

Winter Sweet: an eternity of loving molecules

Photographs survive longer than their subjects. In 2007 Joyce Campbell exhibited the first edition of LA Botanical, an inventory of thirty-nine useful plants frozen in time by the liquid caress of a wet-plate Ambrotype. Hovering in a space between light and dark, the chemical materials of Campbell's Ambrotypes did more than describe the plants themselves, they captured nature as a more-than-human presence at once contemporary and layered through time.

A lot has happened in the intervening years. From 2007–2009 California was in drought, with the first ever state-wide proclamation of emergency. Not long after, 2011–2017 presented one of the longest recorded droughts in the United States: water restrictions were mandated, lawns were left unwatered and many millions of plants and trees died. The drought was accompanied by the very worst wildfires imaginable. Fanned by Diablo winds, the deadliest to human life and the most destructive was the November 2018 Camp fire in Butte County that destroyed the town of Paradise, killing 85 people, and scorching 153,336 acres of land. Unimaginable, and yet true. The hazards have not gone away. On 22 September 2022 the Los Angeles Times reported that “California is so hot and dry that not even soaking rain can ease fall fire peril.”

In this context, Campbell's LA Botanical remains a document of survival. LA Botanical is a contemporary herbal: a record of plants and their uses — edible, medicinal, weapon, stimulant, building material — sourced from the urban environment of a sprawling and luminous city. As such LA Botanical is a tool of awareness: eat this, drink this, sniff here, stroke there, listen, don't touch. The series offers sensory and visible evidence of the Anthropocene: the new geological age where elemental planetary relationships are rendered unpredictable and deadly. Living in California, Anna Tsing, an anthropologist of plants and mushrooms and life, writes:

Industrial transformation turned out to be a bubble of promise followed by lost livelihoods and damaged landscapes ... And yet: such documents are not enough. If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope ... Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival.

These plants survive. In 2016 the Anthropocene Working Group lead by British geologist Jan Zalasiewicz announced that the planet had left the stable atmospheres of the previous 12,000 years known as the Holocene. Now, there was a new concept that described the physical, chemical, and biological instabilities and unpredictabilities that have resulted from human actions. As a working metaphor for human impacts on a planetary scale the Anthropocene offers those of us working in the arts and humanities an opportunity to entangle our observations of people with those of all species that share the living planet. Thinking with the Anthropocene inevitably turns to timelines, global signals, and golden spikes: moments when humans have made an effort to control planetary beings, moments of collaborative (and co-opted) survival. The domestication of animals and the development of agriculture are such markers that have left their traces everywhere. everywhere.

The human domestication of plants long predates the Anthropocene, and yet has become ever more urgent within it. Perhaps, more so than animals, plants have always been our companions. Plants have been used to modify states of being, and nurture bodies. Plants can save and they can kill. In 1545 the Padua Orto Botanica was founded as Europe's first Horto Medicinale, or medical botanical garden. It was born from an urgent need for consistency in plant identification. Padua was already a site of medicine and learning, however an increase in therapeutic and medical uses of plants (the result of a sudden burst of printed information (blame Gutenberg for this one)) had meant that medical practitioners were making deadly mistakes.

The garden allowed the university to permanently set the boundaries of knowledge, and a visit to the garden enabled correct classifications to be made. It was a gathering place for plants from all over the known world. And yet, the relationship between people, medicine, ritual and plants long predates these early modern forms of knowing and classification. In the 1950s, at Shanidar Cave in Iraqi Kurdistan, American Anthropologist Ralph Solecki unearthed a burial group of Neanderthal skeletons dated to between 35,000 and 45,000 years old. With them were samples of pollen from eight different species, which Solecki concluded was evidence of ritual burial with flowers, an observation that inspired Jean Auel's epic speculative fiction *Earth's Children: Clan of the Cave Bear*. Time cycles around us.

Both material and allegorical, LA Botanical documents not only these moments where humans meet plants, but also where together they meet earth, fire, air and water: the elemental ghosts of the planet. In short, Campbell's images are animated by the Anthropocene. A media storehouse for visual memories of what once was, photography has always enabled the vision it captures to survive.

In a 2014 interview with Heather Davis, a New York based interdisciplinary theorist of ecologies and plastic, French social historian of science Bruno Latour explained that the contemporary sciences of climate, what he names the "Gaia sciences" must look and feel different:

"So when it doesn't look like big sciences, and it doesn't look like basic science, and it doesn't look like fundamental science, what then? It's the science of care, and it's as surprising for physicists and mathematicians as it is in women's studies. What does care do? What is care?"

These ghostly images care. Together they present a natural science of the Anthropocene: a powerful narrative of animate being. Since 2007, many other artists and writers have turned to plants whether as species that have shared our urban grey spaces or as species that might contribute their bodies as alternatives to the delirium of petrochemical fuelled consumption. Plants offer new potential as biofuel, clothing, medicine and shelter. They offer hope. Alongside the transformations of the past 15 years these plant bodies documented within the chemical ecologies of Campbell's Ambrotypes demand to be read again. Amidst the layers of grime and modernity, of exploitation, extraction, colonisation and capital, they quietly whisper, pay attention, notice, this.