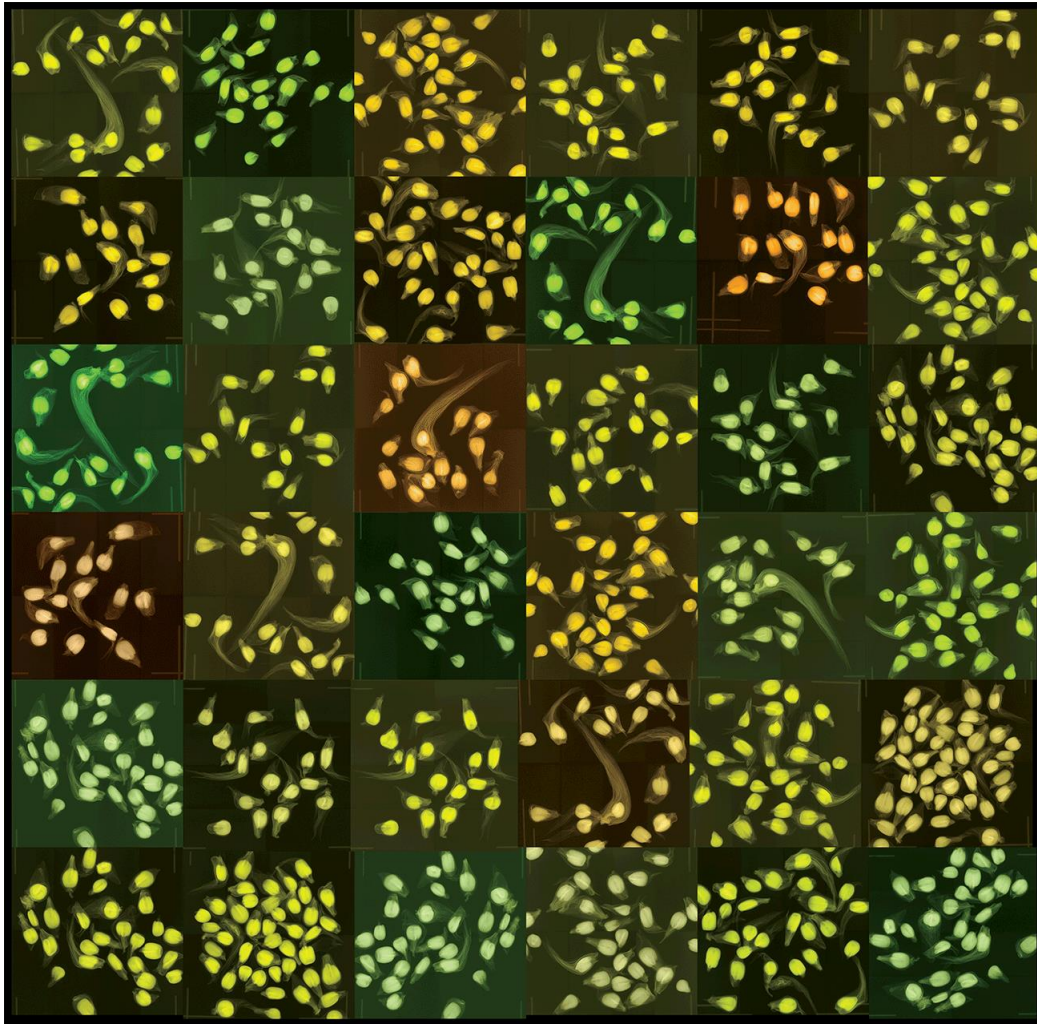


exposure

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Sowing the Seeds of Time: Dornith Doherty and the Archiving Eden Project

Interview by Rachel Cox



Corn Seedlings (2009), © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Digital Chromogenic Lenticular Photograph

Dornith Doherty's photographic project Archiving Eden is a multi faceted approach to addressing the worlds concern of decreasing biodiversity and the extinction of natural species in the face of climate change.

For the past ten years she has collaborated with scientists at international seed banks around the world including banks in North America, England, Brazil, Italy, The Netherlands, Russia, and Australia.

Doherty's photographs include detailed images of highly secured isolated vaults set deep within the earth; doomsday facilities that act as human kinds final chance if the worst should happen and the flora of the planet was suddenly lost. Additionally, the project includes expansive landscapes, greenhouses, incubation chambers,

various laboratory equipment, as well as highly enigmatic collages made from x-ray images recording seeds at various stages of germination.

The vast amount of resources required for this magnitude of preservation, as well as global politics that shape this effort, is illuminated in her recent monograph *Archiving Eden* published this past July by Schilt Publishing.

Dornith has been involved with the Society for Photographic Education since the early 90's. She has served on the national board and is a familiar face at regional and national conferences. As a former student of Dornith's, I have found that the valuable support and peer review offered through connections made at these conferences was instilled in her even as an undergraduate. Recently I had the opportunity to speak with her more about her ongoing project *Archiving Eden*.



View of the bay and airport from Svalbard Global Seed Vault (2010), © Dornith Doherty, from the series *Archiving Eden*, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph

RC: How did you first come to know about the vaults and did this discovery act as a catalyst in any way when developing the project?

DD: I first read about the opening of the Svalbard Seed Vault in the *New Yorker* and immediately knew I wanted to photograph it. I was inspired by the hopeful/pessimistic nature of the seed banks. On one hand, the volunteers, scientists and institutions from around the world were collaborating to create a global botanical backup system, but on the other, had this bleak gravity of climate change and political instability which created the need for an in accessible arc located near the north pole.

Svalbard is only used for storage so no research is actually done there. However, I was inspired to expand the project beyond Svalbard through research as well as talking with scientists who recommended other interesting or important banks around the world. I also had this desire to record the spaces and technology developed to preserve the seeds for 200 years or more and this led to becoming interested in recording different kinds of large institutional banks, as well as specific topics like clones, citrus and potatoes.

RC: The project is incredibly ambitious. Not only in longevity as a ten year project, but in the amount of travel, research, and networking needed to find the subjects you chose to capture. How did you go about funding this kind of expeditionary endeavor?

DD: At first after I read about Svalbard I researched if there was a somewhat local tie to the Svalbard vault closer to me and I eventually found a partner institution only about four hours away by car. I researched who I might contact at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, and using my qualifications of previous projects: Fulbright Fellowship, National Park program residency, and a history of photographing environmentally oriented projects as proof of my seriousness of purpose, I wrote a query letter. I then drove to Austin for the preliminary interview and returned a few times to photograph their seed bank project work with England's Millennium Seed Bank in England on their schedule. I used the resulting photographs and professional affiliations as the basis to make contact with the US National Bank in Colorado. So I traveled there

to photograph in conjunction with an SPE conference, therefore the university covered my expenses. Besides this one account, the rest of my early travels were self-funded. After photographing in Colorado, Texas, and in England I had an initial body of work that was appropriate to use for funding proposals. I applied over a few years and received two semesters of leave and a couple of university grants (about \$5K each) to fund travel to Svalbard and England. The rest of the project was funded through things like print sales and the Guggenheim which allowed me to travel to Brazil, Russia, and Australia.



Vault Interior, National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation, USA, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph

RC: When looking at the photographs made in and around the vaults I think a lot about access. Access to information as well as access to space through formidable security measures and bleak isolation. Was this something you thought about when making the pictures and did it factor into your approach at all?

DD: Well it did affect my working process. I ended up photographing almost twenty banks over four continents, and there were these very small groups of scientists working in relative isolation. But then they were also connected to this network of other scientists exchanging information on research; about the methodologies and equipment needed to make seeds survive for 200 years or more. This is tricky to do, and I tie this back to the Columbian exchange which started in 1493, when Christopher Columbus brought plants, ideas and even disease agents back to the Old World.

I had to work on the project for two years before I went to Svalbard. In some banks they would assign a minder because they were really concerned with food security.

The US National vault is governed by the NSA because of its importance to food security. It's a cold war idea and was built with the notion of functioning as a fail safe, worst case scenario, type structure.

RC: Was it difficult at all communicating your intentions with the scientists? You both are professionals in your disciplines, but speak totally different languages, and I'm interested in how those conversations got started.



Map Room, Desert Legume Research Station, Tucson, Arizona, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph



Herbarium, Vavilov Institute of Plant Industry, Russia (2012), © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph

DD: When I tried to start photographing these places I had to gain the scientists trust in a very quick period of time, and that got progressively easier as I came to know more and could essentially speak their language. I don't think I could have convinced scientists to take me seriously if I just contacted them without working hard on developing a previous deep line of creative research that was environmentally informed, and also possess the ability to explain it to them.

This is a small community, and after working with a couple of key people they would exchange information about me or recommend me to another scientist and I eventually built up the credentials that it became much easier to gain access to the next institution. I worked on the project for two years before I had established trust and a body of work that made me one of only two photographers invited to the opening of the Svalbard Vault in 2010. It took two more years, and lots of work of contacting seed bankers, to be able to photograph the Russian vaults. They had to build trust by seeing the work, hearing me speak about it, and also how I presented it.

Originally, they did not think their work was photographable, but over time, they all were extremely excited to see the images (both x-ray collages and the photographs of the spaces and technology).

RC: I found it incredibly fascinating that each country can only devote a limited amount of resources to this global preservation effort. An image in the book titled, "Seed Accessions, Svalbard Global Seed Vault", reveals a non-descript storage area with thirty boxes of seeds representing what the United States can commit to,

flanked by one box from Uganda, poignantly illustrating the economics of this situation. Were there any other moments where global politics played a role, either in the image making process or through research?



Seed Accessions, Svalbard Global Seed Vault, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph

DD: Oh its all about global politics. I could talk about global politics and seed banking forever, but this particular image was very poignant. The amount of resources that anyone is able to devote is more important than the biodiversity, actually, because it ensures the stability of the species. So for instance, in the spring of 2016 the seed bank in Syria in had to use wheat from the Svalbard collections as a backup strategy. The war going on in Aleppo prevented scientists from literally going into the banks, so a new bank was established in Morocco. They didn't move the existing one from Aleppo, they just made an altogether new bank from the collection stored in the Svalbard vault.

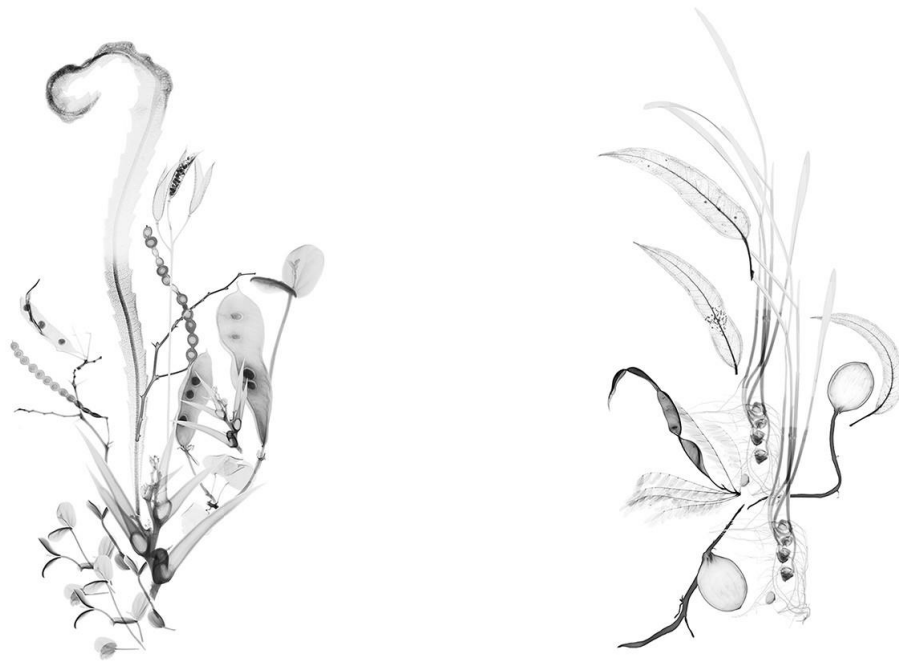
RC: So was that wheat indigenous to Syria?

DD: Yeah. There's a theory of center of origins where various plants can be traced back to as having originated from, and around these centers there's a lot of biodiversity. For example, in Peru there's something like 4,000 different kinds of potatoes, and in Mexico and Central America there is a lot of corn biodiversity considering this is where it originated. In the fertile crescent it's cereal grains and the seed banks are usually built around where those centers are. When these seeds go extinct due to climate or politics the banks are literally the last sites where the seeds exist.

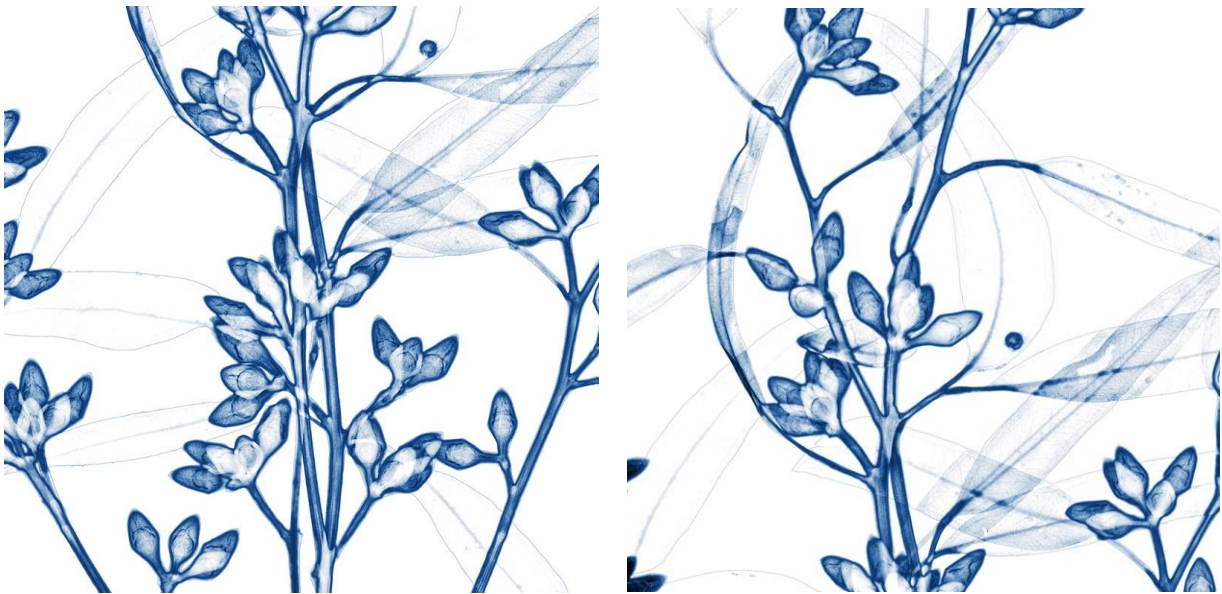
So that's why the narrative of food wars and global politics underlines the necessity for places like Svalbard.

RC: Another facet to this project are collages which you have assembled from x-ray captures of various germinated seeds. The pictures are incredibly expressive and outwardly different than the highly objective

“straight” photographs from the vaults and laboratories. How did these two approaches to image making inform each other?



{from l — r}: Columbian Exchange I and Columbian Exchange III, 2014, Archival Pigment, 35 x 50 inches, Digital Collage made from x-rays captured at the National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation (USA) and PlantBank (Australia) © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present



{from l — r}: Eucalyptus II and Eucalyptus III (2014), Archival Pigment, 20 x 20 inches, Digital Collage made from x-rays captured at the PlantBank (Australia) © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present

DD: When I was photographing the vaults I was paying close attention to detail and having them be as descriptive as possible, as large as possible. Then I was also at the same time collecting the x-ray files from the germinated seeds the scientists had been growing for me and I was taking these back to my studio. For me, these allow an opening up of the conversation and are about many of the themes I see. Some of the bigger

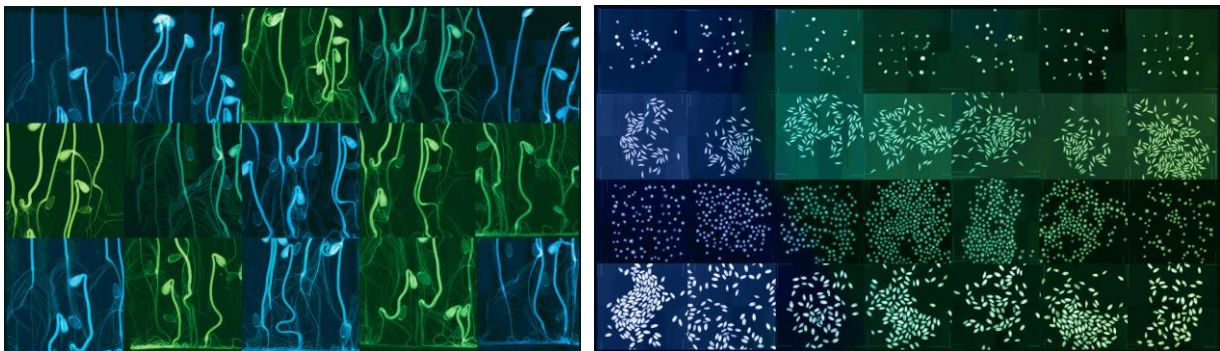
inquiries can be addressed with a more open ended question; scale of the collections or the melancholy felt considering the end of a species, difficult subjects that are almost invisible.

For instance, in the photograph titled, “Smallest Seeds in the World, Australia”, you have a little tiny spark of life that may be the size of dust and yet it is resilient enough to withstand 200 years and then still create new life.

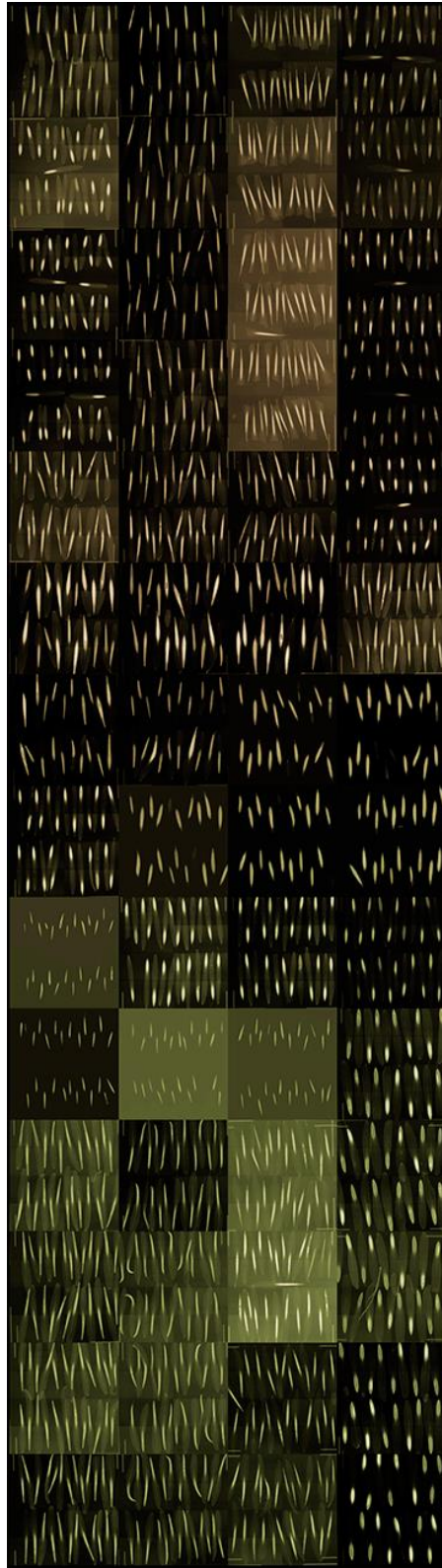
Those kinds of bigger picture, more profound, questions cannot be addressed in the specifics of the day to day “how it’s done” approach. The collages allow for more open ended considerations of philosophical and anthropological questions of what we are doing and why.



Smallest Seeds in the World, Australia, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Archival Pigment Photograph



(from l — r): Sunflowers (2009) and Thirst, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present, Digital Chromogenic Lenticular Photograph



1400 Ash Tree Seeds, 2009, Digital Chromogenic Lenticular Photograph, 96 X 28 inches, © Dornith Doherty, from the series Archiving Eden, 2008 — present,

RC: That's super interesting. Can you elaborate further on any specific questions this line of research has opened up for you?

DD: Well, I definitely question the possibility of stopping time in living materials. As an example, "1400 Ash Tree Seeds," has a very specific number of seeds in the title which refers to the process of trying to categorize, classify and contain. This piece is a lenticular print that changes from green to brown as you move past it. This

tension between stillness of the print and the changing of the color reflects my focus on the elusive goal of stopping time in living materials as well as the drying process central to the methodology of saving seeds.

Also, these seed banks cannot collect and preserve all biodiversity, but must make choices. Even the most well-funded banks have limits on what they can preserve and even the US bank is influenced by what congress is willing to fund. Some banks try to save a small sample of a broad range of species; others try to collect a deep collection of many varieties of economically important plants, like agricultural plants. How should the decisions about what to save be made? Should these collections be anthropocentric?

RC: Your practice is heavily rooted in research, travel, and collaboration. Then there is all the follow up of dissemination, exhibitions, etc. What part of this process excites you the most?

DD: Its about when I make the pictures. When I see the picture and I get that thrill of “Oh I’m gonna look at this!” I recognize the photo and I get super excited. Back when we used film, it used to be you’d have the delay of, “did you get it, did you get?”, and you’d either be “oh I missed it”, or “Yes! I did get it!”, and I’m all about that moment.



Rachel Cox (b. 1984) lives and works in Dallas, TX. Cox’s work has recently been published in Vice Magazine, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, and The British Journal of Photography. Cox’s monograph Shiny Ghost was published December 2016, through Aint Bad Editions. Additionally, she was selected as the curator for the state of Michigan in The States Project series through Lenscratch Magazine.

Cox received her MFA from the University of New Mexico in 2013, and is represented by Talley Dunn Gallery in Dallas, TX.

To view the author’s work, visit <http://www.rachelcoxphotography.com>.