PLANT LIFE
Exploring Vegetal Worlds
in the
Harn Museum Collection

Kenneth A. Kerslake (American, 1930–2007), Tree Dreams, c. 1975,
Screen print, Gift of Sarah A. and Kenneth A. Kerslake, 1992.7.55

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About “Plant Life”

Plants accompany every aspect of human life. We breathe in the oxygen they breathe out, we eat them (or we eat animals that eat them), we wear them, we make our dwellings and furnishings from them, we kill them when they are inconvenient to us. Eighty percent of the Earth’s biomass is composed of living plant material; living human bodies make up less than two-tenths of one percent. Ironically, the incomprehensible abundance of plants may explain our propensity to “plant blindness,” a term coined in 1998 by botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler to describe modern humans’ casual inattention to plants’ foundational roles in the biosphere and their influences on human culture. We are by habit a zoocentric species: when we think of nonhuman beings, they tend to be other animals; plants, if we notice them at all, are like so much window dressing. To grasp the phytocentric (plant-centered) reality of our lives, we must move far outside ourselves.

But art marks the unremarked. The 12 works featured in Plant Life represent a fraction of the Harn Museum of Art’s collection in which plants illuminate the museum’s rich ecosystem of plant-conscious art. Each of these works was chosen because something in it provokes critical reflection on the strange entanglements of humans and plants, and each is accompanied by a short descriptive caption; a QR code links to the original essays for each work. The essay reflects more deeply on the work, its historical and imaginative contexts, and the vegetal worlds that embrace, resist, and ultimately sustain human worlds.

In these works, plants are more than props: they are—openly or cryptically—also made present to us in their own way. They show that it is possible to see our photosynthetic kin as they really exist, in this exhibition, throughout the museum, and in the world outside: as vitally, expressively, insistently with us.

– Terry Harpold
Printmaker and educator Kenneth Kerslake (1930–2007) played an important role in the expansion of fine art printmaking in the American Southeast in the Post-WW II period. Born in Mount Vernon, New York, Kerslake trained in design at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute of Art, and in printmaking and painting at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), where he studied under intaglio printmaker Leo Chesney. After earning his MFA from the University of Illinois in

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1 For an overview of Kerslake’s distinguished career, see Myra Engelhardt, editor, Impressions of Forty Years: The Prints of Kenneth Kerslake, Harn Museum of Art, 1996.
1958, Kerslake was hired by the University of Florida School of Art and Art History to develop the School's new printmaking program. Kerslake would go on to a thirty-eight year teaching career at UF, retiring in 1996 as Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus. His work has been collected by major American art museums, including the Brooklyn Museum, The National Gallery (Washington, DC), the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), The Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), and the Harn Museum of Art.

Kerslake’s principal artistic medium was intaglio printmaking, though he also produced significant work in lithography and vitreography, and experimented with photography and digital art software; he painted throughout his career. *Tree Dreams* is a work of screen printing, also known as serigraphy, a stenciling technique used in both industrial and fine art settings, with roots in Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) silk screening methods, revolutionized in the twentieth century by the introduction of new inks, synthetic screen materials, and photoreactive stencils.\(^2\)

The principal elements of the print are projected on two planes: a dense, rocky landscape receding to a dark horizon, and a vertical arrangement of nine trees, laid out in a 3 × 3 grid, that rises parallel to the print’s surface. A few hints of vegetation sprout from between the rocks but the landscape is for the most part barren. The horizon is the most saturated line of the image, sharply dividing the landscape from the space above, which appears empty. The trees are near multiples of the same image, obviously the same stencil altered in minor ways. In several of the trees, a few branches or some of the vegetation and stones at the base of the tree have been blocked; ink colors and saturation also vary. The trees’ species is unclear, but it resembles one of the baobabs (*genus Adansonia*), extremely long-lived deciduous species native to Madagascar, Africa, and Australia, with swollen, leathery trunks and spindly compact crowns. Each of the trees rests on a blank, rectangular frame, bordered on the top by a dotted line: A porous boundary? A guide to “cut” or “fold here”? At least the middle row of frames are transparent, as the landscape is visible behind them. Are these labels, or spaces for labels, an invitation to viewers to supply their own descriptions? A narrow vertical opening in each of the tree trunks has perhaps a sexual or anatomical significance, but its chief effect (though this also has a sexual valence) is to suggest a third, or rather nine times a third, axis of vision in the print: a line of sight leading to an indistinct interior within the trees, a beyond *beyond* the other planes of the print. Overall, the image suggests an uncanny plenitude, in the strict sense of that term: a surplus of deeply familiar strangeness at the edge of making sense. Looking through the arrangement of the nine trees, the naturalistic rocky landscape appears as through a perverse version of the optical grid used by Renaissance artists to segment the image and manage linear perspective. In this case, rather then rationalizing elements of image so that they can be perfectly captured, the device binds them to obscure relations of layers and depths. Is this an

image of *dreaming about* trees, or an image of trees *dreaming*? The print’s title is ambiguous on this account; the fleeting play of multiple perspectives in the image suggests that both interpretations of the title may be valid.

Human dreams about trees are commonplace. A popular guide to occult dream symbolism proposes that a dream of trees in new foliage “foretells a happy consummation of hopes and desires,” a dream of climbing a tree is “a sign of swift elevation,” and a dream of newly felled trees portends “unhappiness coming unexpectedly.”³ Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) – occult in its own way – includes several specimen dreams about trees and tree branches, which Freud associates with his patients’ unacknowledged fixations on their human anatomical correlates.⁴ His most famous specimen dream of trees, the “Wolf-Man’s” childhood nightmare of a barren tree outside his bedroom window populated with silent, glaring wolves, goes deeper into taboo territory, to the patient’s awakening to the strangeness of sexual desire.⁵ Other animal species – other mammals, birds, and reptiles – are known to dream. If, like humans, their dreams are populated with objects from their environments, it seems likely that some nonhuman animals should also dream of trees from time to time. Are tree dreams especially common for arboreal animals, who must navigate in their waking state the three-dimensional spaces of the forest canopy? Or are those spaces too banal to be registered in their dreams? What about the tree dreams of animal species who live on the forest floor? Perhaps the density and obscurity of the forest canopy makes it a richer source of dream material. Do neurotic wolves dream, fearfully, of being watched from above?

To read Kerslake’s print as a speculative depiction of *trees* dreaming, we must entertain the idea that trees *sleep*. Certainly, plant metabolism changes with the onset of darkness. Photosynthesis, by which most plants use sunlight to turn carbon dioxide and water into starch and other metabolites, releasing oxygen, and respiration, by which they take in oxygen to transform starch into new tissue growth, releasing carbon dioxide, occur both day and night. At night, photosynthesis halts in the absence of light but respiration continues. Thus, plants exhale oxygen and carbon dioxide in the daytime but only carbon dioxide at night; important metabolic processes, in particular those related to tissue growth and root and canopy propagation, increase proportionally in nighttime darkness. Many vascular plant species, including trees, respond to the onset of darkness with distinctive physical movements, called *nyctinasty* (from the Greek, *nux*, “night,” + *nastos*, “pressed together”): flower petals close, leaves fold or rotate from the horizontal to the vertical plane, etc. Due to changes in turgor (cellular hydrostatic pressure) plant stalks and leaves droop during the night, typically returning to their previous positions a

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few hours after sunrise. Recently, this behavior has been observed in tree branches and foliage. The survival advantages of these movements, which are regulated by plants’ internal biological clocks rather than by changes in light and temperature, are imperfectly understood. But it is easy to imagine, on the analogy of animal sleep, that nyctinastic movements and related changes in plant metabolism are evidence of a state resembling sleep, in which there is a redirection of plants’ activity and responsiveness from the external to the internal environment. Sleep states have been identified in every animal species examined for signs of these states, including species that may surprise us: cockroaches and fruit flies sleep, flatworms and sea slugs sleep, some species in the phylum Cnidaria — which include sea anemone, corals, and jellyfish, and which lack both brains and central nervous systems — appear to sleep. If sleep serves primarily metabolic functions and if, as some research suggests, the need for sleep can be initiated by non-neuronal cells, a nervous system may not be a requirement for sleep. Thus, “it is not inconceivable that plants, algae and single-cell prokaryotes will also ultimately be considered to sleep.”

*Dreaming*, however, seems a more demanding standard and probably requires anatomical structures comparable to a nervous system. Even the most reductive scientific descriptions of the dream process, which count it as a kind of neurological housekeeping related to long-term memory storage, admit that the *dreamer* experiences the process as subjectively meaningful, if often obscure and ephemeral. This would seem to require the dream process drawing on a store of existing elements — perceptions, memories, representations — on which basis subjective meaning is constructed, and a communications network of some kind over which these elements are transmitted and aggregated into meaningful assemblages. We know pretty well how this is accomplished in the vast majority of animals. All bilaterian animals — those having bilateral symmetry in their embryonic states, such as humans — possess a central nervous system and a brain. (Bilaterians diverged from a common ancestor with the Cnidarians some 700 million years ago.) Given the growing evidence that all bilaterians sleep, there is no obvious reason why only some bilaterian species should dream; it seems likely that human researchers don’t understand other species’ dream states and how to measure them. Though they lack a central nervous system, Cnidarians do possess diffuse neural nets that control their movements and connect with sensory receptors. These nets obviously support decentralized, outward-directed perceptions during wakefulness; they could also support decentralized, inward-directed perceptions during sleep. Perhaps jellyfish do dream, though so diffusely and desubjectively that

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we bilaterian humans, limited by our brain-centered history of conscious and unconscious states, and by the dominance of anthropogenic images and speech in our dreams, cannot imagine their dream experiences.

More speculatively, jellyfish dreams suggest the form and the process of tree dreams. The emerging field of “plant neurobiology” affirms that plants not only possess anatomical structures equivalent to animal neurons, performing vegetal analogues of animal perception and endogenous signaling, they are also capable of associative learning and subjective experience, and are at least minimally aware of themselves and plant and animal others.\(^9\) Moreover, the field’s most spirited proponents assert that plants are capable of symbolic representation – vegetal forms of language – and able to communicate with plant and animal others, including humans.\(^10\) These assertions of plant cognition and lucid communication are not widely accepted by botanists,\(^11\) though they raise provoking and unsettling possibilities.

It may be that these debates strain comparisons unnecessarily, looking for similarity and difference where there is, on the question of plant dreamlife and vegetal being more generally, only uncanny – familiar and strange – analogy. We are only coming to understand that trees are, among all social organisms, the most connected to their neighbors and near and distant kin.\(^12\) They exchange airborne biochemical signals with other trees, collectively monitoring resource availability and the presence of predators and parasites. Their notionally individual bodies extend outward to, tangle with, and merge other plant bodies, and provide shelter and sustenance, above and below ground, to numberless organisms. By way of vast, mutualistic mycorrhizal (fungus) networks beneath the forest floor – comprising half of a forest’s biomass – they share water, carbon, and other nutrients with other trees and plants. In contrast to our impoverished isolation and melancholy autonomy, awake and asleep, theirs are lives of exuberant \textit{heteronomy}, an ever-vital interdependence with the lives of many selves.\(^13\) That interdependence may well serve as the store and the transmission lines of... some things that mean... something to tree dreamers and others who dream with them, more abundantly and strangely than we can grasp. If trees dream, surely they must do so as jellyfish may dream, only still further removed from the center: diffusely, desubjectively, and collectively, in a state of absolute extension but nowhere in particular.


\(^12\) Suzanne Simard, \textit{Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest}, Knopf, 2021.

This simple image of Ulysses S. Grant inspecting a coffee plantation in Cordova, Mexico was drawn for Harper's Weekly as part of a series of sketches by Frank Hamilton Taylor (1846–1927) during the former president’s 1880 tour of Florida, Cuba, and Mexico. Throughout the late 19th century, Taylor was a well-known Special Artist, a type of illustrator who provided sketches from the field on which newspaper staff artists then based the final printed illustrations. His work has been credited with introducing the Gilded Age’s growing and increasingly literate urban middle class to information about their country during a period of rising pictorial journalism. Documenting Grant’s trip was Taylor’s last major assignment for Harper’s Weekly, and, although not widely-discussed today, the trip was given broad press coverage at the time. Grant’s 1880 tour was intended to keep him in the public eye leading up to the Republican National Convention in June of that year, where he hoped to garner a third presidential nomination. After two scandal-ridden terms, the tour was also meant to burnish Grant’s image and remind the American public of their former Civil War hero (Gutske, The Special Artist).
Throughout the tour, Taylor’s primary task as an illustrator was to depict Grant in a strongly positive light. “Grant Inspecting a Coffee Plantation” is a clear example of this. In this image, the former president appears genteel, yet powerful. He is accompanied by Lt. General Philip Sheridan – in the background, behind Grant’s horse – with whom Grant had fought during the Civil War. Both men inspect their surroundings attentively from their horses. The image evokes the memory of the Commanding General renowned for his horsemanship and logistical prowess, who defeated the Confederacy and kept the country unified.

Although the story for *Harper’s Weekly* was about Grant’s visit to a Mexican coffee plantation, it is the plantain trees – used to shade small coffee plants from the sun – that dominate the depiction of plant life. In fact, the newspaper staff artist ended up renaming the final version of the image “Ride Through a Banana Grove” for its appearance in one of the stories in the series (“General Grant in Mexico”). What remains consistent between the Special Artist’s sketch and the staff artist’s engraving is the placing of Grant at the image’s center. The General and his Mexican guide are the clearest human subjects in the image, bordered by several Mexican farmers whose backs are either facing the artist or whose faces are obscured. Unlike Sheridan or the guide, Grant is dressed in dark colors, which starkly contrast with the washed-out tones that dominate the rest of the image. The viewer is clearly drawn to Grant, observing the coffee plantation calmly, from a position above everything but the trees.

With Grant as the focal point, the foliage, and especially the coffee plants, seem to fade into the periphery, as plants often do in images focused on human subjects. Yet, the coffee plant is a significant political and economic – if not botanical – element of Taylor’s illustrations for the series. Beginning with the American Revolution, when Great Britain implemented taxes and tariffs on imported tea, coffee drinking was considered patriotic among Americans. Moreover, coffee consumption had come to be closely associated with the American military; in 1832, President Andrew Jackson had replaced the army’s rations of rum and brandy with coffee. The change produced soldiers who were considered more obedient, focused, and able to push through difficult situations. Many American homes were introduced to coffee by returning soldiers who had developed a taste for the beverage while away at war (Webb).

Although individual coffee plants are nearly invisible in Taylor’s sketch, their collective presence nonetheless supports the message of Grant as a powerful soldier, focused and willing to confront the difficulties he may encounter with the help of caffeine sourced from countries within the nation’s geopolitical sphere, such as Mexico. During the Gilded Age, coffee continued to prove a slippery and fickle commodity for Americans, because its growing region did not extend to U.S. soil and its growing season was difficult to predict (“The Great Coffee Wars”). In short, coffee defied the rising industrial mastery of the nation in the post-War era. The depiction of Mexican actors in this image, either moving out of Grant’s path or peering at him with awe from the shelter of the foliage, turns Grant’s domestic military power imperialist; a third presidential term would promise control over hemispheric agriculture, much as Grant had once controlled
his army. In Taylor’s sketch, Grant exudes quiet and confident control even when confronted with the notoriously difficult coffee plant and the humans that cultivate it.

What the image does not account for, though, is that, while imperialist intimidation may garner favorable trading relations for the U.S. with Mexico and South America, this will not result in mastery of agriculture itself. There are still the climactic and botanical characteristics of the coffee plant, which are not amenable to confident displays of power. While Grant is capable of bullying children out of his path, the coffee plants remain unmoved and unimpressed—anchored in the soil and in their natural requirements for bearing fruit. A skilled artist, Taylor assigns Grant to the image’s strong, bold center to foreground a message of calm, deliberate power that may have assured a Gilded Age readership. Yet, it is the wispy, lightly-colored, almost ghostly coffee plants on the sketch’s periphery that challenge Grant in their requirements of warmth, sunlight, and diligent care. Regardless of coffee’s stimulating effects on the human consumer, even a general is powerless to change the plant’s delicate, stubborn needs.

Works Cited


Karen Glaser’s *Fire in the Swamp #1*

Kevin McKenna

Karen Glaser, American, born 1954

*Fire in the Swamp #1*

2007

Pigment print

Gift of the artist

2014.50.2

Karen Glaser produced *Fire in the Swamp #1* in 2007 as part of her *Swamps* series, comprised of panoramic photographs taken while she served as Artist-in-Residence at Big Cypress National Preserve (2006–2007) and Everglades National Park (2007–2008) (Glaser). Her intent with *Swamps* and its complementary series *Springs* was to unveil Florida’s elemental obscurities: “I am acutely aware of all the elements: earth, water, fire and air, and how they intermix. I am driven to translate this visceral experience into my photographs” (Ibid.). *Fire in the Swamp #1 – Fire from hereafter* – obscures the (likely) human catalysts behind the image’s dramatic flare, foregrounding vegetal vitality and communication.

The precise location of the scene depicted in Glaser’s 24 × 48 inch image is unclear. *Fire’s* title, as the first in its series, suggests that the photograph was likely taken where she served her first residency in the Big Cypress National Preserve, a region that boasts greater floral diversity than the Everglades (Lodge 91). A seven-hundred and twenty thousand square mile ecosystem (97), the Preserve is comprised of hardwood hammocks home to laurel oaks (*Q. laurifolia*), pinelands with inkberry (*I. glabra*), cypress forests featuring bald cypress (*T. distichum*), mixed pine and
cypress forests composed of pond cypress (T. ascendens) and cabbage palms (S. palmetto), mixed
swamp forests, marl prairies, and sloughs housing ghost orchids (D. lindeni). Established in 1974,
Big Cypress “has one of the largest fire management programs in the National Park System,
burning roughly 60,000 acres each year,” typically during the winter months (“A National
Preserve,” Lodge 104). These planned prescribed burns are of benefit to human-managed wild
forests, as they promote resprouting, “bark thickness, germination cues, serotiny, [and] canopy
architecture, … increase[d] nutrient availability through mineralization,” and reduced disease
(Resco de Dios 8).

The photograph Withholds spectacular distractions that might be present with fanning flames.
The fire, at first glance, only manifests in a subtle orange hue backgrounding the silhouette of
the tree canopy in the top-left and top-center thirds of the image. Lacking evidence of a directed
burn, firefighters or fire breaks, we may initially wonder whether the faded glow results from
environmental (random) or anthropogenic (accidental or planned) origins. On closer inspection,
Glaser seems less interested in didacticism or exposing the catalyst for the pyrolysis when we
notice the evidence of action foregrounded in the understory. Arboreal embers emerge as our
gaze pans the print. Bright bursts – traces of the chaos past – shimmer against the charred
trunks, defoliated branches, and hazy gray background, but only after we prioritize the plants in
our field of vision. These small relics in the static image bring to light what Bruce Bagemihl
refers to as “biological exuberance” (24). Drawing upon French cultural theorist Georges
Bataille’s concept of “superabundance,” Bagemihl’s biological exuberance corresponds to the
abundant vitality, multiplicity, and activity of all biotic matter, for which unrestrained “excess”
is “the primary driving force… of biological systems” (25).

The trees in Glaser’s photograph do not immediately disclose pockets of unrestrained dynamism
when we view the image in its total field; these revelations only appear as we range over the
image. The discovery of these pockets scattered throughout the landscape of burnt vegetation
not only enlivens the charred trees but also suggests that there is more going on here than what
we can see. However, Glaser’s camera is only capable of revealing a moment in the deep, long
time of the swamps’ exuberance, and Fire can only trace a fragment of this abundance, beneath
and beyond the evidence of fire. It is this resistance of deep, long time to the technique and
medium of photography, as well as the signs of resistance in the landscape – the cabbage palms’
vibrant green fronds, for example, because this species often survives fires (Lodge 88) – which
calls into question our understanding of what it is that fire destroys and preserves.

Foresters extol the benefits of controlled burns, but what is the nature of the control at work
here? Does maintenance of the forest frame anthropocentric hubris as stewardship?
Preservationists seem to perceive the swamp’s vitality as an excess to be constrained rather than
an exuberance that has its own logic and its own ecological safeguards, as in, for example,
tropical hardwood hammocks that naturally prevent soil fires from entering (81). Prescribed
fires are a response to the “fire paradox.” Developed societies fear wildfires as a threat to built
human environments, resulting in the practice of extinguishing “all fires,” which “leads to high accumulations of fuel loads” in wild habitats, necessitating stockpile reduction (Resco de Dios 9). Is this not just treating the symptoms rather than the cause of pathologies visited on the swamp’s deep, extra-human vitality? By this logic, managed conflagrations aim, fundamentally, to preserve human enframing and authority over non-human beings rather than to regenerate natural environments in their vital self-determination. The blaze’s human catalysts elude Glaser’s lens, but their potential anthropocentric motives still billow forth from the image.

Though the embers may be fruitful for a discussion of such ironies, the materiality of smoke in the image is the most vital site for re-envisioning human/plant relationships. Debris particles saturate the undulating haziness, filling a dense, opaque background. Aside from adding texture to the 35mm print, Glaser’s presentation of the smoke offers an unsettling image of plenitude. The air, which under other circumstances might be naïvely imagined as an empty region between objects in the forest, is over-full with smoke flowing around, under, and between the trees. Edges of branches and canopies dissolve as the smoke grows denser in the background. Leaves, branches, and trunks tangle in the shortened depth-of-field. The grittiness of the smoke draws our attention to the role of air as mediator for plant biology and communication: reproductively, defensively, and socially. Our search for the fire halts, we are thrust into the particle-laden medium and the dialogue between vegetal beings. Glaser’s image captures this neglected space as a substance that matters.

Works Cited


Maggie Taylor’s *One and a Half Sisters*

Anwesha Chattopadhyay

Maggie Taylor, American, born 1961

*One and a Half Sisters*

2003

Pigment inkjet print

Gift of Thomas W. Southall

2006.43

What is a “half-sister”? It is a sister who shares one’s parent, while the other is an outsider. A sibling who originates from something intimately familiar: mirroring oneself, but the reflection is altered, Othered.

American artist Maggie Taylor’s (b. 1961) provocatively titled digital image *One and a Half Sisters* invites the viewer to consider the self and the other – “sisters” – not only through contrasts between the woman in the foreground – substantial, complete – with her double, translucent,
insubstantial, only “half” person – but also by way of a series of other binaries more indistinctly bordered: blindness and vision, a bird and an egg, the plant and the animal, the organic and the inorganic, the present and the future, the virtual and the real.

To anyone with a passing acquaintance with the Florida based artist’s œuvre, One and a Half Sisters is immediately recognizable as a Maggie Taylor image. The predominance of natural tones, particularly brown, blue, and green, characterize much of Taylor’s work, in particular her 2013 series of illustrations for Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, and in images collected in Taylor’s 2005 design textbook, Landscape of Dreams. For those more acquainted with television than with print or museum galleries, Taylor’s surrealist work, including a version of this image, may be remembered as the basis of the title sequence for the popular 2005–2010 supernatural/paranormal show Ghost Whisperer, starring Jennifer Love Hewitt.

Using a flatbed scanner and Adobe Photoshop, Taylor curates and manipulates images of objects as diverse as fresh fern leaves from her garden, old daguerreotypes of gowned women, and preserved fauna and insects. She incorporates aspects of her own anatomy in many images, including photographs of her arms, hands, and other body parts. In creating the natural world of her backdrops, Taylor often sources and manipulates images of her surroundings, particularly from Gainesville, Florida, where she lives.

On encountering One and a Half Sisters for the first time, I was struck by the feminine sensibility of the image and its allusions to fertility and future potential. The gowned woman in the foreground is blindfolded, unsmiling, and protectively clutching an egg. Solidly situated in the present, she cannot know what the future holds for her, though she may imagine possibilities. Her “brooding” expression can be associated with that of a bird – this is “her” egg, it may hold some portion of her own physical/spiritual essence. Cradled in her hands the egg’s presence blurs lines between the human mammal and other fauna. The seemingly mature, fully-feathered bird is smaller than the egg; it cannot be the same species that laid the egg, or some strange effect of development is taking place.

The future-embodying translucent woman in the background, half-smiling, open eyed, and loosely holding the bird in her lap, appears at first less substantial than the brooding woman, and thus could be the eponymic “half sister.” But in the context of realized potential or self-actualization, she is the one who has achieved fulfilment, while her sister in the present must make do with half-dreams. Shifted forward in time she is also closer to the present moment of our viewing. The bird in her lap is opaque, fully realized, and ready to take flight.

Plant life in the image echoes the inconstant duality of the sisters. The tree in the distance stands barren, wintry; perhaps it has dropped its leaves or has died. A more hopeful reading
could also see it as a tree about to come to life, in the way that the field surrounding it is filled with open, fertile flowers, suggesting springtime. Distantly, the tree also mirrors the spectator's gaze, looking back at the sisters and the viewer from an undefined distance.

The general but indistinct binary at work in the image, between the “real” and the “virtual,” is echoed in the medium of *One and a Half Sisters*. It is ostensibly a digital image, generated on a computer through multiple iterations, some preserved while others are lost to time and metadata. Taylor’s principal compositional tool, Photoshop, is the software tool *par excellence* of layers, masks, and merged forms; everything that appears flat in the image is in fact a virtualized palimpsest: a series of surfaces reused but only partly effaced.

Yet, in a 2015 interview, Taylor emphasizes that she prefers to sell her work in the printed form, that she is in fact creating images that when complete will be made from ink and paper. In the interview, her heightened consciousness of the physicality and the environmental implications of her artwork comes through in her half-humorous, rueful assertion of how much paper she wastes in printing out intermediate drafts until she is satisfied and willing to share the final print. Composition as process: there are versions of *One and a Half Sisters* in which the fragments or “layers” of human and animal have been merged, deleted, or simply subsumed into the materiality of plant residue – paper – and its melancholy insistence on its presence and autonomy.

**Works Cited**


While training for a career in the church, Robert John Thornton (1768–1837) developed an interest in medical botany and turned his studies toward medicine. His professional life was successful, and he was appointed both physician to the Marylebone Dispensary, London and lecturer in medical botany at Guy’s and St. Thomas’s hospitals (Thornton, et al.). His contributions to eighteenth and early nineteenth century English botanical illustration, which appears to have been his passion, have been compared to that of the better-known Franco-Belgian painter and illustrator Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840), who was active during the same period. For A New Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus (1768–1837), Thornton commissioned the work of several artists, and this is reflected in the range of techniques used for the book’s twenty-eight full page color plates. (The plates are primarily aquatints and mezzotints, produced with intaglio printmaking techniques that create subtle tonal effects without the use of cross-hatching or stippling, though some illustrations also feature stippling and line engravings.) Thornton’s only direct contribution to the book is his drawing for the illustration of the rose; other artists completed the engraving and all subsequent images. Despite
the collaboration of multiple artists, the plates in the book show a remarkable sense of unity in how plants are displayed, presented so that the viewer can see all relevant structures of the plant, and the natural and architectural backgrounds against which the plants are shown.

Thornton’s interest in botanical precision can be seen in the attention given to intricate details of the passion flower, shown from each angle in the illustration. The image features no human to distract from the focus on the flowering vine, which is depicted crawling up an architectural column, perhaps implying that the vitality of the plant enables it to master human structures. The image seems dominated by the lustrous green leaves, which are given more space in the image than the flowers, which in turn appear to be focused on the flower’s delicate and distinctive anatomy.

The plant serves as a character here rather than a prop, as it might in another context; its foregrounding draws the viewer’s eye. Despite the artificiality of its presentation, we are reminded of the resilience of vegetal life, by how the flower climbs the column, showing its capacity for dynamism despite the constraints the column imposes on it. In fact, all aspects of the illustration’s presentation impose upon the plant: the vine and flower are clearly subjected to the artistic and taxonomic gazes. These take precedence over the plant’s subjectivity by positioning the flowers in such a way that the viewer can see and perhaps understand the flower’s structure from each angle. The plant is represented in a botanical mugshot, rather than as a freely-growing entity.

And yet the image suggests playful exuberance and even limited independence. If the viewer surrenders her anthropocentrism and approaches the image from a plant-centered perspective, other possibilities emerge. This is an image of Passiflora’s unthinking but irrepressible adaption to human control; it is, we may imagine, thriving in this scene, because of and despite that control. Michael Marder’s discussion of the subtle freedoms of plants in his book Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy on Vegetal Life justifies this paradox of the passiflora’s appearance in Thornton’s image. Marder proposes that, while as sessile (rooted) beings plants are fixed to their locations and significantly affected by the external world, “they are not dependent on their other” – that is, we humans – “in the same way as manufactured artifacts are” (120). The spirit of the passiflora in Thornton’s image is marked in the tension between the notional mastery of the botanical gaze and the plant’s insistence on growing in its own way.

Works Cited

Thornton, et al. “The Quadrangular Passion Flower by Robert John Thornton, Peter Henderson on Donald A. Heald Rare Books.” Donald A. Heald Rare Books,
Sally Mann’s *Deep South*, Untitled (*Swamp Bones*)

Ryan Bedsaul

*Sally Mann, American, born 1951*

*Deep South, Untitled (Swamp Bones)*

1998

Gelatin silver print, tea toned, from original tintype

Museum purchase, gift of Dr. and Mrs. David A. Cofrin

2001.1

*Deep South, Untitled (Swamp Bones, 1998)* is one of the many landscape photographs American photographer Sally Mann captured on her famous *Deep South* road trip. The resulting exhibition represented a departure from her early work—a decade’s worth of photographs taken on her family farm in Rockbridge County, Virginia, which often featured her children posed against the lush, Shenandoah Valley landscapes that nourished their day-to-day lives—towards a broader environmental focus. In her memoir *Hold Still*, Mann remarks of this turning point in her career, “The children were reaching the age I referred to as filial shear, and as the landscapes overtook my family pictures, their figures began to recede from my gaze” (Mann). Living out of her Chevy Suburban with an 8” × 10” view camera, a tripod, and a makeshift wet-plate darkroom, Mann made her way South, through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, in search of new landscapes.
In this photograph, taken at the beginning of her trip, near Lake Ponchartrain, Louisiana (Mann, *Hold Still*), we see what appears to be a graveyard of gnarled roots and tree branches, their living companions situated just out of focus or otherwise beyond the camera’s depth of field. The image has an ethereal quality: a bright background that obscures the greater landscape while a mass of fog covers the floor beneath the woody scramble, abstracting the ancient rooted beings from their anchoring to the soil. The overall effect is achieved through Mann’s wet-plate collodion technique, a nineteenth century photographic method that requires patience and dexterity, as Mann herself demonstrates in the documentary short *Sally Mann: Collodion and the Angel of Uncertainty*. A glass plate is coated in collodion, a solution of nitrocellulose in ether and alcohol, then dipped into a silver bath and loaded into the camera for exposure. The resulting negative is used for the silver print. The most remarkable quality of this process is the stillness it requires of its photographic subjects, due to the extended duration of the exposure – two hours in the case of Untitled (*Swamp Bones*). When speaking of the collodion portraits that followed her *Deep South* exhibition, Mann observed “in some cases, [her human subjects] actually went to sleep during the picture-taking” (Hubber). Perhaps this is why Mann first tested the method on vegetal subjects. The length of the exposure honors their stillness.

In *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, art theorist and historian Giovanni Aloi pleads for this kind of radical approach in our visual representations of plants. Discussing the “plant blindness” of an anthropocentric experience of the world, he observes that “plants’ fixity, perceived passivity, and resilient silent presence have... relegated plants to cultural backgrounds. These reductionisms have been used to assess plants’ ontological inferiority towards animals and even more so, humans” (Aloi). His concern echoes the shift in Mann’s artistic focus throughout her *Deep South* series, as if by 1998 she had come to terms with the “cultural backgrounding” in her own work and decided to launch the landscapes into the foreground. She describes this effect best when she confesses in an interview with the Getty Art Museum, “I was ambushed by the backgrounds” (Hubber). A radical, non– or more-than-human ecological consciousness informs Untitled (*Swamp Bones*) as we imagine the total foregrounding of the trees as a reversal of the merely human “cultural backgrounding” Aloi complains of. We may still wonder what the method of the silver print, the tea tone, and the tiny imperfections of the image created by the wet collodion process, add to the calculated aesthetic representation of the plant subjects. There is a subjectivity present in the image, a shadow that is not in the landscape itself but is, nonetheless, evoked through traces of Mann’s labor-intensive photographic technique.

Thus, the overall effect of her process is not simply a foregrounding of the tree subjects, but a foregrounding that is complicated by the intentional phases of the collodion wet-plate method, and a texturing and coloring determined to elicit a mood. For many followers of Mann’s work, this sensibility evokes the horrific past that lives throughout her more-than-human landscape.
images, indirectly traced by reminders of the human suffering and dispossession that have become inseparable from the background. This evocation is especially apparent in, for example, Mann’s photographs of civil war battlefields, or her silver print of the bridge where Emmett Till was murdered. One might reasonably wonder: were Untitled (Swamp Bones) entirely abstracted from its historical context, or placed before someone unfamiliar with Mann’s work, would the viewer still recognize the subject as a distinctively Southern landscape, or simply as a swamp portrait? Is it even possible to separate these two perspectives? That is, is it possible to awaken viewers to the unsettling presence of the vegetal world around them without relaying insistence on being seen through another anthropocentric lens – in this case, a quite literal one?

Works Cited


Michael Kenna’s

*Trees, Wroxton, Oxfordshire, England*

Anna Grzybowska

Michael Kenna, American, born England, 1953

*Trees, Wroxton, Oxfordshire, England*

Photo date: 1979; Print date: 1994

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Melvin and Lorna Rubin and museum purchase, funds provided by the Caroline Julier and James G. Richardson Acquisition Fund, with additional funds provided by the David A. Cofrin Acquisition Endowment

2012.51.20

Michael Kenna’s (b. 1953) signature photography style is defined by black-and-white landscapes, primarily captured with long exposures and thus including significant interplay of light, sharpness, and blur. His work has been published in more than twenty books, displayed in numerous exhibitions around the world, and featured in advertising campaigns of well-established commercial brands. Often taken at dawn or at night, his photographs portray spaces absent of human activity, yet his images deftly allude to human presence by way of built structures seen in the context of natural settings. Contemplating the effect of his own work, Kenna remarks, “I do feel that most of my photographs hint at, speak of, certainly invite human presence, even though there is no specific illustration. I find that the absence of people in my photographs helps to suggest a certain atmosphere of anticipation. ... There is anticipation of events about to happen, or perhaps events have already happened and we are reconstructing scenes in our imagination.”¹

*Trees, Wroxton, Oxfordshire, England* seems to break from this practice of a limited inclusion of the human, shifting it further from the landscape and rendering its traces incongruous, unwanted, and dispensable. The three trees depicted in silhouettes dominate the image entirely; the

photograph’s power emanates from their strong presence. The human spectator may attempt a voyeuristic appreciation of their sublimity but, ultimately, is not invited into the space the trees occupy. The human gaze may be our only means of experiencing the trees, in the moment of photography, and later in viewing its product. Yet this experience is wholly one-sided; the trees remain obstinate in their indifference. The frustration created by our desire to see them, and their nonchalance and nonresponse, underscores that our gaze has little (if any) power over them.

This alienating effect is, in part, generated by the photographic medium itself. The trees exist in a different temporality than that of the spectator, which, very nearly timeless, exceeds and challenges human time. They also appear, paradoxically, detached from their location – the title “Wroxton, Oxfordshire, England” indexes the taking of the photo but not what it shows us – and thus they escape human-centered registers of location. Other than through the image, the trees remain inaccessible to us, denizens of the space of the image, which pertains almost entirely to it. The photograph’s monochromaticity emphasizes this estrangement for a human eye accustomed to seeing in color. Deprived of their presumed natural shades of green, the trees seem to belong to the completely new realm that moves beyond nature. Springing out of the darkness of the ground, they unapologetically intrude into the comparably empty space above, simultaneously complicating and strengthening the relationship between the two spheres.

Nevertheless, the aspect that most shapes the exclusion of the human is the distinctively vegetal subjectivity of the trees themselves. In his book *Plants as Persons*, Matthew Hall observes that in Western thought plants have been largely excluded from human moral consideration, which exclusion, according to him, is neither natural nor inevitable. Drawing on the work of plant scientists J.H. Wandersee and E.E. Schlussler, Hall points to the human trait of plant blindness, a failure to both notice and acknowledge plants’ presence and importance in human life, and to eliding plants’ distinctive way of being in the world and their different time scale. To be plant-blind is to also underestimate plants’ independence from human perception and the fact that they exist regardless of our acknowledgment of them and the meanings we make from them. Hall cites F. Hallé’s concept of plants existing in a state of “absolute otherness” to humans, which emphasizes their differences from us, and Karen Warren’s understanding of this exclusion as “an act of intellectual violence; and ... the attitude that drives collective and systematic physical violence” against plant beings.

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2 The photograph shows three trees standing at the edge of Her Ladyship’s Lake, on the grounds of Wroxton College, an international studies venue managed by Fairleigh Dickinson University. (Personal correspondence with Fairleigh Dickinson University Wroxton College via Facebook, May 4–19, 2021). Knowing their precise location, and the fact that the trees are still living, doesn’t make them any more accessible. The spectator still experiences their presence by way of Kenna’s photograph. Were we to stand before them, in situ, they would still not look back at us.


4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Ibid., pp. 5–7.
Kenna’s trees challenge us to confront such misperceptions of plants. They constitute three distinct entities, each of which has its own unique shape, features, and – overall – character. We can't mistake them as elements in an anonymous cluster or wall of green life: they present themselves fully as individuals; they are distinguishable from one another, and in this regard they challenge the conceit that distinctive selfhood can pertain only to humans and perhaps a few other animals to which we accord that privilege. Majestic as they are, the trees seem to be self-sovereigns within the image, leaving little room for the human, at most inviting its gaze. Their immobility is their power and the affirmation of its consequence, for they are part and parcel of the landscape; they both inhabit it and constitute its substance.

Describing his relationship to the landscapes he photographs, Kenna has observed, “I always feel it's a two-way street. You're giving something to the landscape and it's giving something to you.”6 What do the three silhouettes of trees offer to the spectator? On the one hand, they have a certain positive effect; they add something to our perception of a wider world: the image elevates the trees to the status of individuals and we have thus the opportunity to appreciate the exquisite diversity of natural beings. On the other hand, their autonomy evokes a sense of their ascendancy over our gaze. This might be characterized as the image’s negative effect: a subverting of our presumptive power and a dispelling of the illusion – and the “intellectual violence” – of human mastery of spaces in which we at most are intruders, unwanted or unnoticed.

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Paula Chamlee’s *Yosemite National Park #3*

Erick Verran

Paula Chamlee, American, born 1944

*Yosemite National Park 184 #3*

1990

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Melvin and Lorna Rubin

2006.38.11

Paula Chamlee is best known as a black-and-white photographer of the American landscape. Her artistic training, however, began in the late 1980s with a BFA in Painting. Although her senior thesis consisted almost completely of works on canvas, it was shortly before graduating that Chamlee discovered outdoor photography. By the early 1990s, Chamlee had traveled throughout the Pacific region, though her abiding interest lay in documenting the giant sequoias and rocky outcroppings of California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. After a period during which she lectured on photography in Southern Alabama, where she secured many solo and group exhibitions, Chamlee relocated to Pennsylvania with her husband, the photographer Michael A. Smith. She has published seven artistic monographs to widespread critical acclaim; some of these book projects were done in collaboration with Smith, until his death in 2018. An indefatigable artist of wide-ranging talents, during the last decade Chamlee has increasingly
laced her books with watercolor drawings, assemblages, and the stray journal entry, most notably in *Chicago: Lake* (2009), a two-in-one collection that opposes the rigid Chicago skyline with Lake Michigan’s miles of winding shoreline.

*Yosemite National Park 184 #3* was produced during Chamlee’s westward drives to the coast. At a mere 8 × 10 inches, the print captures in grisaille a rectangle of dried foliage: a bed of snapped twigs and branch matter adorned with boxy acorns, which simply dropped to the forest floor. Monochrome film’s chemical ability to render sharp detail and cavernous black tones is perfectly suited to the abundance and visual density of Chamlee’s subject. While the focus of her camera is not a single object in good lighting but a multitude of forms racing out of bounds, *Yosemite National Park 184 #3* impresses upon us a sense that it is composed. Even the larger sticks seem to suggest a framing effect that hints at a loose four-sided boundary.

Certainly, the artist chose this patch of earth to the exclusion of others very much like it. It is that mysterious skill of the master photographer to locate within her viewfinder *the right shot*, though this might require multiple, nearly identical negatives that were never printed. In its sublime internal coherence, *Yosemite National Park 184 #3* appears, simultaneously, undisturbed and, on a strictly formal level, calculated and utterly compelling to the eye. In the manner of American mid-century abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock, whose huge canvases were laid horizontally on the floor of his Long Island barn studio, Chamlee stands directly over things shown in this photograph, the camera pointed straight down; like Pollock’s strands of household paints crisscrossing one another to form a dizzying lattice, Chamlee allows the ever-changing park grounds to flaunt all their silvery, deciduous layers together.

Chamlee’s works share some formal properties with the New York school’s aesthetic hallmarks. Slings and flicks of oil paint typically gravitate around the middle of a Pollock canvas, yielding a noticeably centralized mist; although wholly incidental in layout, compared with the beautiful found constructions of, say, British photographer and land artist Andy Goldsworthy, *Yosemite National Park 184 #3* congregates agreeably in places. The student of Western art history may be quick to identify in this remarkable photograph the “all-over” technique pioneered by the Ukrainian-American painter Janet Sobel but brought to a fever pitch by Pollock, in which the image has no clear point of interest and no corner of the composition holds greatest sway. Notice how Chamlee’s subject floods its edges with visually rich miscellany, falling somewhere between a conscious choice and an accident occasioned by the setting. Or isn’t nature continuous?

Equally significant is the photograph’s patterning, whose motifs are the arboreal fruit and shoots let go by unpictured trees high above. Displayed on a vertical surface, *Yosemite National Park 184 #3* offers the viewer a *decorative* objectivity, comparable to tapestries of the Italian trecento (14th century) period and known then as *millefleur* (“thousand flowers”). However random the
underlying material basis really is – for the passing red fox or chipmunk there is no aesthetic aspect here, only the substance of nourishment and shelter – Chamlee’s interposition produces a sort of natural wallpaper that recalls the symmetrical density of British textile designer William Morris. But wallpaper also implies flatness; there are layers of vegetable matter beneath the chaotic surface of the forest floor here. Standing before this extraordinary image, the viewer finds sudsy depth skimmed by a dying light.
Mark Klett’s *New Trees Planted by an Open Field*

Peter Vertacnik

Mark Klett, American, born 1952

*New Trees Planted by an Open Field*

1989
Gelatin silver print
Gift of the artist
2009.4.11

Before Mark Klett became a photographer, he trained and worked as a geologist for the U.S. Geological Survey, a profession which, much like his current occupation, concerns itself with the capturing and recording of time. Throughout his career, Klett seems to have been fascinated by the ways in which time affects both human-made and naturally-occurring structures. This can most readily be seen in his many “rephotography” projects, a process which involves photographing the same site or landscape at different points over an extended period of time, creating a kind of “then and now” effect that highlights time’s influence on a particular place. Many of Klett’s recent rephotography projects have been collaborations with American illustrator Byron Wolfe.
While Klett’s photography usually centers on subjects – most often landscapes – of the American West and Southwest, in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s he seems to have taken a number of photos in northern and central Florida, including *New Trees Planted by an Open Field*, many of which also employed the same gelatin silver print process.

Looking closely at *New Trees Planted by an Open Field* with geology and time in mind, new aspects of the image emerge. Klett’s photograph is a study in geological layers in reverse: the bottom of the photo, the foreground, includes the youngest layers in the bodies of the stripling pines, the age of the trees advances as the eye progresses upwards, past the mature, wild forest, and into the sky. The slash pines (*Pinus elliottii*), arranged in efficient, artificial rows will take thirty years or so to reach mature sawtimber harvesting size, yet they have a potential natural lifespan of nearly two hundred years if left to fend for themselves in the wild. Scanning the blurred, tree-dense distance, it is unclear if there are mature, unmanaged slash pines in what looks to be that more natural border of trees; their ideal habitat lies somewhat farther to the south in Florida. This reverse reading of the temporality of the landscape is itself a lens, much like the device that captured this scene.

Travelling back in time, say, for a hundred years, while staying in this same field, what would one see? What habitat was this before it became a pine plantation? Longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), perhaps, with wiregrass and milkweed, before the ground was cleared and drained. Klett’s photo, taken over thirty years ago, depicts trees no taller than a child perhaps; those rows would soon afterwards have shot into dense walls of bark and pitch and green needle, blocking everything else that lay beyond it from view. Today, the slash pines are likely gone from this spot, “harvested” and processed into different paper products that humans use to write or wrap or wipe. What remains of the harvested trees is only what was returned to recycling and post-recycling manufacturers (about 68% of paper and paperboard products produced annually in the U.S. according to the EPA). Other trees have been planted in their place.

Not shown here: the vast and complex networks of root and mycelium that extend underground between trees, by which they share chemical and electrical signals, nutrients and which sustain their collective life. The distance between the planted pines and the undomesticated trees beyond the bare field is too immense for trees in the plantation to reach, even were there others of the same species willing to help these trees trapped here in lock-step growth. Such living networks and collective purpose, as German author and forester Peter Wohlleben has observed, thrive only in naturally occurring and undisturbed forests. Even these trees, standing closer side by side, cannot sustain these networks; their subsurface connections are damaged by how they are planted en masse, and how the spaces between them must be cleared of growth to facilitate eventual harvesting. They live, it appears, much like melancholy human inhabitants of densely populated cities: for most of their lives in close proximity to one another, but remaining disconnected strangers. There’s a risk in such speculation, a temptation to read the network that
should be there into the postures of isolated individuals. Perhaps the trees are lonely? Perhaps they will find other means to establish solidarity, despite human activities that forbid it? Their chafing within the bonds of stakes and manicured rows may remind us of the most famous of fictional plants struggling for freedom, British science fiction author John Wyndham’s triffids: carnivorous, intelligent houseplants, tapping their roots to their stems so as to converse with one another, as human prisoners might communicate by rapping their empty tin cups against the bars of their cells: biding their time, planning their eventual revolt.

What this suggestion of an active, vegetal resistance to the logic of the plantation means, I’m not yet certain, but it sets me to looking for evidence of other limiting forms in the image. Is it only a study of closed and open spaces, and of sessile, immobile beings trapped rather than rooted? Observe how the starkly lineated pine fields of the foreground still resemble the thick canopy of trees in the distance, which contains its own different but equally determinate order, and which corrals the edges of the sky. Look at the bright open meadow: how it separates those two darkened orders while still retaining its lightness of color and its openness, much the same as the vast field of the sky overhead borders on the field of our gaze.

Works Cited


Huang Shen’s *Chinese Cabbages*

Janice Whang

Huang Shen, Chinese, 1687–1770

**Chinese Cabbages**

Qing dynasty (1644–1911), dated 1759

Ink on paper

Museum purchase, funds provided by the Robert H. and Kathleen M. Axline Acquisition Endowment

2004.32.4

己卯 秋 九月 寧化 廣瓢: Year 1759, Fall, September, Ning Hua (city name), Yingpiao (sobriquet). Two red square seals show the characters for Ying Piao and Huang Shen, respectively.

Huang Shen (1687–1772) depicts four Chinese cabbages at various stages of growth, indicated by their different sizes and flowering. Huang Shen (黃慎, sobriquet Yingpiao 廣瓢) was from an impoverished family in Ning Hua, in Fujian province. Originally a scholar, his father’s death forced him to financially support his family and he chose to become a professional artist, against
Art was supposed to be an amateur hobby of retired scholars and government officials, and to sell paintings and poems commercially for a living was considered vulgar. Huang Shen excelled at poetry, calligraphy, and painting, earning the reputation of possessing the “Three Perfections (三絕).” He was also one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, a famous group of painters from troubled, impoverished backgrounds who were patronized by a new, vastly wealthy merchant class who themselves sought to overcome the social stigma of ranking “at the bottom of the four major professional groups of scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant”. The Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou were mainly known for their departures from orthodox painting techniques and subjects, and their individualist, expressive styles. Though “the term ‘eccentric’ during their time was derogatory and referred to a deviant mode of expression”, their supporters appreciated their bold and vigorous expression, experimentation, and originality.

The 18th century was a time of extravagance and hedonism during the Qing dynasty (1636–1912). The government monopoly granted to salt merchants in Yangzhou allowed them to amass the “largest aggregate capital possessed by a single commercial or industrial group in the empire” and by the 18th century, residents of Yangzhou who came from the “poor, mountainous region in the south Anhui province” became “the richest group of people in the world at the time”. Paintings of cultivated produce became popular during this period, seemingly as a reaction to ostentatious displays of excess and mainly in the prosperous city of Yangzhou where Huang Shen lived at the time. Paintings in this genre reminded viewers of “the core Confucian values of frugality and moderation that many among the educated elite classes feared were in danger of disappearing.” These food plant paintings usually depicted the most homey, everyday produce such as turnips, cabbages, eggplants, lotus root, and bamboo shoots.

Chinese Cabbages is in the “boneless” style, a method of painting directly on a surface with different shades of wet ink without prior outlining; the style requires tremendous skill and is considered one of the most advanced techniques of Chinese painting. The smallest misstep could ruin the painting. Huang’s use of one of the most advanced styles of painting on a humble, common vegetable is an active redirection of human extravagance away from unbridled consumption, towards a more focused attention on that which sustains society at its most basic level. The large size of the image and scroll, approximately four feet and seven feet respectively,

3 Peyton
4 Giacalone
5 Giacalone
6 Giacalone
7 Peyton
8 Peyton
similarly signals the importance of the food plants in relation to humans, the role of plants in human lives, and the irony of our tendency to take them for granted.

The painting seems more the portrait of a living subject than a botanical illustration meant for scientific classification. Instead of orderly, rectilinear rows associated with domesticated crops, the cabbages cascade in zig zags down the scroll as it would have unfurled. The curves and flowing lines of the boneless technique further imbue these sessile (rooted) beings with movement and motion; their stillness on the scroll appears to be a deceptive pause or momentary snapshot in their life and growth. In this sense, the painting points beyond the human viewer’s limited experience of vegetal time, emphasizing the ongoing, dynamic vitality of plant growth.

Further challenging a human-centered perspective, the flowering cabbage, which has bolted and is no longer suitable for consumption, takes preeminent position and proportion in the painting. Not only has it escaped human hands, it is in reproductive mode, propagating itself. An open gash in a mound of dirt suggests that a cabbage has been harvested, but this lone sign of human activity is relegated to the lower left corner of the image, like an afterthought or a thing that is no longer relevant. Despite the masterful brush and stroke technique, the content of the painting proposes that its nonhuman subject resists our mastery.

Chinese cabbages have a long relationship with humans. They were first domesticated in China in the 5th century BCE; the first written mention of them is in a pharmacy book edited by Jing Su (659 CE). The genetic evidence of their domestication corresponds closely with the history of ancient human migrations. Chinese cabbages’ earliest domesticated ancestor, a turnip (Brassica rapa), was first domesticated in Babylonia 4070 years ago. An eastward progression led to the divergence of a South Asian / East Asian variant, which was cultivated for its leaves. The split into the first East Asian variant, Pak choi (B. rapa subsp. chinensis), happened approximately 1470–2440 years ago. B. rapa was then bred with B. rapa subsp. chinensis to make Napa cabbage (B. rapa subsp. pekinenses) 1,244–2,070 years ago. Ming Dynasty naturalist Li Shizhen (1518–1593) popularized Chinese cabbage by bringing attention to the plant’s medicinal qualities. Chinese cabbage is also known for its resilience as a crop and ability to survive soils contaminated with salts and heavy metals, pests, and drought. More than two hundred years old, Huang Shen’s painting is a relatively recent tribute to a plant that humans have lived alongside for at least four millennia.

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10 Qi
The Kuba Kingdom, a federation of eighteen distinct but related ethnic groups, is a sub-Saharan African kingdom located within the area bounded by the Sankuru, Kasai, and Lulua rivers, in the heart of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).\(^1\) Ruled by an hereditary king by divine right, the nyim, and a highly-stratified system of senior titled officials (kolm), the Kingdom dominated this region of Central Africa from the early 17th until the late 19th century. During the period of the Middle Passage (c. 1518 to the mid-19th c.), as millions of enslaved West Africans were forcibly transported to the New World, the Kingdom remained relatively isolated.

from the slave trade, growing in prosperity and technological sophistication. In the 18th and 19th
centuries, Kuba artistic excellence (see below), the development of new animal and fish-farming

techniques, and high-yield agricultural practices using cultigens introduced by the triangular
Atlantic trade, such as cassava, maize beans, and peanuts, increased the Kingdom’s economic

power in the region (Vansina, The Children of Woot, 175–78).

Near the height of its influence, the Kingdom was ended as a functioning independent entity by
the European partitioning of Africa and the founding of the Congo Free State (1885), which
made the whole of the Congo the private possession of King Leopold II of Belgium. Two decades
later, international outrage at the extreme brutality of Leopold’s rule forced the end of his
control of the region and its colonial annexing in 1908 by the Belgian government. Throughout
the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, under the domineering paternalism of Belgian
colonial rule, internal power struggles following national independence in 1960, strongman
authoritarian governments and short-lived, fragile democracies, civil wars, and violent ethnic
conflicts, the Kuba Kingdom persisted as a tribal-cultural entity that today unites about 250,000
Bushong-speaking peoples of the region.2 It has limited sovereign power within the DRC’s
national political structure.

Renowned for their artistic sophistication, the Kuba are celebrated for their raffia palm (genus
Raphia) textiles, fiber and beaded headware and ceremonial masks, stylized wood sculptures in
the likeness of the nyim, known as ndop, and elaborately carved wood containers, especially palm
wine cups and “Kuba boxes.” This object is a particularly elegant example of a lidded cosmetic
box (ngedi mu ntey) dating from the late colonial period.

Typical of Kuba boxes, it is carved from camwood (Bois dé Cam, Baphia nitida), a small leguminous,
understory evergreen tree with waxy, dark green leaves and white flowers. Found in the forests
of the Guinea coast as far south as the Congo River basin, the tree’s bark and heartwood are also
used to make a brilliant red pigment, tukula, twool, or tool, a principal component of Kuba textile
dyes, paints, and cosmetics.3 The bright hues of the box’s exterior and the intersecting arches of
its lid are due to tukula; traces of the pigment are also present on the box’s interior surfaces,
indicating that it was used to hold tukula powder. (The pigment is also insect-resistant, which
may explain the box’s excellent condition.) Tukula can be mixed with palm oil to make a paste,
which can be sculpted and dried hard in the sun, or baked into blocks, usually carved with
ornate patterns, for long-term storage; these objects, called mboong itool, can be reconstituted into
workable paste with the addition of palm oil. Such preserved forms of tukula are often exchanged

2 Jan Vansina, Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960, University of Wisconsin Press,
2010.

3 Somewhat ironically, as Binkley observes (30), camwood is not native to Kuba territories, and represents
one of the Kingdom’s major imports.
as gifts, particularly during Kubas’ funeral rituals, in which dyed textiles, masks, and cosmetics play important roles. The rituals, elaborate displays of decorative arts and masquerade performance, honor and pacify the recently-deceased to ensure their peaceful voyage to the land of the dead, from which they may return, after one or more generations have passed, in the spirit of another human (Binkley 46–49). 

*Tukula* paste is commonly rubbed on the bodies of the dead in preparation for burial.

In Kuba culture, artistic production is gender specific. Wood-carving and mask-making are male activities, as are the creation of raffia baskets, mats, prestige regalia, and raffia cloth, which is used in textiles for both men and women’s clothing. Women create their own decorated textiles, functional and decorated baskets and pottery, and are chiefly responsible for the creation and carving of *mboong itool* (Binkley 19–20). Nearly all artistic practices are linked to the Kingdom’s aristocratic structure, perhaps the most complex title system in sub-Saharan Africa (Binkley 13), in which the visual arts are a source and guarantor of political prestige. Almost from the Kingdom’s inception, status-conscious title holders have commissioned artists to fashion objects that demonstrate their owners’ wealth and devotion to Kuba aesthetics; social rank and advancement depend on such conspicuous displays and on the gifting of beautiful objects to others at the same or higher social positions. This long-established practice has led to intense, open competition among artists and their patrons, in search of ever more nuanced designs.

The Kuba, observes Vansina, seem to have a horror of empty spaces (*Children of Woot*, 222); all available surfaces of Kuba wooden cups and boxes are ornately carved and incised, usually with multiple, repeating geometrical motifs. (These motifs are also commonly found in Kuba decorated textiles and pottery.) Cornet lists 64 families of these motifs (162–79); Vansina noted in 1978 that more than 200 distinct motifs had been identified (*Children of Woot*, 221). The decorations on this box are typical of a family of motifs known as *mnaam*, also the term for lianas, long-stemmed, woody vines common in tropical moist forests such as those of the Congo region; the vines climb from the forest floor to the canopy in knotted, braiding forms (Cornet 168). As in this example, *mnaam* motifs are usually highly stylized and angular; curved designs are uncommon.

In addition to its functional qualities, several compelling analogies are marked in this object’s design. The application of *tukula* to the exterior of the box, which has given it its arresting color and helped to ensure its persistence in a hostile climate, mirrors the application of the pigment to the surfaces of living and dead bodies in celebration of life’s eternal return. The *mnaam* motif encircles the surface of the box, as a liana might encircle a camwood, or any other, tree. This embrace may provide some structural support to younger trees, and offer lines of flight to myriad

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5 As the invention of new motifs is considered a demonstration of artistic virtuosity, it seems likely that others have been invented in the last four decades.
other living beings in the canopy, but at the cost of increased competition for light, water, and
nutrients, the burden of holding aloft another extensible ecosystem, and the destiny of death by
strangulation – and subsequent regeneration (!) within the forest’s arc of unceasing vitality and
renewal.⁶

⁶ Stefan A. Schnitzer and Frans Bongers, “The Ecology of Lianas and Their Role in Forests,” Trends in Ecology
Ōtagaki Rengetsu’s *Wooden Plate*

Terry Harpold

Ōtagaki Rengetsu, Japanese, 1791–1875

*Wooden Plate*

Meiji period (1868–1912)

Wood with ink and color

Museum purchase, funds provided by the Robert H. and Kathleen M. Axline Acquisition Endowment

2013.19.2

Turned away at the inn

I take this unkindness as grace...

resting instead

beneath the hazy moon

and evening blossoms.

やどかさぬ

人のつらさを

情にて

おぼろ月よの

花の下ぶし

Yado kasa nu

hito no tsurasa wo

nasake ni te

oborozukiyo no

hana no shitabushi.

(English translation, hiragana and rōmaji transcriptions by the Rengetsu Foundation)

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1 See [http://rengetsu.org/poetry_db/index.php?pageNo=1](http://rengetsu.org/poetry_db/index.php?pageNo=1). This is poem #55.
Ōtagaki Rengetsu (大田垣蓮月, 1791–1875), a Buddhist nun, poet, calligrapher, painter, and potter, is widely regarded as one of the most important *waka* poets of the 19th c.\(^2\) (*Waka*, 和歌 or 和歌, “Japanese poem,” is the oldest continuously-practiced genre of Japanese poetry. It encompasses several classical verse forms, most of which have passed into disuse.) The circumstance of Rengetsu's birth are unclear, though she is thought to have been the child of a samurai of the prominent Tōdō clan and a low-ranking noble or commoner woman. Perhaps by arrangement of her biological father, Nobu (her childhood name) was adopted shortly after her birth by the Ōtagaki family; her adoptive father was a samurai awarded a position at the Chion'in temple, in Kyoto. In 1798, at the age of 7, she was sent away to serve as a lady-in-waiting of the Matsudaira clan, at Kameoka Castle, Tanba Province, where, uncommonly precocious, she received training in poetry, calligraphy, fencing, and martial arts. In 1807, at the age of 16, she returned to Kyoto for an arranged marriage to a samurai who had also been adopted into the Ōtagaki family so that he would inherit her adoptive father's position at Chion'in. The marriage produced three children, all of whom died in early infancy; she and her husband separated in 1815, and he died less than a year later. A second marriage in 1819, once again to a samurai adopted into the family, produced one or perhaps two children, who would also die at young ages. Following her second husband's death in 1823, Nobu cut her hair, renounced the world, and became a nun at 33, taking the name *Rengetsu*, or “Lotus Moon.” Her adoptive father also took his vows at this time and both continued to reside at Chion'in until his death in 1832. Thereafter, Rengetsu, left with no means of support, practiced a largely itinerant life for the next three decades, in and around Okazaki, an area of Kyoto then a center of artistic and scholarly innovation. There she came in contact with some of the foremost *waka* poets and literati painters, male and female, of the late Edo period (1603–1867), developing a distinctive poetic style that combined ordinary modern language with subtle wordplay and textual allusions more typical of Heian period (794–1185) *waka*. To support herself financially, she took up pottery making, producing mostly sakeware and *senchadō* teaware, on which she painted, or more often incised, original *waka* prior to firing or glazing. She produced thousands of such items, known as *Rengetsu-yaki* (蓮月焼, “Rengestu-ware”), which were celebrated for their hand-molded naïveté, were widely imitated, and which remain highly prized by twenty-first century collectors.\(^3\) She mentored and often collaborated with other poets, including the young painter-calligrapher Tomioka Tessai (富岡鉄斎, 1836/37–1924), who would later become one of the


most influential Japanese painters of the early 20th c. In 1865 Rengetsu settled into solitary life in a modest tea hut at the Jinkō'in temple, Kyoto, where she intensified her study of Buddhism while continuing to produce calligraphy, painting, and pottery at a prodigious rate until her death in 1875, at age 84. She was interred in a nearby cemetery, under a simple stone marker beneath a cherry tree. The tree still stands.

Classical Japanese poetry is written and read in columns, from top to bottom, right to left. “Turned away at the inn” is an example of tanka (短歌, “short poem”) verse, the primary surviving form of waka. It follows the form’s constraints: five non-rhyming lines (箇句, ku, “phrases”) in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern of equally stressed morae (モーラ, mora), phonological units that are roughly equivalent to syllables, for a total of 31 morae. The first three lines (5-7-5) are called the kami-no-ku (上の句, “upper phrase”) and the last two lines the shimo-no-ku (下の句, “lower phrase”); upper and lower phrases are often, as in this case, distinct in their emphasis or mood. Nearly all of the poem is written in hiragana, the Japanese phonetic writing system, which is today predominant but was used primarily by women during Rengetsu’s lifetime. The two kanji (Chinese characters) in the bottom left corner of the board are the poet’s signature. Typical of Rengetsu’s late calligraphy, the initial characters of the lines are not aligned and spaces between characters vary a great deal, emphasizing a sweeping but inconstant movement from the upper right to the lower left. This is reinforced by the lines’ cascade across the sloping woodgrain; taken together the brushstrokes and woodgrain destabilize the board’s rectilinearity. Also typical of Rengetsu – and unusual for Japanese women’s calligraphy in the 19th c. – her brush strokes are uniformly thin, almost threadlike, and few characters are merged; apart from the flourish of the cherry blossom in the final phrase, Rengetsu’s script conveys a modest, austere precision.

The poem is based on an incident in Rengetsu’s life recorded in the first posthumous edition of her collected works. Leaving her house one afternoon in search of tofu for a meal, she remembers that the cherry blossoms in nearby Yoshino, Nara Prefecture, are in full bloom.

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4 It is estimated that she produced 50,000 works of art during her lifetime.
6 Fister proposes that Rengetsu’s late brushstroke style may have been acquired through the practice of incising her poems on her pottery, “where broad lines and complex connections between characters would have been difficult to accomplish consistently” (“Looking Back: Ōtagaki Rengetsu.,” Calligraphy Idea Exchange, vol. 4, no. 4, 1987, p. 18.)
Forgetting the tofu and a pot of rice left boiling on the fire she heads for Yoshino as evening approaches. (A friend stops by during her absence and luckily thinks to remove the pot from the fire.) Turned away from lodging for the night because of her disheveled dress, she elects to sleep in the open, “beneath the hazy moon and evening blossoms.”

A spring night passed in solitary reflection beneath a changing moon and fragrant flowers is more than a sensible solution to a lack of shelter. The lower phrase is, accordingly, complex and richly expressive. Rengetsu’s graceful acceptance of her situation is a tacit acknowledgement of the Buddhist doctrine of the three marks of existence (三法印, sanbōin), which apply to all conditioned (noneternal) beings (行, gyō) – impermanence (無常, mujō), unease (苦, ku), and the emptiness of self (空, kū) – and resonates with the Japanese mood of mono no aware (物の哀れ), “the pathos of things,” felt in the apprehension of life’s transience. The presence of the blossoms, heralding both the exuberance and ephemerality of spring, is an indication of this; the Japanese passion for cherry blossoms, which fall within days of their blooming, is conventionally associated with knowing mono no aware.

A second indication is the lower phrase’s masterful evocation of other texts and contexts. Rengetsu’s “hazy moon” of a spring night, oborozukiyo (おぼろ), cites a celebrated verse by the late 9th c. waka poet Ōe no Chisato (大江千里), “nothing compares with the hazy moon of a spring night [oborozukiyo], neither brilliant nor clouded.” The verse is, in turn, cited in a key passage of The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari, Heian period, early 11th c.), a monumental work of Japanese literature and often described as world literature’s first novel. In Chapter 8 of Genji, “Under the Cherry Blossoms” (花宴, Hana no en), the eponymous hero, the son of the late Emperor and a commoner concubine, wanders the palace deep into the night, melancholy, lonely, and a little drunk after the banquet of the cherry blossom festival. He meets and begins a clandestine, ultimately ill-fated affair with his half-brother the Emperor’s promised concubine Oborozukiyo (“The Lady of the Hazy Moonlit Night”) – ! – who is so named because it was her singing of Chisato’s verse that first drew Genji to her room. The next morning she refuses to tell him her name but gives him a keepsake: a “cherry blossom” fan, scarlet on one side, white on the other, decorated with a painting of a hazy moon reflected on water. Their liaison is one of many dalliances and wistful love affairs during Genji’s checkered career in the court. None, no matter how heartfelt in the moment, offers enduring satisfaction. As in Rengetsu’s poem, the bittersweet transience of joy is its only constant.

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10 The late Edo period literary scholar and linguist Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長, 1730–1801), the first theorist of mono no aware, celebrated the whole of The Tale of Genji as a defining expression of the “pathos of
And there is one more blossom. “Turned away at the inn” is not unique to this tea board; the text is one of Rengetsu’s better-known waka, and appeared in print at least once during her lifetime. Fister observes that “it was clearly one of her favorite poems,” as she is known to have copied it to multiple paintings and works of pottery (Japanese Women Artists, 159n46). I’ve located about a dozen surviving copies of the poem, in several media, in private and public archives and museums worldwide. Fister identifies seven copies, but I’ve not been able to cross-check our lists. In every other surviving copy I’ve found, and in the canonical published versions of the poem, the final phrase begins with the kanji 花, hana, meaning “blossom,” and by convention, cherry blossom. But on the Harn’s teaboard, Rengetsu has drawn a picture, a small graffiti really, of a cherry blossom, in place of the kanji. It’s a small textual difference – and it seems like a bit of whimsy – but the substitution of the blossom alters the poem’s presentation, shifting it just a little away from the ekphrastic and logographic conventions of waka and kanji toward something closer to an unmediated, poetically resonant image. Other, textual, copies of the poem on hanging scrolls are illustrated with paintings of blossoms; at least one copy on a teapot is decorated with flowers (Fister, Japanese Women Poets, 152). Here, writing and drawing merge to perform their interdependence.

I suspect that making the switch occurred to Rengetsu spontaneously as she painted the poem on this teaboard, but we can’t know what prompted her to do so. No matter; its effect radiates an affection for the objects of her verse – the living and the drawn blossom – and hints that the affection is felt to be reciprocated; the very incongruity of the graffiti guarantees the interdependence and consolation it records. Such a blossom, we may imagine, watches over the space below (no shitabushi), subtly aware – in the way that the awareness of vegetal beings appears only subtle to humans – that it has been spoken of and that it is seen. As ephemeral as, yet more vital than, a hazy springtime moon, it rises above Rengetsu’s signature, the trace of her upward gaze of loving-kindness.

I am indebted to Tongyun Yin, Cofrin Curator of Asian Art, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, for her assistance in the writing of this essay.


11 In Ama no Karumo (A Seaweed Diver’s Harvest), published by San’eidou, c. 1871, one of two collections of Rengetsu’s poetry published before her death.

12 “Loving-kindness” - 慈, ji, a Buddhist concept, equivalent to selfless amicability and the cultivation of benevolent affection for others.
Acknowledgements

*Plant Life* springs from a series of conversations in my Spring 2021 University of Florida graduate seminar on Critical Plant Studies. I proposed to my students that they join me in identifying and documenting a small number of *plant-conscious* works from the Harn Museum’s extensive collections: works that elicited – or provoked – a response, and reflection on the imagined and real aspects of our lives among and alongside the Earth’s actually dominant kingdom. We selected the works on display in the exhibition, and workshopped drafts of the essays in the catalog, collectively. I am grateful for my colleagues’ discernment, perseverance, and good cheer.

I am also grateful for the encouragement and support of Harn curators and educators, in particular Dulce Román, Chief Curator, and Eric Segal, Director of Education and Curator of Academic Programs, during the several months it has taken to prepare the exhibition for public viewing. Many thanks to the Harn staff members who ably fitted *Plant Life* to the intimate confines of the Langley Foyer, where it is entirely at home.

None of this effort was simple or easy during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. The success of the compassionate pledge by all to bring the project to fruition while striving to keep everyone safe is among its most admirable accomplishments.

Terry Harpold
Gainesville, July 2021