

Seedscaapes: Future-Proofing Nature Curator Liz Wells introduces the exhibition

Film transcript

Seeds matter! Plants can survive without humans, but we cannot survive without plants. Yet, given world-wide threats from conflict, global warming, pollution and – as we have recently been reminded - pandemics, biodiversity and seed sustainability is at risk. Pictures have the power to inform and influence us. So, 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.

Seedscaapes: Future-Proofing Nature brings together five international artists, each of whom brings her own particular artistic way of seeing to this important theme. My hope is that the exhibition encourages visitors to reflect on ecological ideas and issues whilst also enjoying fascinating photographs and moving imagery.

Prosperous Mountain by Norwegian artist, 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 mine shaft. Her contemplative video explores qualities of light and space in this remote archipelago area as well as noting marks 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, and uses an electron microscope to reveal detail imperceptible to the human eye. These pictures depict shapes and textures such as extraordinary inner ‘landscapes’ rather like extra-terrestrial pictures, that are not at all how we might imagine the insides of tiny seeds.

In *Archiving Eden*, American artist, 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 photographs and reproducing them using magnifying lenses. For example, in her picture of Husk Corn seedlings, the seeds appear animated, gently dancing as we move towards them. The artist also documented laboratory systems and spaces unfamiliar to those other than the scientists and technicians who work there. She remarks that it seemed to her that by saving seeds, individuals and institutions from around the world were working together to ensure the survival of entire plant species. This forms part of what she termed a ‘heroic fight to preserve the bio-diversity of life on earth’. We might add that she is contributing to this through using images to encourage interest in ecological issues.

An artist residency scheme allowed British artist, Liz Orton, to access seed collections at Kew Gardens in London, where she became particularly 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 arrived, maybe up to a century ago. The title, *Splitters and Lumpers*, references classification systems that distinguish between the distinctiveness of each seed, or ‘lump’ them within larger groups. A concertina book, *Herbarium of Extinction*, made specially for this exhibition, further explores the idea of collection. Based on digitized versions of botanical specimens, Orton defines it as ‘a reflection on evolution, loss and representation’. It

includes pictures of plant specimens that are between 100 and 200 years old from now extinct species. The work reminds us that nature is mutable; no plant is safe.

The exhibition falls loosely into two sections, the first, as I have described, primarily considers seeds and collections. The second section reflects on woodlands as a dynamic space subject to human intervention as well as to ecological shifts.

Having grown up in a rural area in France, Chrystel Lebas has a long-term interest in change in the landscape. For *Field Studies* she retraced the footsteps of Edward James Salisbury, Director at Kew 1943-57, who, as a young botanist and ecologist in the early twentieth century, had photographed in Scotland, Devon and Norfolk. The story behind the project is rather intriguing. The Salisbury collection of glass slides at the Natural History Museum had lain there unidentified. Lebas was invited to make contact prints, and eventually found an image with Salisbury's signature. It turned out that his diaries corresponding to the slides were in the archives at Kew. The images and the notes had been separated. Once re-united, it was possible to identify locations, retrace his journeys and re-photograph vegetation as it is now, thereby offering visual evidence of botanical change. Her pictures bring together his small original photographs and diary notes from a century ago with her larger, recent photographs of the same places, in some cases offering us 3 metre wide panoramic views.

In 1992, Sant Khalsa, an environmental artist and activist based in California, planted about 1000 pine trees as part of a collaboration to re-forest the Holcomb Valley, originally cleared by settlers during the 1860 Southern California gold rush. The aim was to improve air quality to counteract pollution in nearby urban areas, hence her project title, *Growing Air*. She embarked on an annual ritual of nurturing and planting new seedlings. Her companion series, *Trees and Seedlings*, features wooden sculptures with integrated photographic images set in glass and lit to create ethereal reflections suggesting memories of vegetation lost. We are reminded of the importance of woodlands and wildness for nature and for our wellbeing.

My aim throughout *Seedscaapes* has been to maintain a balance between aesthetics and socio-ecological values, between visual poetics and activism. I hope that visitors find the exhibition stimulating and enjoyable.

Liz Wells, 2020

Credits

This transcript accompanies the film commissioned to accompany the exhibition *Seedscaapes: 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.

Seedscaapes: 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.

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