

by Anne Marie Hunter (<http://kcstudio.org/author/amhunter/>)  April 30, 2018

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Spencer Museum of Art's "Big Botany" Exhibit Examines Human/Nature Relationship

“ . . . the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects . . . ” – Thomas Berry, ecotheologian

Celebrating nature's alluring power while simultaneously warning of the perils that threaten our natural world, "Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World," is a sweeping botanical tapestry of works by 50 artists spanning six centuries.

Five years in the planning, the exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence reflects a lifetime passion of curator Stephen Goddard, who has assembled paintings, drawings, photographs, books, engravings and site-specific installations to trace the long history of pain and joy that defines our human relationship with nature.

"What I did not know at a young age is how critical cultivating empathy for the plant world would be decades later, as the impact of a century of human environmental irresponsibility comes into sharp focus," Goddard notes.

Dating from the 1490s, the exhibit's oldest work is "The Lovers," an engraving by Israhel van Meckenem the younger. With graceful, poetic lines, van Meckenem depicts the garden-of-love, a popular theme in medieval art. The engraving also reflects a common medieval practice in which botanical species were ascribed specific symbolic meanings.

Appreciation of botanical life has crossed cultures, continents and centuries, and is abundantly represented in this show.

Though small and deceptively simple, a late 1800s-early 1900s Iroquois basket and lid, woven from sweet grass and plant fiber, reflect indigenous peoples' bond with the natural environment.

This peaceful affinity, depicted in many of the show's earlier works, evolves and deepens through the centuries. Through "Big Botany," we watch artists, scientists and others respond to an increased knowledge and awareness that human beings are inextricably dependent on the natural world.

In photographer Karl Blossfeldt's early 20th-century black and white floral imagery, we see a highly articulated interpretation of the geometrical and mathematical elements in these forms. However, Blossfeldt doesn't stop there; he elevates his vision to a more philosophical level.

"My flower documents should contribute to restoring the relationship to nature. They should reawaken a sense for nature," Blossfeldt wrote.

Contemporary artists sound the alarm

The exhibit's contemporary artists communicate a compelling urgency to accept our responsibility to and for the natural world.

"The most current exhibits look at technology, climate change and the destruction and disregard for plant life," says Goddard. "The artists reveal their own regard and respect for this life and how to strike a balance, or return to a healthier reverence for plant life."

Seeds, though tiny, command a formidable place in works in which artists address bioengineering, sustainability and biodiversity.

In her series "Archiving Eden: The Vaults," photographer Dornith Doherty photographed the world's largest seed banks to document their crucial role in the face of climate change and the extinction of natural species.

Crafted from an antique Boy Scouts of America rucksack, cotton batting, plastic containers and seeds, "The Seed Smuggler's Luggage," artist and environmentalist Mark Dion's addresses questions surrounding the ethics of biotechnological enterprises.

Kahn & Selesnick's "King of Weeds" forms part of the narrative of their recent performance and installation series, "Truppe Fledermaus & The Carnival at the End of the World." The "King of Weeds," a leaf-covered figure with a long history in folkloric traditions, can be viewed as a symbol of invasive species spread by climate change and human migration.

"Big Botany" also includes several site-specific projects created by artists-in-residence.

In her immersive, large-scale murals, Sandy Winters uses printmaking, drawing and painting to create an imagined future of biological plant-animal-machine hybrids that are simultaneously humorous and threatening.

“On the one hand my work evinces an underlying preoccupation with procreation and growth as well as the destructiveness characteristic of both nature and the human world; on the other hand there is a recognition of the surface world of whimsy that this process makes possible,” writes Winters.

Outside the museum, Mathias Kessler’s greenhouse installation provides insights into plants’ experiences with stress. Kessler converts their symptoms into sound, providing us a deeper understanding of the plant spirit we might not have known existed.

In their own efforts to raise awareness and understanding, the artistic team of Ackroyd & Harvey has produced many provocative works concerning the natural world, focusing specifically on the role of plants in sustaining life on earth.

For “Big Botany,” Ackroyd & Harvey, who are part of the Spencer Museum’s International Artists-in Residence Program, used grass seed and light to realize photosynthetic portraits and a stencil on a grass seed background. The panoramic stencil replicates the “Satanic Formula,” an equation by ecologist Dr. Ranil Senanayake, that expresses the rise of greenhouse gases at the expense of oxygen due to human activity. The title, “Satanic Formula,” originates from William Blake’s reference to the “dark Satanic Mills” of the early Industrial Revolution and the inception of human activity that has led to the climate crisis.

“We are stripping our oxygen. Trees and plant matter are the only things that replace oxygen,” says Heather Ackroyd. “Our core concern and motivation for our work is this. Our art intersects with our concern for our ecological health and climate change.”

In the work he chose for “Big Botany,” Goddard has given us copious iterations of our relationship with the botanical world, providing opportunities in which this relationship can be both embraced and examined.

“I know that care, respect and affection for plants can be intuitive, instinctual, and that it can also be learned. It is my hope that this catalog and exhibition will help address the inadequacy of human awareness of the plant world,” Goddard said.

“Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World” continues at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi St., Lawrence, Kansas, through July 15. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Monday. For more information 785. 864.4710 or spencerart.ku.edu (<https://spencerart.ku.edu>).



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Anne Marie Hunter is a writer and photographer who holds a B.S. in speech and art history from Northwestern University and a M.A. in Art Education from Southern Oregon University. Her work includes newspaper, magazine and corporate photography and writing assignments and projects. You can view and read her work at annemariehunter.com.

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