

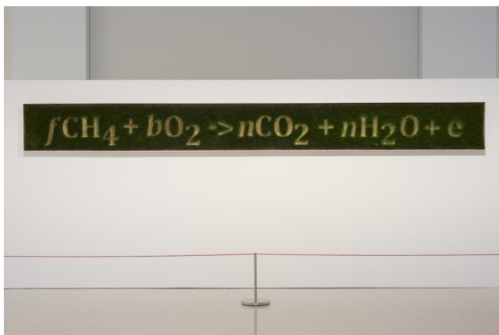
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Unearthing Centuries of Interdependence Between Humans and Plants

Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World explores how humans have historically understood the plant world, and how we ought to reconsider it as we degrade the planet.

Amy Brady 3 days ago



Ackroyd & Harvey, "Satanic Formula (after Senanayake)" (2017, all photos courtesy Spencer Museum of Art, the University of Kansas)

In the 2018 film *Annihilation*, an alien intelligence transforms a swath of coastal wilderness into a mutated landscape. Separating this so-called "Area X" from the rest of the world is rainbow-colored slick that modifies the DNA of anything living under its umbrella — including humans. The film, like the novel it's based on, is science-fiction. But in the [Anthropocene](#), a term scientists use to describe our age of unprecedented human

influence over the natural world, the film is a helpful reminder that our relationship with nature is symbiotic and interdependent.



Israhel van Meckenem the younger, "The Lovers" (c.1470-1500), Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Gift of the Max Kade Foundation

That relationship is examined throughout [*Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World*](#), an impressive art exhibition currently on view at the [Spencer Museum of Art](#) in Lawrence, Kansas. Timely and interdisciplinary, the show explores how humans have historically understood the plant world, and how we ought to reconsider it as we degrade the planet with greenhouse gases and ecological destruction.

Among the oldest objects on display is "The Lovers," a late-1490s engraving by Israhel van Meckenem the younger. It depicts a "pleasure garden," in which a man and woman sit under an archway of flowers, presumably seeking privacy in which to whisper sweet nothings. By centering on the human figures, the engraving embraces the age-old belief that the natural world exists only to serve human needs.

But a different set of engravings, created in the 17th century by an unknown German artist, reverses the perspective of *The Lovers*. It depicts giant flowers towering over man-made landscapes, which are dotted with castles, ships, and bridges. The size of the plants suggests that they deserve our respect, but their disruptive position questions whether our relationship with them is mutually beneficial.



Installation view of *Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World* at the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas

Recent artworks in the exhibition further emphasize the imbalances in our relationship with nature. Ackroyd & Harvey's sobering "Satanic Formula (after Senanayake)" (2017) stretches for several feet in the museum's sunlit atrium. Sunlight literally powers the piece; a thick, green carpet of sprouting grass covers its front. But etched in all that green is a scientific formula devised by Ranil

Senanayake, a systems ecologist and a pioneer in the field of "analog forestry." His formula shows in mathematical terms that, as we burn more fossil fuels, we increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Meanwhile, oxygen levels are falling: "The only thing that keeps the global concentration levels up," wrote Senanayake in 2017, "is photosynthesis by leaves and plankton." In other words, plants keep us alive.



Kahn & Selesnick, "King of Weeds" (2013), Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund

Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick's playful "King of Weeds" (2013) helps to suggest that a different relationship is possible. Their photograph depicts the artists' recent performance and installation series "Truppe Fledermaus & the Carnival at the End of the World." A man stands in a field that blooms with life, covered from head to toe in a wide variety of weeds. The figure suggests that, just maybe, we can finally recognize the interdependence of humans and plants. Is a weed an invasive species? Or, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a "plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered"?



Eduardo Kac, "Plantimal IV" (2009) Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: Letha Churchill Walker Memorial Art Fund

The exhibition's section on engineered and imagined plants excites the imagination. Here one finds Eduardo Kac's photographs of "Plantimal" (2009), a pink petunia that carries a strain of the artist's DNA. A spray of tiny red veins spreads across the petals. Rohini Devasher's pigment ink prints, "Archetype - 1" (2007) and "Chimera - 2" (2008), present imagined plants that are modified with animal and human genes, as well as machine parts. The twisting stems and blinking petals are, like the human-plant hybrids in *Annihilation*, uncanny but not wholly unpleasant. It's hard to be repulsed by shapes so deeply familiar.

In a world ravaged by climate change, pollution, and deforestation, these works are timely and disturbing. They ask us to see ourselves in the very life forms we are killing.

Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World is on view at the Spencer Museum of Art (1301 Mississippi Street, Lawrence, Kansas) until July 15.