

A Botanical Conversation

Sept. 12 -Dec. 14, 2024

With works by Haseeb Ahmed, Sean Crossley, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, Ella Littwitz, Isadora Neves Marques, Alex Reynolds, Sheida Soleimani, Julius von Bismarck, Antwoine Washington.

“The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history”

Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature”, 1980

The exhibition takes its name from an installation by **Mehdi-Georges Lahlou**, which was commissioned by SPACES in Cleveland, Ohio. The work consists of a wall painting and a four channel video which was shot at the Cleveland Botanical Gardens. The painting, a detail of a microscopic view of a palm tree, challenges easy identification, stretching into a reflection on the interconnectedness of global ecosystems, and the constant change, loss, and growth which they endure under the strain of human activity. The videos engage local residents in theatrical monologues, exploring patterns where plant life provides parallels to the human experience and is used to address socio-cultural situations. These four videos open the door to the conversations which other works in the exhibition explore.

In his 1987 essay “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race”, the anthropologist Jared Diamond posits that it was not humans that domesticated nature, but rather the other way around; Diamond illustrates how the advent of agriculture demanded a new organization of space, time, and labor, creating a structure which led to the inequalities and excesses of our current reality. **Sean Crossley’s** painting *Cereal Space* begins with an electro-microscopic image of a wheat grain, and resembles an image of vast natural space, which is unreasonably organized as it spreads across ten panels. Separated, the panels evoke the formats of 19th century decorative painting, which were tailor-made for the spaces between doors and wall corners in apartments. When lined up side by side, their totality produces an image resembling a landscape, or a slice in the earth’s crust. This is a sedimentary painting of terrestrial materials: oils from plant seeds, ground earth, and metal pigments, layered upon a gesso base, itself a petrochemical product distilled from thousands of years of compressed organic matter. The brushstrokes, textures, layers, and corrections are perhaps a diagram of the broader temporal scale of how the materials came to be, and illuminate the somewhat beautiful complicity between entropy and commerce.

Isadora Neves Marques’ 2017 video, *Linnaeus and the Terminator Seed*, asks whether there is a deterministic, evolutionary line connecting modern botany to contemporary transgenics. The short film-essay gathers botanical drawings by European naturalists in Latin America and Southeast Asia, plant genome representations, UN contracts and documents about transgenic seeds, as well as modern depictions of the reproductive systems of flowers and humans; it explores the sexual imaginary of botanists such as Carl Linnaeus, to consider the post-natural conditions governing current biotechnology, the colonial management of reproduction, as well the representation and indexation of life forms both past and present. The soundtrack, writing, and editing is by Isadora Neves Marques, the narration by Simão Cayette and Syma Tariq, and the work was created with the kind support of the Berardo Museum Collection.

Haseeb Ahmed’s work *Anemophilous: Lovers of the Wind* depicts a perennial love affair between certain plants and the wind. The artwork is rendered on a scroll of high-grade Egyptian papyrus, which grew along the Nile and was fundamental for visual and linguistic development. The scroll is laced with date pollen, which is used as a supplement for virility, as a single male date palm can fertilize 300 female palms, thus populating the harsh Western Egyptian desert. On the papyrus, the Face of the Wind discovered by Ahmed joins the god Shu’s ostrich feather, which controls the flow of all air. These ancient thought figures and plants are swept up with contemporary representations of weather patterns into a turbulent and anachronistic vortex. Ahmed creates scrolls to offer a non-linear mode of comprehension, one much needed to understand our world today.

In **Alex Reynolds’** sensual video poem, *Peel*. Two hands belonging to different bodies negotiate their movements in the almost erotic act of peeling an orange. In a shot which evokes the conventions of Baroque still life, this eminently tactile footage captures the conversation between the fingers and the fleshy orange body which, together, they struggle to separate. Reynolds plays with the conventions of performance and storytelling, along with the role of the spectator, challenging our perceptions beyond the screen and the world of images. This work has previously been shown at Okela in Bilbao, and at a solo show last year at CaixaForum Barcelona, curated by Sabel Gavaldon.

In his series of works *We Were All Naked* (2023), **Julius von Bismarck** embodies Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto with an intervention that illustrates certain impacts of nature’s collision with technology. Created in Madagascar, one of the earth’s biodiversity hotspots, the artist wraps living plants in plastic and vacuum-seals them. They are preserved in their present state and inevitably die, as the shiny plastic literally reflects our present inability to preserve our own environment. The machine-milled aluminum frames offer a view of land deprived of air and needing a hose to breath, an uncanny, almost alien landscape in the

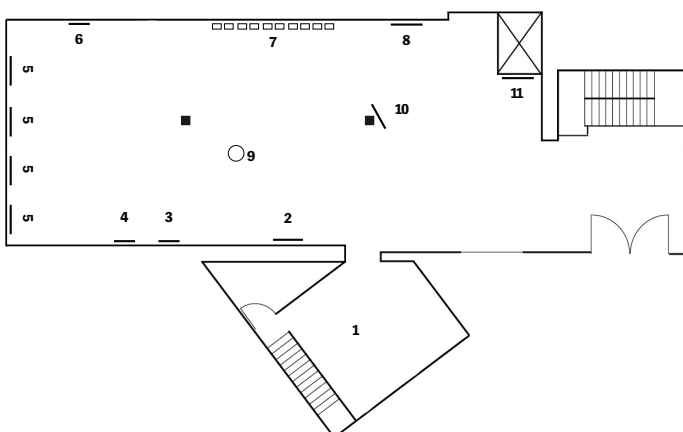
context of a depopulated scene which can hardly be surmised. The images confront us with the fact that it is often impossible for the non-human world to adapt quickly enough to survive their changing environment, as it is modified by human behavior. Von Bismarck's other contribution to the exhibition borrows its name from a well-known children's song, and as in the song, the beauty of nature seems to be the main theme. However, in contrast to the childhood practice of pressing flowers between the pages of a book or creating herbaria to classify and archive vegetation, the work converts large-scale plants and small trees into almost two-dimensional forms. Suspended delicately in space, they become likenesses of themselves reminiscent of floral wallpaper or backdrops. The plants are not mere images of floral beauty. They also allude to the brutality inherent in the Western conception of nature. Scaled up in size, the violence of the works' production becomes impossible to ignore. In an elaborate process, the plants are boiled and then robbed of their third dimension with the help of a 50-ton hydraulic press and press oven, and finally attached to a thin stainless-steel plate. The series consists exclusively of species not native to central Europe, whose names have been changed to suggest European heritage, an alteration which testifies to the appropriation of both nature and culture.

Ella Littwitz investigates political, social, and cultural landscapes by collecting and shifting specific elements connected to the land. Pivotal to her practice is the constant desire of humans to create sovereign ideologies by drawing limits, borders, and frontiers, sometimes even controlling nature and moving soil. Her works echo biblical and modern narratives, presenting us with diverse examples of transition, transfiguration, and the formation of political constructs through acts of belief. *The Promise* is a 1-1 copy of a symbolic Cypress tree, planted by Theodor Herzl on his only visit to Palestine in 1898. In 1915, this tree was burned in an act of Turkish nationalism, and eventually cut after failed rescue attempts. During the 1948 war, the stump was kept safe by soldiers and chauffeured in armored vehicles before being returned to its original location and placed in a cage. Littwitz spent years convincing authorities to replace the cage and managing to create a 3D scan during the time it took for them to do so. The work was commissioned by Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen for an eponymous solo exhibition in 2017, and created at Kunstgiesserei St. Gallen.

Sheida Soleimani's work *The Blind Owl* is part of her ongoing project *Ghostwriter*, in which she takes on the role of the ghostwriter to tell her family's stories of political persecution. The image nods to Sadegh Hedayat's eponymous literary work, which evades linear events to allow for open ended interpretations, dipping and diving into memory, fragmentation and magical realism. The photo also roots itself in the scent of orange blossom water, made from displaced sour oranges, which dangle before the bird's eyes. The fruit were grown from seeds her mother brought from her garden when she escaped Iran; the owl is one of thousands of birds which have come into Soleimani's care in the last five years. It came to her blind and ill, and had to be euthanized by the artist and her mother. The image captures a metaphorical burying of the owl in the garden which the exiled family can no longer visit, a frozen image in a complex tale of generational care, loss and absence. Works from the *Ghostwriter* project have been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Providence College Galleries and The Center for Contemporary Art (Cincinnati, USA-upcoming, 2025), and acquired by The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (NY, USA), The Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, USA) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, UK).

Antwoine Washington's painting is part of a series, which explores the unforgiving wilderness and history of the Great Dismal Swamp. This critical habitat for a wide variety of birds, animals, plants, and other living things, became a safe haven for runaway slaves before the American Civil War. Here, amidst the dense woods and murky waters, the humans found temporary solace. The swamp, both a sanctuary and a prison, literally symbolizes the complex terrain of freedom—where every step towards liberation was met with brutal resistance, and if a runaway was caught, their Achilles was viciously sliced to prevent them from running again.

This botanical conversation consists of diverse artistic inquiries into a wide range of ecosystems, from cypress to citrus, palm to papyrus, Egypt to Iran to Israel, and carried by the wind all around the world. These various explorations of nature generate new narratives, and plant seeds for rethinking our social histories and futures, especially as they relate to sex, politics, medicine, and notions of home.



- 1 Isadora Neves Marques, *Linnaeus and the Terminator Seed*, 2017
- 2 Julius von Bismarck, *We Were All Naked (Elephant Ear)*, 2023
- 3 Sheida Soleimani, *The Blind Owl*, 2023
- 4 Julius von Bismarck, *I like the bwers (Ferocactus stainesii)*, 2023
- 5 Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *A Botanical Conversation*, 2024
- 6 Antwoine Washington, *Achilles' Wound: Shackled Freedom in the Dismal Swamp*, 2023
- 7 Sean Crossley, *Cereal Space*, 2022
- 8 Haseeb Ahmed, *Anemophilous: Lovers of the Wind*, 2024
- 9 Ella Littwitz, *The Promise*, 2019
- 10 Alex Reynolds, *Peel*, 2022
- 11 Julius von Bismarck, *I like the bwers (Opuntia Vigas Indira)*, 2023



Learn more about the artworks