

REPORT

AMANDA WHITE

Thinc Design, New York City

jane says, an exhibition of works by Ann Shelton

ABSTRACT

jane says is an exhibition of works by Ann Shelton, that opened at the Denny Dimin Gallery in New York City, in Spring 2019. Ann's sumptuous photographic portraits of botanic arrangements – arranged by the artist with an ikebana-like approach – present these contrivances in larger-than-life detail. Divorced from the domestic interior and titled both for the medicinal plants they feature and female archetypes, each botanic composition reveals an unexpected history of women's plant knowledge and its suppression. An accompanying performance – assembled and choreographed by the artist – is constructed from a tapestry of quotes, and stories about the properties of plants, their historic use as contraceptives, for fertility and abortion. These arrangements show the plants contorted into obedience, just as colonization sought to control and claim our natural world and fellow species, and suppress indigenous and women's botanic expertise. Now, we find ourselves at the brink of irreversible biodiversity loss and climate change, living in the era of the Anthropocene. Shelton's work provokes us to consider not only humanity's relentless depletion of the natural world, but the role women will play in a regenerative future.

KEYWORDS

photographic portraits
botanic art
ikebana
medicinal plants
herbal knowledge
birth control
Anthropocene
gallery exhibition

Ann Shelton is recognized as one of New Zealand's leading photographic artists. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki hosted Shelton's mid-career review exhibition *Dark Matter: Ann Shelton*, curated by Zara Stanhope (November 2016), and toured the exhibition to Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū (December 2017). Shelton is associate professor in photography at Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University, Wellington, and her most recent research engages with plant narratives and histories, in particular the intersection of these histories with human knowledge systems. She is interested in how through art, the perceived power play between plants and humans can be questioned, redefined and modified and in how these questions come urgently into play as we move into and through the era of the Anthropocene. For Shelton, making photographs comes with a complex potential agency and a set of overwhelming ethical and moral margins that are at the heart of the medium's difficult ontology. Combining performativity, doubling and printed matter to open up what can be critiqued as the seamless, closed and singular nature of photographic objects, Shelton employs these interventions to shift their status into mobile, multiple and stammering utterances. In April 2019, Shelton presented the project *jane says* in New York, her first solo exhibition in the United States, at Denny Dimin Gallery. Her ongoing body of work *in a forest* has been shown in London, Berlin, Melbourne, Sydney, Spain, Wellington and Auckland.

Plants in the twenty-first century have been largely reduced to the status of utilitarian and decorative objects. [...] We tend not to ask questions about how they behave, cope with life's challenges, communicate both with each other and, metaphorically, with us. They have come to be seen as the furniture of the planet, necessary, useful, attractive, but 'just there', passively vegetating. They are certainly not regarded as 'beings' in the sense that animals are.

(Mabey 2015: 4)



Figure 1: Ann Shelton, *The Ingénue, Yarrow* (*Achillea* sp.), 2015, Archival pigment print (framed), 44h x 33w in/112h x 84w cm. © Ann Shelton.

Spring is a startling season in New York City, with flowers and green growth sprouting up in unexpected places, including the bleakest corners of Manhattan. Ann Shelton's exhibition of photographic artworks depicting floral arrangements – *jane says*, at Denny Dimin Gallery – creates a fitting and vivid interruption to a typically grungy street in Soho, at this time of year. However, these works bring visitors intensely close to meticulously arranged contrivances. For the arrangements depicted are definitely *not* obvious representations of nature's regenerative forces at work, although they absolutely call our attention to their absence.

Larger than life, both spare and sumptuous, these works beckon and seduce us with their visual clarity. Each feature a botanic assemblage, referencing but not strictly adhering to the Japanese ikebana technique and arranged by Shelton herself. The backdrop is a consistent, intense colour, interrupted only by the shadow of the object, with no two colours the same, so that the whole show is radiant with contrasting hues, set against the archetypal white of the gallery wall. Ikebana is perhaps the most contrived of all our peculiar human attempts to control and display nature indoors. Branches might be stripped to all but one leaf. Twigs are contorted into non-natural shapes and clusters, intertwined with floral flourishes, seeds, pods, even roots, and bedded into an array of anachronistic vases and dishes. Gorgeously shot in stunning detail, the lavishness of Shelton's photographs transforms these decorations into exaggerations of themselves: divorced from typical domestic interiors, and as the focus of our attention, they are striking and prideful, almost performative, demonstrating an aesthetic swagger.

This is no place for nature to force its unruly way in, but the performance featured on opening night – called 'The Physical Garden' – did just that, with the sharing and scattering of Spring's flowers (see Figure 2). A single performer walked the gallery floor, reciting an extraordinary tapestry of



Figure 2: 'The Physical Garden', authored and choreographed by Ann Shelton, performed by Sasha Boykin for the opening night at Denny Dimin Gallery, New York City, 18 April 2019. © Ann Shelton.

quotes from historic and contemporary sources, all of them referring to plant knowledge, and bringing dense strata of meaning to the work. These botanic arrangements reveal layers of historic significance. Domestic floristry is, for instance, an homage to nature but it is also defined by highly structured and violent rearrangements of nature's forms. Concealed in their creation and lineage are centuries of human manipulation, claims to ownership and the devastation of species. Colonizing forces plundered the natural world for knowledge and wealth, placing a monetary value on plants, and all species and natural phenomena, that set in motion a chain of events in which we find ourselves now: a global climate crisis and vastly depleted biodiversity. The imperial, patriarchal colonizing project to claim the Earth's resources forced into existence a narrative of control and ownership over nature. Indigenous knowledge – and by that, I mean thousands of years of scientific observation and research – about plants and regenerative use, was deliberately ignored and so it has remained obscured, or intentionally hidden by those who hold the knowledge. Women's botanic knowledge has also been subjugated, associated with witchcraft or seen as relevant only to secretive aspects of women's health.

There have been a number of anecdotal reports of contemporary women in the Appalachian mountains and Watauga County, North Carolina, using *Daucus Carota* seeds for their anti-fertility activity. The confusion regarding the origins, applications and identification of DC [*Daucus Carota*] has not been helped by the great loss of herbal knowledge believed to have occurred in the Middle Ages. It is widely accepted that information regarding birth control was orally transmitted and therefore, as a consequence of the persecution of 'witches', who were often female midwives, herbalists and healers, much of this information was lost.

(Jansen and Wohlmuth 2014: 13)

Vast projects of deforestation – in Indonesia, the Amazon, Nigeria – are now the most visible and destructive results of our claim on the botanic world. Monocultural agriculture has stripped the land of its fertility. And there is another, insidious narrative that traces our desire to tame nature, in the form of organized gardens and the myriad ways we have sought to trim, shape and arrange plants for our aesthetic pleasure, outdoors and in.

Historically, men practiced ikebana, though in western culture, domestic botanic decoration has been the dominion of women. In fact, all of the works' titles in Shelton's exhibition refer both to a female archetype and a primary plant featured in the assemblage, revealing a veiled layer of significance: every one of these arrangements calls to our attention women's plant knowledge and, specifically, medicinal qualities for contraception, childbirth and abortion. The content of the performance 'The Physical Garden' creates yet more depth, revealing the significance of specific plant specimens, for example poroporo (*Solanum* sp.) featured in Shelton's artwork *The Courtesan* (see Figure 3):

Māori women used poroporo (*Solanum laciniatum* and *S. aviculare*) shrubs as contraceptives. They boiled leaves and drank the broth about a week before menstruation. The efficacy of the decoction as a method of birth control is not known. [...] When it proved cheaper to raise such plants overseas or use synthetic substitutes, poroporo was no longer cultivated in New Zealand.

(Tolerton 2011: n.pag.)



Figure 3: Ann Shelton, *The Courtesan, Poroporo (Solanum sp.)*, 2015, Archival pigment print (framed), 44h x 33w in/112h x 84w cm. © Ann Shelton.

The performance was researched and choreographed by Shelton as an essential feature of her exhibition. A recording of 'The Physical Garden' was on hand for viewing in the gallery after its live presentation at the opening, and the script available on request. During the live performance on opening night, an enigmatic young female actor delivered each quote. Her performance stitched the excerpts together in an increasingly revealing journey through time and into the significance of so many of our botanical species:

The ancient Greeks named the plant *apsinthos*, sometimes referring to it as 'Artemisia' after the goddess of medicine, Artemis. [...] Looking to the plants around them almost as we would a vast supermarket or drugstore, early civilizations believed every plant was put on earth with a purpose, that often being to help humankind.

(Largo 2014: 3–4)

On the face of a Cyrenian four-drachma coin, the leaves of the silphion plant just touch the right hand of a woman, who is seated with her left hand pointing to her genital area. The iconography suggests a connection between the plant and reproduction. Both the Greek comedy writer Aristophanes and the naturalist Pliny the Elder mention silphion's high cost, and Hippocrates recorded the failed efforts to cultivate it in Syria and Greece. The reason for the plant's high value was best explained by Soranus, who said that the sap of silphion, taken by mouth, prevented conception. Soranus provided several prescriptions for 'Cyrenaic juice', which he said would either prevent or halt a pregnancy.

(Riddle and Estes 1992: 230)

Shelton's work has long been concerned with feminist narratives and she places women's knowledge and trauma at the heart of her investigations. The



Figure 4: Ann Shelton, *The Mermaid, Wormwood* (*Artemisia* sp.), 2015, Archival pigment print (framed), 44h x 33w in/112h x 84w cm. © Ann Shelton.

title *jane says* refers not only to the Jane's Addiction song of the same name in which a woman is incessantly faced with decisions, but also to the autopsy reports and death notices of 'Jane Does' who died after botched abortions. *jane says* reminds us that female knowledge has been veiled by history – the properties of plants to heal, but also to protect our freedom and jurisdiction over our bodies through contraceptive and abortive properties. Shelton's photographic works reveal not only the lost value of plants and our dissociation with nature, but also the obscuring of a profound, women's knowledge that will bring us closer as a species to a thriving future.

We cannot reverse the past but we can approach a new paradigm: what characterizes a thriving ecological system in our new world? This is the Anthropocene, and humans have the potential to find new ways to share synchronistic relationships with our fellow species, to create urban ecosystems characterized by regenerative plantings, edible and healing species, and an understanding of the value of plants well beyond their aesthetic properties. Plants communicate, make decisions and work cooperatively, and the botanic world has been gradually revealing to us how. Through the work of Suzanne Simard, and then Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), we know that plants form superorganisms, sharing nutrients to sick individuals. Many are awakening to the realities of a global environmental crisis. Others of us have been fighting for recognition over decades. Art has always played a vital role in communicating what other channels conceal, deliberately or not, and its place in the global project for change has never been more significant. Now, we need every medium possible to take up the loudhailer. Shelton's deep

engagement with photography – a medium historically complicit in collecting plant life and privileging aesthetic value – and the layered meaning she affects through performance calls attention to a specific and fundamental narrative. That is the need for a deep reconnection with the natural world around us, and a recognition of our role within the Earth's vast natural system.

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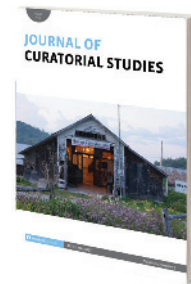
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