

Husk Corn. From the series *Archiving Eden* (2008–2017) © Dornith Doherty

Seeding change

Liz Wells introduces a new exhibition that explores how to future-proof Nature

Seeds matter. Without them, humanity cannot sustain itself. Yet given worldwide threats from global warming and pollution, biodiversity and seed sustainability are at risk. As a curator and academic who has spent many years investigating photography and the environment, I wanted to produce an exhibition exploring these urgent issues. *Seeds: Future-Proofing Nature* brings together five international artists, each of whom offers her own particular way of addressing this important topic.

Prosperous Mountain by Heidi Morstang takes us to Svalbard, the site of the Global Seed Vault, where duplicates of seeds from around the world are stored deep under the ice in what was once a mineshaft. Her contemplative video explores qualities of light and space in this remote archipelago area as well as noting marks



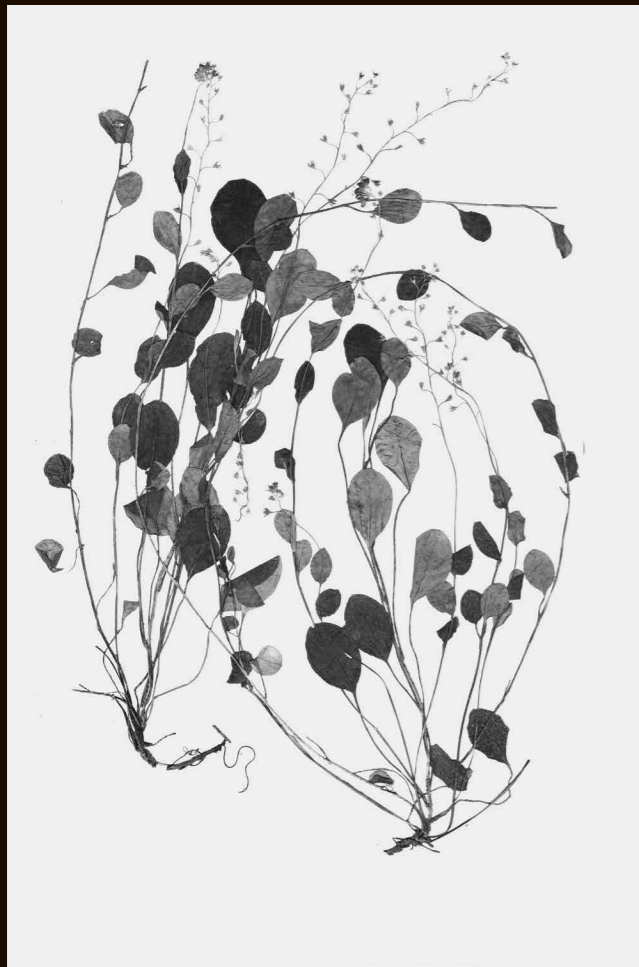
Untitled, from *Splitters and Lumpers*, 2012 © Liz Orton

of human presence as new seed deposits are flown in. She also portrays seeds from flora in a sheltered valley where plants grow despite the Arctic climate, using an electron microscope to reveal detail imperceptible to the human eye. These pictures depict shapes and textures, including extraordinary inner 'landscapes' more akin to extra-terrestrial images than to how we might imagine the insides of such tiny phenomena.

In *Archiving Eden*, Dornith Doherty brings together clusters of seeds in digitally fabricated collages based on X-rays. She produces these images as lenticular prints, a technical process that involves sandwiching two or more images and reproducing them using magnifying lenses. 'Husk Corn', for example, appears animated, the seeds gently dancing as we move towards them. Doherty also documented laboratory systems and

spaces unfamiliar to those other than the scientists and technicians who work there. She comments: "While photographing the seed banks, it became apparent to me that by saving seeds, individuals and institutions from around the world we're working together to ensure the survival of entire plant species, and, through these efforts, forming part of a heroic fight to preserve the biodiversity of life on Earth." In effect she is contributing to this fight through aesthetic means of encouraging interest in ecological issues.

An artist residency scheme allowed Liz Orton to access collections at Kew, where she became interested in specimens that had been donated but not catalogued. Her photographs reveal seeds, stems and leaves half-concealed in the packing materials in which they had arrived, maybe up to a century ago.



Top left: *Myosotis petiolata*, c 1866, New Zealand. Rare/nationally critical.
 Top right: *Tulipa billietiana* 1873, France. Critically endangered/almost extinct in the wild
 Bottom left: *Streptocarpus burtianus*, 1990, Nguru Mountains in Morogoro District, Tanzania. Critically endangered.

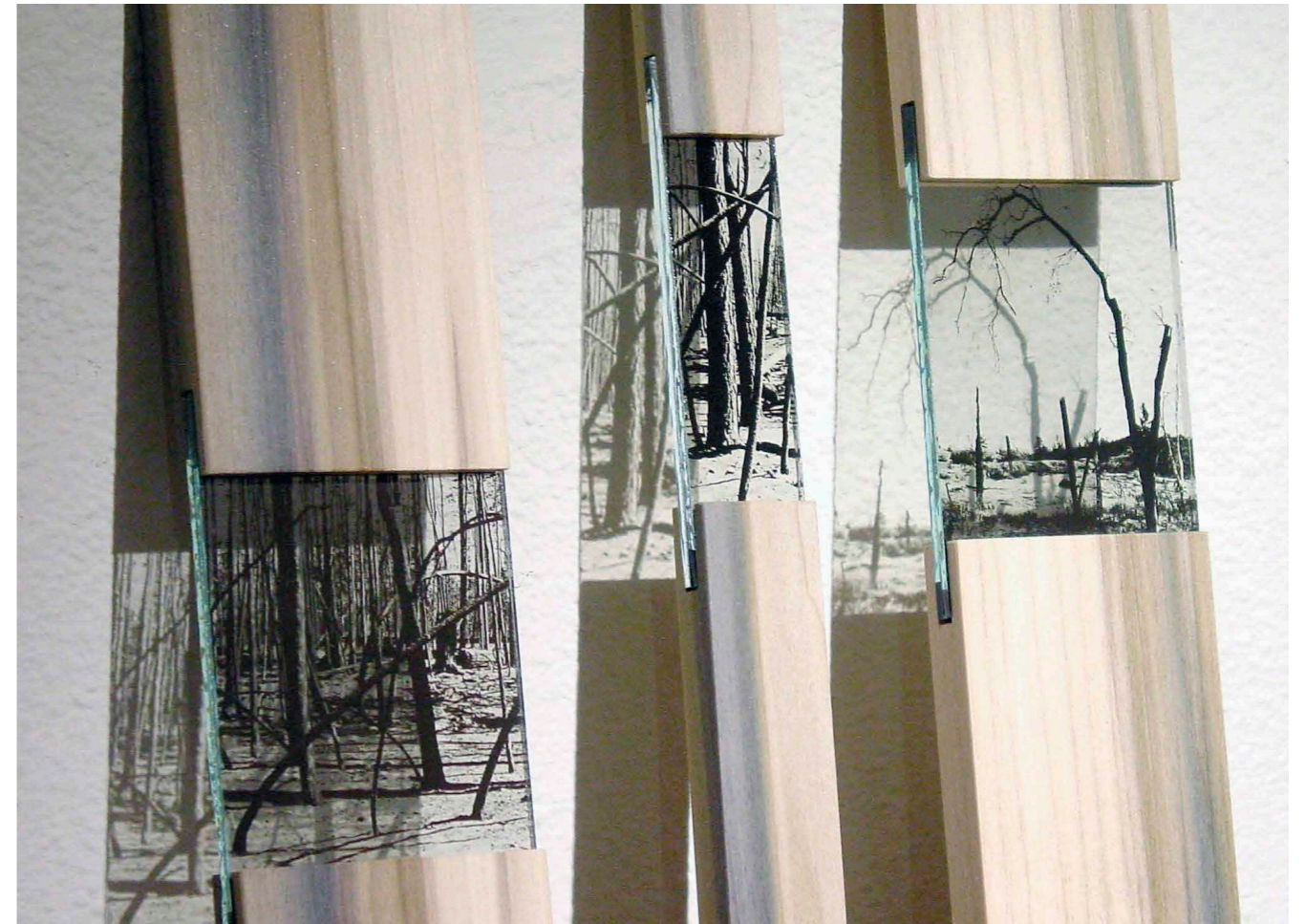
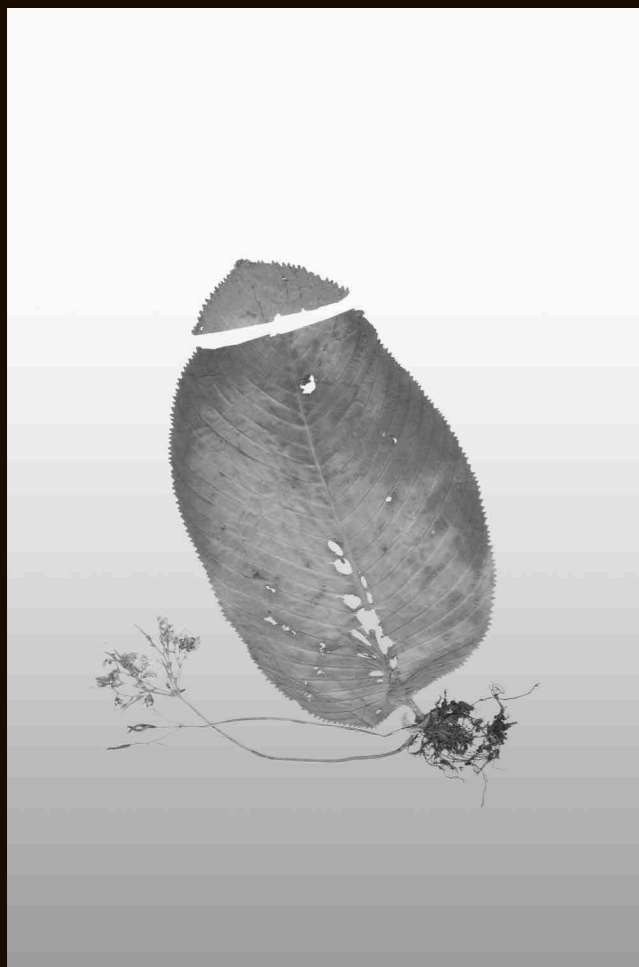
Herbarium of Extinction

Herbarium of Extinction started in 2014 when Liz Orton joined a search for the Ghost Orchid, a critically endangered plant that hasn't been seen in the UK since 2009. It is feared extinct, but with, potentially, 37 years between flowerings, it may just be dormant. This led to a broader inquiry: how do we know when something no longer exists?

Orton's images, originating as scientific scans of mounted plant specimens from Kew, have been digitally manipulated by the artist. She has erased the identifying data – a gesture that echoes the loss of species – which transforms the specimens into fossil-like impressions, hovering between existence and non-existence, presence and absence.

Orton is interested in how digitisation creates ruptures: between the specimen and the image; between digital and archival time; between originality and reproduction. She expands those ruptures through further acts of digitisation. These interventions have a potential parallel in the biological world: there may come a time when plants are resurrected from the genetic material of preserved specimens.

If photography is an act of preservation, *Herbarium of Extinction* is a way to evaluate the past in the context of the present. It urges us to think not only about what has been lost, but how we can affect what is to come.



Detail of installation of *Trees and Seedlings* (2000–2017) © Sant Khalsa

The title, *Splitters and Lumpers*, references classification systems distinguishing between emphasising the distinctiveness of each seed, and 'lumping' them within larger groups. *Herbarium of Extinction*, a concertina book made specially for this exhibition and based on digitised versions of botanical specimens, further explores the idea of collections. Orton describes it as "a reflection on evolution, loss and representation". It references plant specimens between 100 and 200 years old, from now-extinct species, reminding us that Nature is mutable; that no plant is safe.

Chrystel Lebas has a long-term interest in change in the landscape. For *Field Studies: Walking through Landscapes and Archives*, she retraced the footsteps of Edward James Salisbury, director at Kew from 1943 to 1957, who, as a young botanist and ecologist in the early 20th century, photographed in Scotland, Devon and Norfolk. The story behind the project is rather curious. The Salisbury collection of glass slides at the Natural History Museum was originally unidentified. Lebas made contact prints, eventually finding an image with Salisbury's signature. It turned out that his diaries corresponding to the slides were in the archives at Kew. Once they were reunited, it was possible to identify locations and photograph the vegetation as it is now, thereby offering visual evidence of botanical change.

In 1992, Sant Khalsa, an environmental artist and

activist based in California, planted about a thousand pine trees as part of a collaboration to reforest the Holcomb Valley, originally cleared by settlers during the Southern California gold rush in the 1860s. The aim was to improve air quality; hence her title, *Growing Air*. She embarked on an annual ritual of nurturing and planting new seedlings. Her companion series *Trees and Seedlings* features wooden sculptures that combine photographic images set in glass, lit to create ethereal shadows suggesting memories of vegetation lost. We are reminded of the ecological importance of woodlands and wildness for Nature and for our wellbeing.

My aim throughout *Seedscapes* has been to maintain a balance between aesthetics and socio-ecological values, between art and activism, between poetics and preaching. Images have the power to inform and influence us; my hope is that the exhibition will encourage visitors to engage more with ecological debates. R

Seedscapes: Future-proofing Nature is an Impressions Gallery touring exhibition curated by Liz Wells in association with the Dick Institute and Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery. It is on tour at the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock from 12 September to 12 December 2020, Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter from 6 February to 2 May 2021 and at Impressions Gallery, Bradford in Autumn 2021.