

Amon Carter Museum hosts Dornith Doherty: Archiving Eden, now through January 14.

By Steve Carter – 08.17.17



Acclaimed North Texas artist Dornith Doherty has been photographing seed banks around the world since 2008, and the capstone exhibition, Dornith Doherty: Archiving Eden, has just opened at the Amon Carter. The show is a spellbindingly beautiful collection of 15 large-scale images, both of the seed banks themselves and digital collages from x-ray images Doherty took in the labs. Patron spoke with Doherty at the Museum the day before the August 12 opening.

PATRON: Your “*Archiving Eden*” project has consumed you for nearly 10 years—does the origin of this exploration date back to when you learned of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, the so-called “doomsday vault”?

DORNITH DOHERTY: Yes, I’d read an article in *The New Yorker* magazine called *Sowing for Apocalypse*, by John Seabrook. It’s a great title, right? And at that point I didn’t know what a seed bank was. I read about it and I thought, “Oh my gosh.” We are surrounded with this narrative of doom and gloom about climate change. And I grew up in Houston as a child of the Cold War where we were under the desks at school with the nuclear threat. We grew up with that narrative where the world would end by nuclear holocaust.

Over the decade, North Texas photographer Dornith Doherty has travelled the globe to construct a visual meditation on the planet’s botanical diversity by showcasing the work of

international seed banks and sharing the pure aesthetic pleasure of seeds and their transformations into plants. This exhibition celebrates the completion of that project. At a time when some ecologists are suggesting that we are losing more than ten animal and plant species each day, the display provides eloquent confirmation of the close relationship between botany and biophilia.

And then in the 70s they started talking about the hole in the ozone layer and awareness of global climate change came to the fore. And for me, being steeped in this apocalyptic vision of climate change, and the fact that it feels like no one's really taking action, what struck me about Seabrook's article was this little ray of hope, that's like simultaneously super-apocalyptic but also kind of utopian, that a group of scientists would get together and create an ark on the North Pole.

I thought, "That's the most interesting thing," and then to see that there were 1,400 seed banks at the time; there's actually 1,700. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault opened in 2008; I saw that article and I said, "I don't know how I'm going to get there, but I have to get there." I started researching and I found out that the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center was collaborating with one of the Svalbard partners. I made contact with somebody there and explained that I was a professor and photographer and interested in research-based art and that I wanted to photograph the seed bank there, and they said "yes." And so from there, they knew the people on the national seed bank so I met a very influential scientist there who was key to the success of the project; his name is Dave Ellis, and at the time he was a research scientist and he was very accommodating and allowed me to go in. And then when I saw the x-ray machine, he said "yes" when I asked if I could use that and x-ray the seeds and the clones that they were creating.

P: *How difficult was working with x-ray technology, compared to your usual cameras of choice? What was the learning curve like?*

DD: They had these tabletop x-ray machines that were set up for the researchers to use; there were usually one or two people in charge of them. They were kind of careful with the settings. It looks sort of like a microwave, and they have different heights, a door that closes and some buttons you push. Because I'm a photographer I was thinking, "Well what if we tried *this*?" I could adjust the contrast and the exposure in order to get something. In some cases they would really let me go to town on it. I ended up using all the x-ray machines that people used in the different labs...I ended up knowing them pretty well.

It's not hard. I would have to adjust it to get the tissue samples because there's so much water in them. That's a super technical answer, but most of the seeds are very dry by the time they're x-rayed. But the tissue samples are denser so it's harder to get this really delicate detail with things that have a lot of water in them.

P: *How many seed banks did you ultimately visit in the course of this project?*

DD: I think it was nearly 20 seed banks, on four continents: South America, North America, Australia, and Europe. There were several in the U.S., one bank in Italy, two banks in Brazil, one bank in England, one bank in the Netherlands, three banks in Russia, three in Australia, and then Svalbard in Norway.



Dornith Doherty: Archiving Eden, August 9, 2017–January 14, 2018

P: *Five of the photos in the exhibition document the seed banks themselves—There’s something surreal about those photos, almost like an espionage thriller—*

DD: **Oh, good.** And it really felt that way. When you were there at Svalbard it felt like that, it felt very much like you’re in a James Bond set.

P: *The world today feels like it’s on the brink of catastrophe, and yet your project shows that there are scientists and environmentalists in the US, Australia, Russia, England, Norway, Brazil, Italy, the Netherlands, all very concerned about the future of the planet.*

DD: Right, and they’re collaborating! There are these far-flung little tiny labs that have so few members, and yet they’re super mission-based, and they’re exchanging ideas and techniques with each other, and even the plants themselves get traded. They’re sending samples back and forth as they’re trying to collaborate on these key issues. There is this network of collaboration that just seems really important to me, and that’s where I find the hope. It’s like all this doom and then a little spark of hope, that somebody’s got a plan.

P: *In a sense you’re a voice crying in the wilderness, a canary in a coalmine, Paul Revere with a wakeup call, but primarily you’re an artist. With this project was it hard to strike a balance between those impulses?*

DD: That was not ever my intention. That was not the reason I did it. I did it because I thought, for all those reasons, just how amazingly interesting this effort is and the fact that I found hope in it... Bringing attention to the issue is positive but it’s not polemical. There’s a lot of fragility but there’s also a lot of resilience in the pictures. My thing is if people just think about it or become more aware of this, that’s interesting. But like all artists, that’s not what I’m thinking about when I make the work. It’s not like advertising, it’s not trying to convince anybody of anything—it’s just my interest, right?

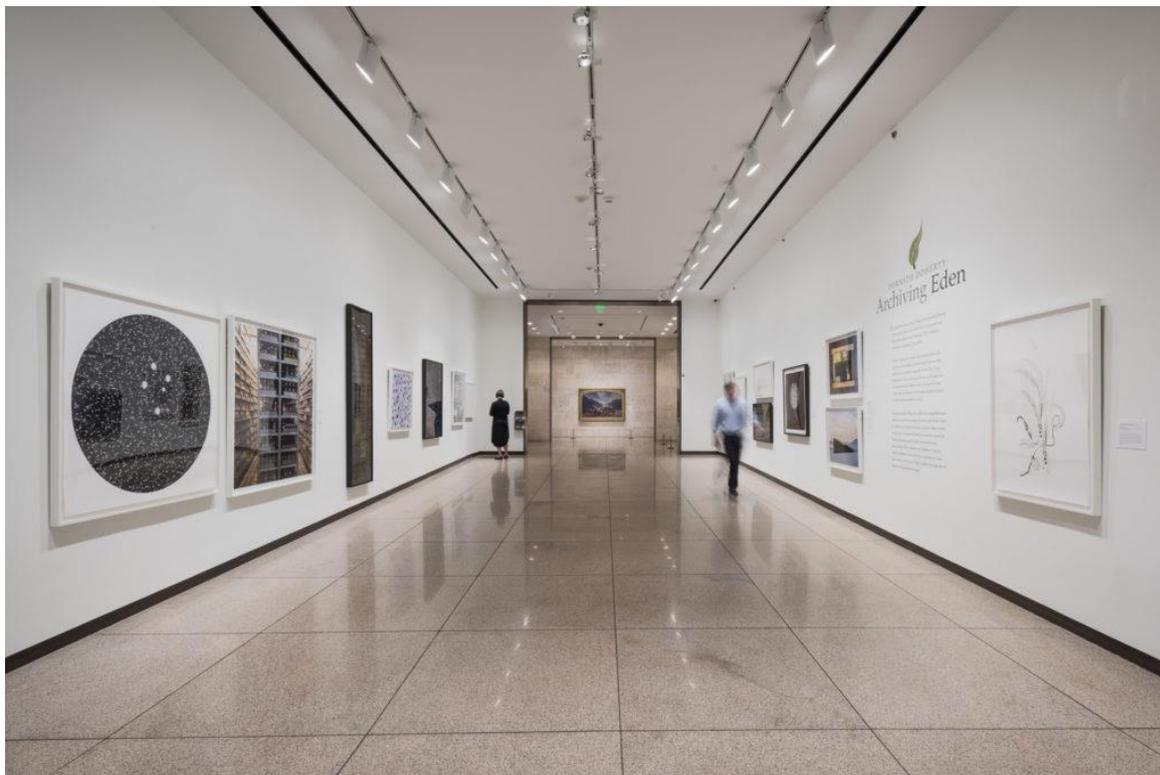
P: Thinking about seed banks as a failsafe, there's so much that's ominous and foreboding about the subject—a person could get very alarmed, depressed, but what are the other takeaways?

DD: The thing that I really think about, that I've learned from this doomsday scenario project, is that it's an overwhelming problem and there's no answer and nothing you can do can change it—that's how I experience the reporting on climate change. But for me what's interesting is the fact that individual action can make a difference, like that story that 200 years ago some guy threw a bag of seeds in a leather pouch and ended up saving the species. So in making these attempts, even if they may be futile they're not completely futile because it will change the face of the future, it will make things better, it will succeed on some level.

The scientists are focused on feeding an ever-growing population. And my interest in it is saving biodiversity of all plants—if I could direct what they do, I would say that. But I think that it does make a change; they are affecting change, they are making the future better. It really does boil down to these individual actions brought together in a collective way: you do make a change and you are going to affect the planet in a positive way.

P: Is this the culmination of the *Archiving Eden* project?

DD: I love this project so much, and I could just keep on going. I'm so fascinated, and all the stories, every bank, has some crazy interesting story. But I'm moving on. I'm starting a new project that I don't really have the language for yet...it's another super egghead-y project that I need to unpack for people, in the same way I did with seed banks.



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