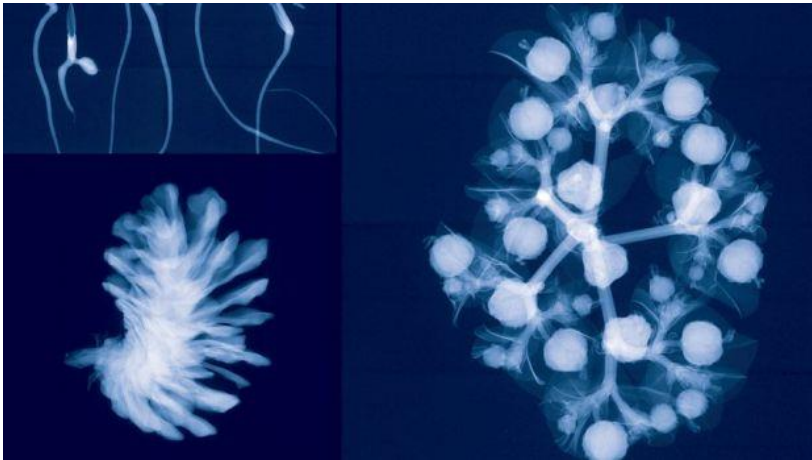


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Planetary Gardening at Huw Davies Gallery Photoaccess is a quality exhibition

By Peter Haynes



Dornith Doherty's Millennium Seed Bank Research Seedlings and Lochner-Stuppy Test Garden No.1 is part of a beautifully realised set of images in the Planetary Gardening exhibition. *Photo: Dornith Doherty*

This is a very impressive exhibition. It showcases works by 19 artists who, according to one of the curators Laura McLean, "take the viewer on a journey exploring the symbiotic relationship between the cultural and the chemical, the organic and the technological, and the agency of human and non-human actors, to nurture new subjectivities attentive to the tending of the earth".

Using a range of photographic mediums (C-prints, video, rayograms/giclee prints, pigment print) the selected artists present highly individual works that, despite their extraordinary variety, unite in a visually cohesive and exciting whole.

The first work, *Fukushima Daisy*, by Japan-based artist @san_kaido is a small (13 x 18cm) image of a daisy. Its scale is inoffensive, even apologetic. The image, however, delivers a double take. The "daisy" of the title has morphed into a group of genetically malformed flora, its prettiness holding a foreboding truth. *Fukushima Daisy* sets a provocatively interrogative pose that characterises the whole exhibition. The curators (McLean and Ashley Lumb) have gathered together a clever collection that is simultaneously seductive and disturbing.

Dornith Doherty's *Millennium Seed Bank Research Seedlings and Lochner-Stuppy Test Garden 1, 3 and 4* is a beautifully realised set of images. Redolent of the 18th century's need to classify the natural world it captures the architectural evanescence that comprises the morphologies of the various seeds she has chosen to pictorialise. The individual forms float not on a scientific glass slide but rather in an ethereal sea of blue whose tonal richness alludes to the richness of the plant world. Doherty's other piece, *Finite*, also holds that marvellous density seen in the previous work but here manifests a dynamic kineticism underscored by its circular format.

Robyn Stacey's *Leidenmaster II* is a homage to 17th-century Dutch vanitas still life and the rich symbolism that populated those works. Its large scale and detailed realism is played off nicely against the absorbingly beautiful and luminous abstraction of Renata Buziak's video *Medicinal Plant Cycles*.

The 30 rayogram/giclee prints of Anais Tondeur's *Chernobyl Herbarium* are outstanding and the manner in which the curators have displayed them is aesthetically and thematically seriously effective. The sepia tones with their connotations of early photography are in fact "created by the direct impact of radioactive herbarium specimens grown for scientific study ... onto photosensitive paper". Each print holds its own visual integrity that is not diminished by the sophisticated combination of the 30 individual units into the whole.

Contrast is successfully achieved by the judicious placement of Merrilyn Fairskye's *Waste Plant*. This starkly intimidating image is a purposefully intrusive inclusion that provides a powerful comment on the impact of human activity on the natural world. By contrast Janet Laurence's *Resuscitation Garden* is an eloquent elision of sound and image in which barely there images accompanied by (almost) musically opaque sounds offer optimistic possibilities for the future role of science.

Suzanne Treister's HFT *The Gardener/Botanical Prints* is another beautifully effective set of images. The accumulative effect of the 20 giclee prints in combination is stunning while the individual impact of each work is never denied. The subtle reference to the human need to categorise and classify especially as promulgated during the 18th-century Enlightenment is intelligently and embracingly handled here.

Melanie Bonajo's video *Night Soil/ Fake Paradise*'s figurative language is perhaps a little out of whack for me here. Also, its 32:09 duration is somewhat demanding of viewers in an otherwise nicely detailed selection. Joe Hamilton's *Indirect Flight* is an aerial view of a sort of quilted landscape composed of various of man's infiltrations into the earth's surface. Its quiet didacticism is a playful ploy to much of the other work in the exhibition.

Planetary Garden is a serious, interesting and informative exhibition. It exemplifies the importance of art in its ability to embrace and interrogate our world in aesthetically exciting and visually powerful languages. The curators deserve congratulations. This is an exhibition not to miss.

Huw Davies Gallery PhotoAccess at the Manuka Arts Centre. Until March 26.