

# Hyperallergic

## Archiving Eden Ahead of the Apocalypse

- by Laura C. Mallonee on November 26, 2014



“Door, Svalbard Global Seed Vault” by Dornith Doherty, 2010, 30.25 x 38.77 inches, archival pigment print (click to enlarge)

The apocalypse may be a popular trope in sci-fi films and mass market fiction, but it’s not something most people have ever actually prepared for. To do so would be an act of both cynicism and faith, as survival in the wake of the earth’s destruction seems hopeful at best. But, luckily for us, scientists are planning for the worst. By refrigerating plant seeds in 1,400 repositories around the world, they aim to preserve botanical life — and by extension, human life — for ages to come.

Photographer [Dornith Doherty](#) has spent the past six years documenting their efforts in the series *Archiving Eden*, an image of which is currently on view in Crystal Bridges Museum’s [State of the Art](#) exhibition. We spoke with the University of North Texas photography professor about her journey from reading about seed banks in *The New Yorker* to finding herself x-raying seeds in the Arctic Circle at one of the most protected seed vaults on earth.

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**Laura C. Mallonee:** *Why did you start photographing seed vaults?*

**Dornith Doherty:** *Archiving Eden* was inspired by an article about the opening of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault near the North Pole. When I read John Seabrook’s [“Sowing for Apocalypse”](#) in *The New Yorker*, the simultaneously pessimistic and optimistic aspects of a global seed vault

built to save the world's botanical life from catastrophic events made a profound impression on me.

**L.C.M.:** *How did you access these carefully guarded sites?*

**D.D.:** Gaining access was difficult to do, because seed banks play an important part in food security. However, because of my background with other environmental projects and the support of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, I had the very good fortune to meet Dr. Dave Ellis, a research scientist at the United States National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation, now head of the International Potato Center in Peru. His support and collaboration made it possible to expand *Archiving Eden* to include seed banks in England, Norway, Russia, the Netherlands, Italy, Australia, Brazil, and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.



"Kuban Experimental Station, Russia" by Dornith Doherty, 2014, archival pigment photograph (click to enlarge)

**L.C.M.** *What does it feel like to walk into a seed bank?*

**D.D.:** Seed banks fill me with awe. It's hard to express the emotion evoked when standing in the presence of thousands of delicate sparks of life in a state of suspended animation. The vaults are so cold and dry it takes your breath away. Even in the middle of summer, you have to wear a polar suit to spend any time inside of them. Surprisingly, there is a deafening roar of huge fans.

**L.C.M.:** *How did you approach photographing such sterile spaces?*

**D.D.:** I have always loved 19th century expeditionary photography that brought images of remote locations to light. Initially, I worked with a view camera to capture in exquisite detail the spaces and technology of seed banking. I'm interested in how photographs of the architecture, technology, and types of collections reveal our cultural aspirations and fears, which in turn govern what is saved and why. Scientific heritage, philosophical perspectives, and access to economic resources are made manifest in the photographs.

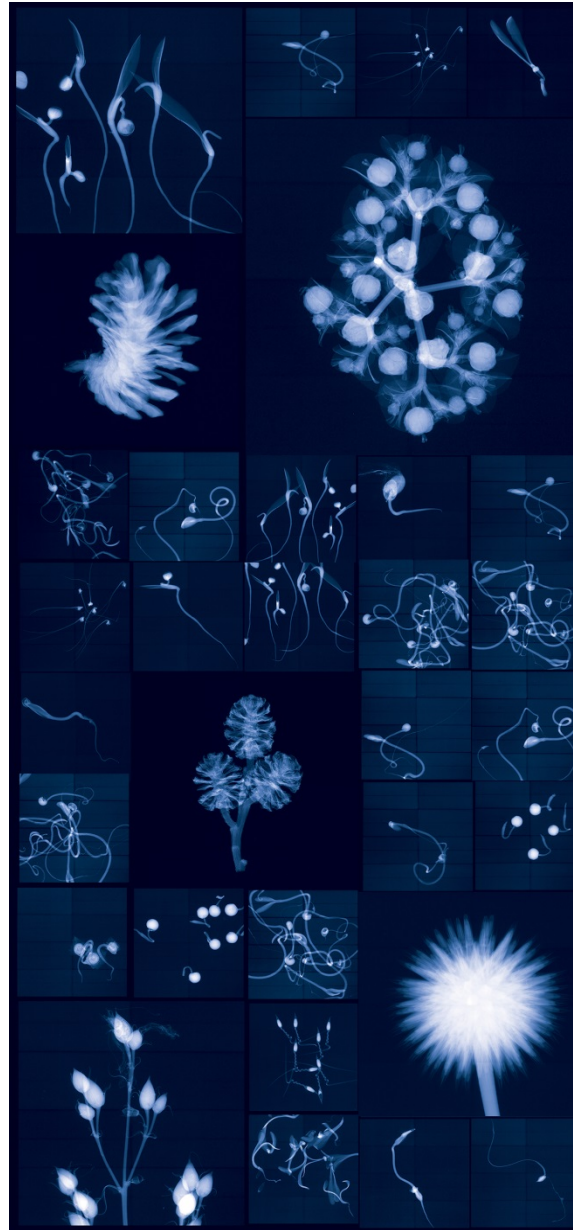


"Columbian Exchange I" by Dornith Doherty, 2014, 35 x 50 inches, archival pigment print (click to enlarge)

**L.C.M.:** *Why did you move from photographing the vaults to photographing the actual seeds?*

**D.D.:** The dual nature of *Archiving Eden* emerged very early in the project. At the second bank I photographed, (the National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation in Fort Collins, Colorado), I asked permission to use their research x-ray equipment in order to make digital x-rays of seeds and research plants from their collection. Upon return to my studio in Texas, I used the images as the basis for a suite of collages, which allowed me to address, in a more openly poetic way, my wonder in encountering a massive vault filled with an archive of life.

The photographs and the x-ray collages are linked; they are captured at the same time and place and express two sides of the quest to preserve life. The scale of time that is ingrained in the process of seed banking, which seeks to make these sparks last for two hundred years or more, makes the life cycle very much on my mind while I work. I also contemplate the elusive goal of stopping time in relation to living materials, which at some moment, we would all like to do.



“Millennium Seed Bank Research Seedlings and Lochner-Stuppy Test Garden” by Dornith Doherty, 2011, 35 x 76 inches, digital chromogenic lenticular print (click to enlarge)

**L.C.M.:** *You’ve been working with collage ever since you began your first photographic series, [Constructed Landscapes](#), in 1997. What is it about the medium that appeals to you?*

**D.D.:** The collage appearance of my earlier work is somewhat misleading — they are actually made from one negative. The stewardship of natural resources and the challenging complexity of human interaction with our world are of utmost importance to me. Prior to *Archiving Eden*, my focus was on the cultural aspects of contemporary managed landscapes in national parks,



historic gardens, and nature preserves (*Temporal Screens* and *Altered Terrain*); and later, the politically and environmentally contested landscape of the Rio Grande river valley (*Burnt Water/Agua Quemada*). *Constructed Landscapes* is the result of photographing in national parks and nature preserves in the American Southwest and Central America. These “wilderness” sites are giant macro gardens; all are circumscribed, managed, and manipulated by humans. Using collected specimens and human artifacts from the terrain, I assembled them into a still life, illuminated it with projected imagery of the landscape and then the entire assemblage was re-photographed with a view camera. The obvious artifice of the resulting still life mirrors the fabricated aspect of the protected landscape.

**L.C.M.** *How did you develop your long-running interest in the environment?*

**D.D.:** That’s an interesting question, and it’s rather difficult to answer. I have always been interested in the natural world and how our actions influence it. We are living through a key moment, and why not address this grave topic with visual poetry?



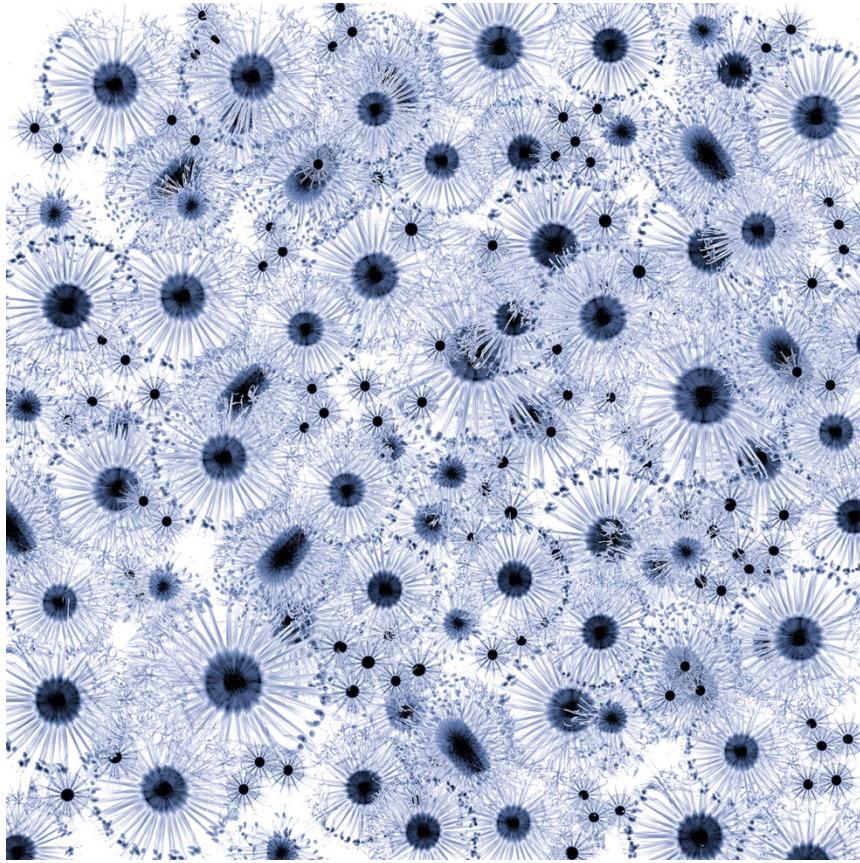
“Papaya Collection, Cruz das Almas, Brazil” by Dornith Doherty, 2013, 45.25 x 43.47 inches, archival pigment print (click to enlarge)

**L.C.M.:** *What did you learn while working on Archiving Eden?*

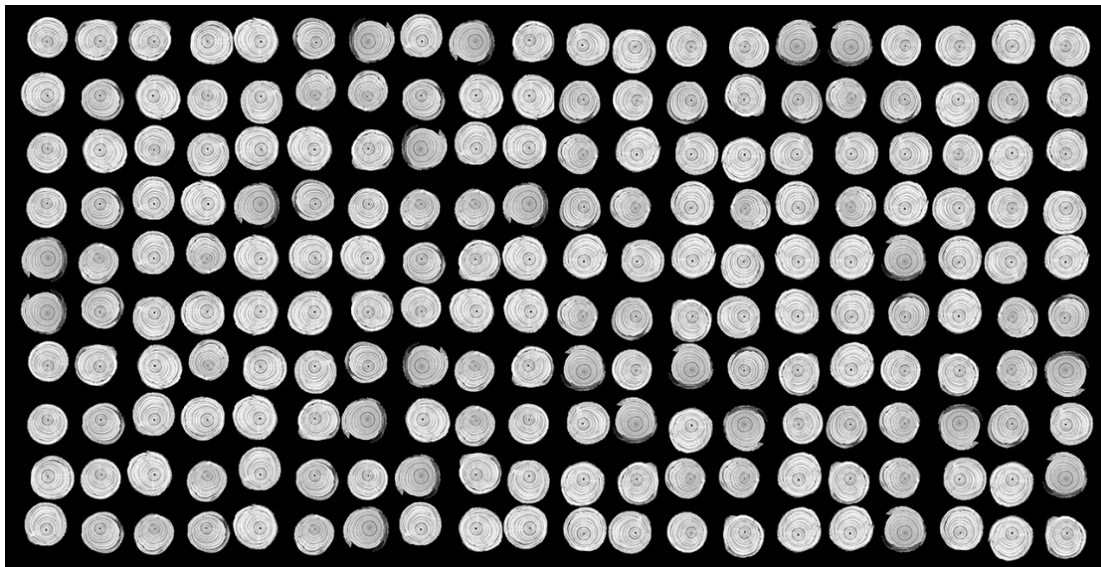
**D.D.:** When confronted by large problems such as climate change and extinction of species we face today, sometimes it seems that individual efforts can’t make a difference. While photographing the seed banks, it became apparent that by saving these seeds, individuals and institutions from around the world were collaborating to ensure the survival of entire plant species, forming part of a heroic effort to preserve life on earth.

**L.C.M.:** *What do you hope will come out of this project?*

**D.D.:** I could not have anticipated what I've photographed at the banks and the images that I've made from the x-rays. And while they are an incomplete and subjective response to this global effort, it is my hope that these poetic visual artifacts may inspire conversation and awareness of this important effort. I am now working on a monograph of the photographs.



"Banksias" by Dornith Doherty, 2014, 36.5 x 36.5 inches, archival pigment print ([click to enlarge](#))

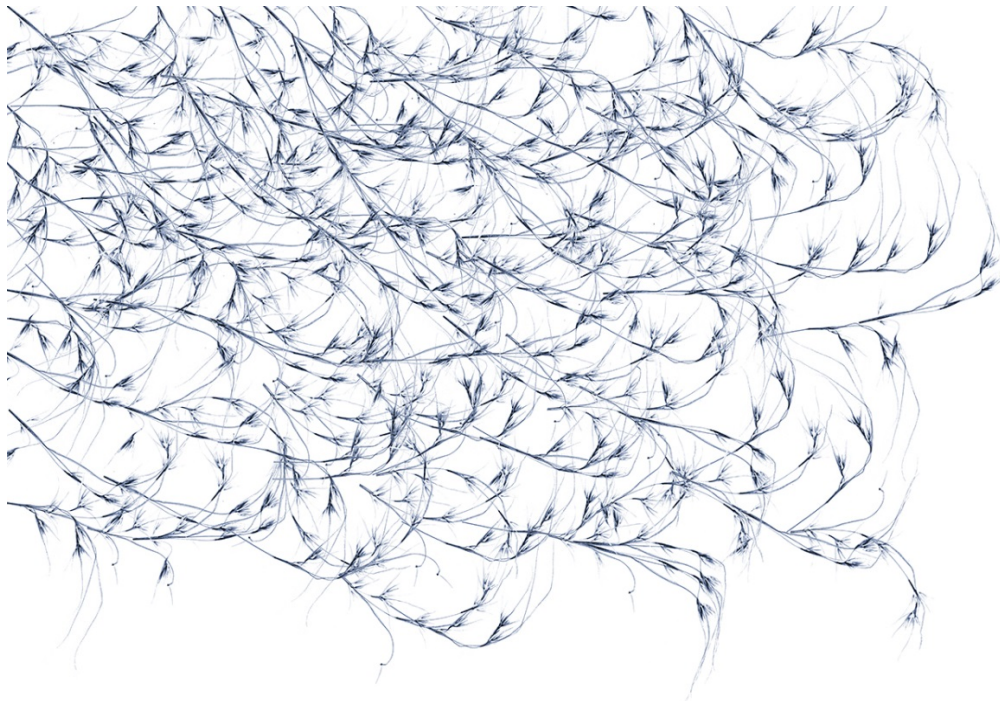


"Wollemi Pine Cross Sections" by Dornith Doherty, 2011, 64.5 x 29.5 inches, archival pigment print ([click to enlarge](#))

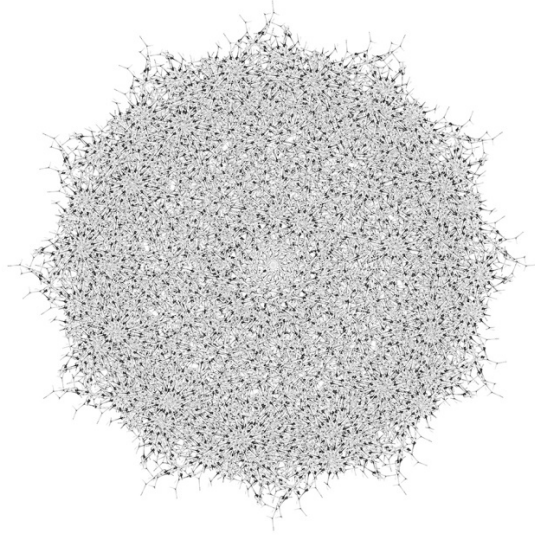




"Finite" by Dornith Doherty, 2014, 56 x 56 inches, archival pigment print



"Kangaroo Grass" by Dornith Doherty, 2014, 45 x 30 inches, archival pigment print (click to enlarge)



“Epiphyte” by Dornith Doherty, 2014, 36.5 x 36.5 inches, archival pigment print



“Smallest Seeds in the World, Australia” by Dornith Doherty, 2013 30.25 x 24.2 inches, archival pigment print (click to enlarge)