

Liz Wells

What Can Art Do? Curator's Essay for Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature

Seeds matter! Plants can survive without humans, but we cannot survive without plants. Environmental concerns are not new, but have been foregrounded in recent years by the threat of extreme global warming and by evidence of reduction in biodiversity.

Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature, concerns ecology, politics and aesthetics. Five photographers explore seeds and sustainability, woodlands and wellbeing. *Seedscapes* highlights ways in which art can contribute to addressing contemporary concerns, revealing and investigating scenarios without accusation or propaganda. Through showcasing work by artists who variously engage with seeds and woodlands, the exhibition fosters awareness of sustainability issues, particularly, seed security and biodiversity for the future.

As a writer and critic working within the cultural field, I am completely relaxed responding to artworks or discussing projects with artists. I first heard about Chrystel Lebas' involvement with the Salisbury botanical archive some years ago when selecting work for another show. She had contact prints from his glass slides pinned up in her studio. I ended up writing a catalogue essay for the publication that accompanied the first major exhibition of this project, so it seemed obvious to include a small extract from her extensive *Field Studies* enquiry. Aside from the photographic qualities and experiments in colour filters (for her *London Rocket* resurgence series), I learnt from the botanists and natural history collection curators with whom she had collaborated.

Planning the exhibition itself was fascinating, and enjoyable. Researching the broader context for *Seedscapes* was much more of a challenge. For me, the botany is daunting. I have no basic training in the field and little memory of whatever I learnt at school (clearly not very thoroughly!). I do have an allotment, but it does not follow that I understand seed and soil chemistry, let alone the economics of large-scale agricultural industries, although I do know that neo-colonialist pressures on less affluent countries to re-orient crops in order to satisfy Western taste have impacted on self-sufficiency in many regions. This project has led me to explore histories of photography and botany, and also to read accounts by botanists, often titles that simply caught my eye – for instance,

Lab Girl, by Hope Jahren, sub-titled 'A story of trees, science and love' (picked up rather randomly when visiting the Eden Project in Cornwall a couple of years ago).

Nor had I considered questions of seed security. In 2012 Heidi Morstang told me that she had permission (from the Norwegian Government) to visit the Global Seed Vault that had opened in 2008 in Svalbard, 78° North, an opportunity that led to her filming *Prosperous Mountain*. This was when I first learnt that world leaders had agreed to create a reserve collection for seed security purposes, whether in response to climate issues, conflict, or other events. The first emergency extraction of seeds from the bank was by Syria, in 2015; by 2017, Syrian agriculturalists had regenerated crops and returned duplicate seeds into the cold storage at Svalbard. Whether and how the recent pandemic will have impacted or eradicated key crops in some areas of the world remains to be seen, but if so, it is to be hoped that sample seeds have been deposited at the Vault.

This group exhibition emerged from a chance encounter. Given my interest in environmental issues from socio-political and photo-media perspectives, in 2016 I made a point of going to Fotofest in Houston, Texas, for which the theme that year was *Changing Circumstances: Looking at the Future of the Planet*. Extracts from Dornith Doherty's ambitious project, *Archiving Eden*, were included. Pippa Oldfield, Head of Programme at Impressions Gallery, was there at the same time. We discussed *Archiving Eden* with its carefully considered address to aesthetics and to what new technologies can facilitate in terms of making visible that which we would not normally be able to perceive. We also noted that many of the artists exploring detailed botanical questions are women. An idea had been seeded!

As curator, once the theme was agreed, there was the pleasurable task of seeking artists and work for inclusion. Nowadays, the internet complements the 'ear to the ground' and 'word of mouth' methods that curators have used over the years. The second challenge was to determine a combination of artworks that together would form a substantial and varied exhibition. It emerged that Heidi Morstang and Liz Orton had collected further materials that they wished to develop as projects; Seedscapes offered a context and deadline for doing so. Thus, we are able to include some photographic works made specifically for the exhibition.

I had not previously worked with Liz Orton, and I no longer remember how I heard about her residency at Kew. I had also never actually worked with Sant Khalsa, although I had met her and was aware of her environmental activism. The notion of 'growing air' in order to counteract pollution in the Los Angeles region caught my interest. Reforestation is a material means of combatting the adverse effects of logging, but she transforms the experience into poetic 3-dimensional photo-sculptures that, in the context of this exhibition, contrast effectively with the 2-dimensionality of photographs and flat video screens. Along with the vitrines used to display Dornith Doherty's images of labs and vaults, and Liz Orton's *Herbarium of Extinction*, a unique artist's concertina book, Sant Khalsa's *Trees and Seedlings* series contributes to the physicality of the experience of encountering work within the gallery context.

Photography transcends straight documentation, pointing to phenomena and circumstances that should concern us whilst drawing on the authority of visual evidence. Achieving a balance between aesthetic integrity and socio-ecological values, between art and activism, is a challenge for artists. This links to a question that fuels much of

my research and writing, namely, what can art do? Art is not polemical: rather it can alert us to issues through informing, engaging and extending perceptions, through suggesting different ways of seeing. Art in the context of a gallery is at its best when it is investigative and revelatory, not accusatory and not propagandist. Environmental art offers information, invokes natural ecologies, or imbalances, offers space for contemplation and suggests issues that beg address. As exhibition curator, my role is to use the gallery as a space to articulate their investigations and reflections, in *Seedscapes*, a set of dialogues on seed security, bio-diversity and wellbeing. Through extensive research including collaborating with botanists, ecologists and conservationists, consideration of aesthetic strategies, and ethical integrity in terms of their approaches to projects, each artist makes a significant contribution.

Aside from a small selection from *Archiving Eden* included in a group show in Liverpool in 2011, Dornith Doherty's extensive work investigating environmental issues has not been seen in Britain. Sant Khalsa's activist art has never previously been shown in the UK. So, I am very pleased that, with extensive support from Impressions Gallery, and particularly from Pippa Oldfield, Head of Programme, to be able to bring their work to new audiences. As already mentioned, for Heidi Morstang and Liz Orton, *Seedscapes* offered a context and deadline for creating new works from materials previously collected (at Svalbard and at Kew, respectively). For Chrystel Lebas it is a further opportunity to show an extract from her extensive *Field Studies*.

The works in the exhibition are evocative, beautiful and, at the same time, thought-provoking. Images are memorable; they have the power to influence ways in which we see, value and make sense of our world of experience. This is one of the things that art can do.

Liz Wells, 2020

Credits

This essay was commissioned to accompany the exhibition *Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature*, held at Impressions Gallery from 2 September to 12 December 2020 and touring to RAMM (Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery), Exeter, and The Dick Institute, Kilmarnock, in 2021.

Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature is curated by Liz Wells, with creative producer Pippa Oldfield. An Impressions Gallery touring exhibition in association with the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter City Council and The Dick Institute, Kilmarnock, East Ayrshire.

Please cite this essay as Wells, Liz (2020) 'What Art Can Do: Curator's Essay for *Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature*', Bradford: Impressions Gallery

Notes

1. Chrystel Lebas, *Field Studies: Walking through Landscapes and Archives*. Amsterdam: Fw:Books, 2017. First solo exhibition, *Regarding Nature* at Huis Marseilles Museum for Photography, Amsterdam, December 2017 – March 2018. The project retraces the steps of British botanist, Sir Edward James Salisbury (1886 – 1978).

2. Hope Jahren, *Lab Girl. A Story of Trees, Science and Love*. London: Fleet, 2016.
3. See ICARDA films, 2015 and 2017 at <https://www.nordgen.org/en/global-seed-vault/seed-vault-videos>
4. Wendy Watriss, Steven Evans and Frederick Baldwin, *Changing Circumstances: Looking at the Future of the Planet*. Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing & Houston: Fotofest International, 2016
5. Dornith Doherty, *Archiving Eden*. Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2017
6. Extracts from *Archiving Eden* were included in *Confined: The Captive and Keeper in Contemporary Life*, a group show including seven photographers, curated by Sara-Jayne Parsons, at the Bluecoat, Liverpool, 2011.

About the curator

Liz Wells is one of the UK's foremost photography scholars, specialising in landscape and the environment. She has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Light Touch* (Baltimore Washington International Airport, 2014); *Futureland Now – John Kippin, Chris Wainwright* (Laing Gallery, Newcastle, 2012), *Sense of Place, European Landscape Photography* (BOZAR, Brussels, 2012); and *Landscapes of Exploration, British Art from Antarctica* (touring the UK 2012–2015). She is the author of *Land Matters, Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (2011), and has written numerous essays on photography and environment. She is series editor for *Photography, Place, Environment*, Bloomsbury Academic. Liz Wells is Professor Emeritus in Photographic Culture at University of Plymouth, and formerly convened the research group, *Land/Water and the Visual Arts*. In 2017, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

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