

# Our Ancestors Bloom Overground

A group show curated by Joana P. R. Neves.

Works by Lise Duclaux, Maja Escher, Gözde Ilkin, Landra and Barbara Nicholls.

I am thinking about the idea of nature and how to destroy it. The constructs of nature, culture, landscape, specimen overpower the stories we tell about life on earth, drastically separating us from it. The eco-philosopher Timothy Morton has described the construct of nature as “the slowest and perhaps most effective weapon of mass destruction yet devised”<sup>1</sup>. The French anthropologist Philippe Descola<sup>2</sup> proposed to go beyond the nature / culture divide (meaning planet / humanity), which is a seemingly insurmountable crack between humans and organic life.

I am learning how to “live with the trouble” in the words of Donna Haraway, and how to build upon this new relationship with the world, neither ancestral nor industrial but a hybrid of hopefully the best of both worlds. The notion of reciprocity proposed by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist of the Potawatomi Citizen Nation, seems appropriate. She reminds us that the Apache “root word for land is the same as the word for mind. Gathering roots holds up a mirror between the map in the earth and the map of our minds”. Or, on a more visceral level, “recent research has shown that the smell of humus exerts a physiological effect on humans (...) [it] stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, between lovers”<sup>3</sup>.

Kimmerer claims that this kind of bonding is preferable to the clinical words of sustainability or ecology. Reciprocity is her proposed action, stemming from a lifelong reconnection with her indigenous roots, which were taken away from her ancestors. While their meals came 50% from foraging, this form of food collecting was forbidden by the American state; the tribes were uprooted from their native land; this led to the dissipation of traditions and languages currently carefully pieced together, reclaimed and repaired. Although for different historical reasons and authoritarian systems, European countries have also disregarded old wisdom, shamanic practices, herbal uses and foraging in favour of processed resources and thoughts.

Kimmerer describes reciprocity as a recognition of the “personhood” of the plant. She summed up the sustainable practices of indigenous culture as such:

*Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.*

*Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.*

*Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.*

*Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need.*

*Take only that which is given.*

*Never take more than half. Leave some for others.*

*Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.*

*Share.*

*Give thanks for what you have been given.*

*Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.*

*Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.*

Not unlike the aforementioned thinkers, the artists invited to contribute to this exhibition have an insightful awareness of mostly invisible, intangible organic life under and over ground. They are also interested in specific territories, that is, localised eco-systems and their complex interweaving with our industrial ways. Be it the New York “cosmopolitan” weeds, the water of the Santa Clara dam in Portugal, or the “polyphonic garden” of the Mac / Val contemporary art museum in Ivry (Paris), the world is peopled with our ancestors cyclically blooming and flowing. The artists explore how the peculiar socio-politics of plants, minerals and some animals overlap with our own. Gözde Ilkin’s main materials are collected plants – charged with their histories –, and used fabrics – charged with their memories.

## Art is a particular kind of slow activism: a hypothetical world.

For her, both carry the complexities of collective life. The humanoid figures of her drawings expand and interconnect like carnal roots or braided fibres. The works included in the exhibition were produced after a field investigation for her exhibition at the Mac / Val contemporary art museum (2019-20), where she spoke with gardeners and locals about gardens and fabrics, whose communal uses of embroidery, vegetables, fruits and flowers are depicted in each work. The project was called “As the Roots Spoke, the Cracks Deepen”.

I have been asking myself how the stories we are told make our world, and how we can tell other stories. No plots and plot twists, heroes or even anti-heroes, but stories that nourish and align us, that stem and create organic growth – giving, sharing. The abstract quality of Barbara Nicholls’ work is a murmur of time, a tale of geological strata. Her processual drawing is infused with the slow spontaneity of mineral behaviour. Her narratives are wordless lifelines. Lise Duclaux’s work interweaves scientific facts with a poetic form of making that considers plant desire as a motivation disregarded by scientists. She associates botanic growth structures with planetary orbits in her drawing sequences. She studies and follows plants. Some of them are “cosmopolitan”, such as the weeds found in New York, native of distant countries and now travelling around the city.

These material stories told by artists who care for the invisible life of our ancestors and their histories are an appeal for action through poetic strategies. Maja

Escher, for instance, collects sayings and vernacular knowledge pertaining to water while also investigating its industry and engineering. She is moved by the catastrophic overuse of the Santa Clara dam water in Alentejo (built on the Mira river), the Portuguese region where she grew up. Reacting to the despair of the local population watching industries dry up the river, she produced an ensemble of devices in clay, fabric and vegetables. These function like a diagram of awareness of the earth and the sky working together through simple technologies. She made these devices portable for protest.

Landra, the project led by Sara Rodrigues and Rodrigo Camacho, is a system devised from the experience of living in a land surrounded by an oak forest, where they explore the uses of the acorn (known as “landra” in the Iberian Northwest) – a food culture finally lost during the dictatorship in Portugal. Believing that the acorn and other foraged plants can teach us fundamental things, such as ways of caring for the infinitesimal growth of bacteria and

mycelium, here they employ sound and drawing as a means to infuse consciousness on our necessary reciprocity with the invisible soil life.

Art is a particular kind of slow activism: a hypothetical world. It plants a seed in you that will grow by connecting you with our ancestors, the mushrooms, the bacteria, the roots, the vitamin B12, whose indissociable netting keeps showing its face above ground, while having a feast underneath us. Living with one’s ancestors is a time-loop, a circular journey, that redefines life as an anachronistic delight.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology, For a Logic of Future Co-Existence*, Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, Penguin Books, 2013, p. 235-236.

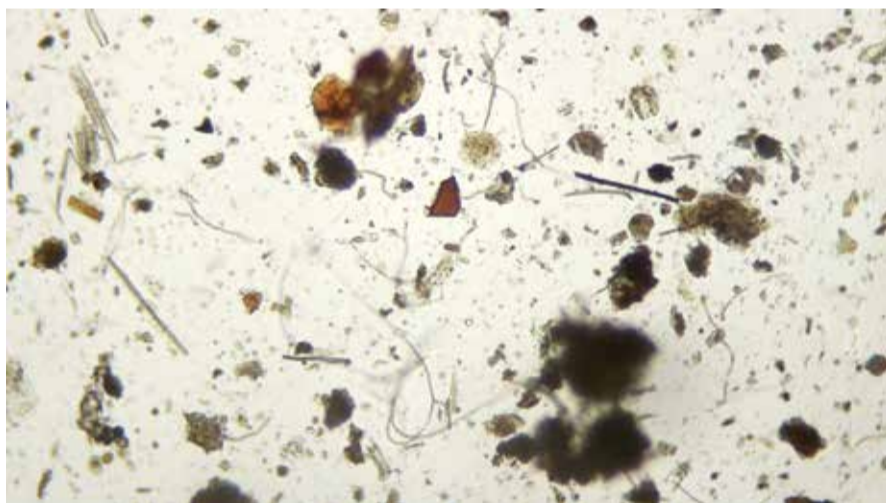


Barbara Nicholls, *Particle Studies No. 6*, Watercolour on 638gsm HP Saunders Waterford, 30x21 cm, 2022

Landra, *Desecration of Empire*, Microscopic image, 2023

Maja Escher, *Protest Tools*, Canes, earthenware, stoneware, raw cotton cloth – Installation view at Worliding – Open Studio, 2021

Overleaf: Gözde Ilkin, *Pawlonia*, Stitching and painting on duvet natural dyed with plant extracts and patchwork, 115x92 cm, 2019



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