

OPENING MARCH 27: 'BIG BOTANY' ADDRESSES CRITICAL ROLE PLANTS PLAY FOR LIFE ON EARTH¹

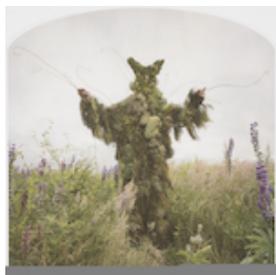
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LAWRENCE — Opening Tuesday at the Spencer Museum of Art, the exhibition "[Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World](#)²" examines the integral relationships between humans and plants through works by more than 50 historical and contemporary artists from the museum's collection, loans and site-specific installations by four artists-in-residence.

Kicking off the exhibition is the Big Botany research [symposium](#)³, beginning with the keynote lecture, "What a Plant Knows," by Daniel Chamovitz of Tel Aviv University, at 5:30 p.m. March 27 in the museum's auditorium. Art historian Giovanni Aloï of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and philosopher

Timothy Morton of Rice University will give lectures April 11 and May 2, respectively. All lectures will be live-streamed through the museum's YouTube [channel](#)⁴.



Blending art and science, "Big Botany" includes prints and photographs, specimens from KU's R. L. McGregor Herbarium, rare books from the KU Spencer Research Library, scientific illustrations and live plants. The exhibition is organized by Stephen Goddard, Spencer Museum of Art associate director and senior curator. Goddard said the interdisciplinary nature of the exhibition aims to capture the critical role that plants play for all life on Earth.

"No one discipline can adequately address, discuss or answer the environmental and ecological challenges facing us," Goddard said. "The questions are getting so big that it takes many disciplines to address them. That's the richness I've tried to bring to the exhibition."

Themes explored throughout "Big Botany" include the scientific study of plant forms, the challenges of sustaining plant diversity, humankind's affinity for the beauty of plants and the imagined future of plants, from biomechanical plant hybrids to a post-human world where plants retake the Earth.

Four artists-in-residence completed site-specific works of art commissioned for the exhibition. American artist Sandy Winters's immersive mixed-media murals depict the clash of nature and culture. English artist-collaborators Ackroyd & Harvey use photosynthesis to bring portraits to life with installations made from sprouted grass. Outside the museum's front entrance, a greenhouse contains Austrian artist Mathias Kessler's installation that monitors and communicates the stress levels of plants through sound.

Major funding for this exhibition was provided by two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and one from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for \$177,000, which is the largest federal grant the museum has ever received. Overall, "Big Botany" has received more external funding than any other exhibition in the Spencer Museum's history.

"The relevance and urgency of the topics addressed in this exhibition are evident by the number of significant grants, gifts and awards that have made this remarkable project possible," Spencer Museum Director Saralyn Reece Hardy said. "We are indebted to these organizations for their consideration of a large-scale and complex project that continues to delve into new domains."

Additional support for "Big Botany" comes from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, the Arts Council State of Vorarlberg, the University of Kansas Research Investment Council, the Asian Cultural Council, the Linda Inman Bailey Exhibitions Fund, the International Artist-in-Residence Fund, KU IT, KU Student Senate and Friends of the Art Museum.

["Big Botany"](#)² will remain on view through July 15. Related events:

- "Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World," on view March 27-July 15
- Lecture: "What a Plant Knows," 5:30-6:30 p.m. March 27, Spencer Museum of Art auditorium. Renowned biologist Daniel Chamovitz, dean of the Faculty of Life Sciences at Tel Aviv University, opens the "Big Botany" exhibition, lecture series and symposium with his keynote lecture, "What a Plant Knows." Illuminating the science and romance of plant biology and demonstrating how

plants are acutely aware of the world around them, Chamovitz's investigations lead to the question: How similar are we to plants?

- Symposium Wednesday, March 28, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Spencer Museum of Art. Organized in conjunction with the exhibition "Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World," this interdisciplinary symposium brings together scientists, artists and other researchers to share their work on plant studies. The symposium is free, but registration is required.
- Lecture: "PLANT-CAPITAL: Objectification and Agency in a Consumerist World" from 5:30-6:30 p.m. April 11 at the Spencer Museum of Art auditorium. Through a discussion of contemporary artworks, art historian Giovanni Aloï of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago maps the paradoxes and contradictions that characterize our relationships with plants as defined by capitalism.
- Gallery Talk: "Up Close: Big Botany" 2-3 p.m. April 22 at the Spencer Museum of Art's Perkins Central Court. Explore the exhibition "Big Botany" with curator Stephen Goddard and discover how artists untangle humankind's historic, contemporary and future relationships with the plant kingdom.
- Lecture: "Inside Big Botany" from 5:30-6:30 p.m. May 2 at the Spencer Museum of Art auditorium. Philosopher Timothy Morton fuses the arts, humanities and scientific scholarship to reconceptualize humankind's relationship with the natural world.

View the [museum's calendar](#)⁵ for a complete listing of "Big Botany" events.

Images: Top, visiting artists Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey work on their installation "The Satanic Formula (after Senanayake)", which is made from sprouted grass. Left, Kahn & Selesnick, "King of Weeds," 2013, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund, 2014.0338

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1. <https://news.ku.edu/2018/03/26/opening-march-27-spencer-museums-big-botany-addresses-critical-role-plants-play-life>
2. <https://spencerart.ku.edu/exhibition/big-botany-conversations-plant-world>
3. <https://spencerart.ku.edu/register-for-big-botany-symposium>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/user/SpencerArtKU>
5. <https://spencerart.ku.edu/calendar#top>
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