 'strange flowers.' Despite the plants' beauty, our unease reminds us that what is at stake with nature's circulation routes goes beyond relations of power: it is about our origins, memories and survival, as embodied in the performance "The Good Seed" by Ninar Esber (Lebanon). The artist relentlessly sorts and assembles corn kernel by colour and quality, echoing the widespread global rejection of difference, where any 'alien' element gets marginalised.