

University for the Creative Arts  
Research Project Portfolios

# Phytopia

By Edward Chell



# Project Details

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Name of Researcher:	Edward Chell
Name of Output:	Phytopia
UCARO link:	<a href="https://research.uca.ac.uk/4364/">https://research.uca.ac.uk/4364/</a>
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; curation of exhibition which also included the researcher’s own artworks, with associated book
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p><b>EXHIBITIONS</b></p> <p>The Milton Gallery, St Paul’s, London (9 November – 1 December 2017)</p> <p>Thames-Side Studios Gallery, London (2 February – 5 March 2018)</p> <p>Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea (15 February – 26 May 2019)</p> <p><b>BOOK</b></p> <p>E. Chell and T. Jeffreys (2019) <i>Phytopia</i> [exhibition book]. Swansea: Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. ISBN: 978-0-903189-87-3</p>
Key Words:	Fine art, curated exhibition, biology, botany, history, museology
Funding:	<p>The Milton Gallery, St Paul’s, London, contributed cash and in-kind support of £3,374.04.</p> <p>Thames-Side Studios Gallery, London, contributed cash and in-kind support of £1,150.</p> <p>The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, contributed to the publication and also funds towards a short documentary film made about the exhibition, £16,000.</p>

# Synopsis

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*Phytopia* is a research output by Edward Chell comprising three curated exhibitions and an accompanying publication. The research explores the concept of 'phytopia', the influence plants and organic forms have on nearly every aspect of visual culture, and the 'Tree of Life' motif which is present in many cultures and traditions.

Within the *Phytopia* exhibitions Chell included a range of artists not usually seen in the same context and a number of works exhibited for the first time, including Chell's own work. The exhibition brought together different media, with sculptural pieces by Derek Jarman and Paul de Monchaux, drawings by Marc Quinn and Rasheed Araeen, and situated

these contemporary works alongside nineteenth-century nature prints. Chell curated three separate iterations of the exhibition from 2017 to 2019 that featured the same 22 artists but with different selections of works in each of the different spaces. The *Phytopia* publication includes an extended text authored by Chell along with a contribution by writer and cultural analyst Tom Jeffreys

This portfolio of supporting contextual evidence includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It is illustrated with images of key pieces featured in the book and exhibition. It also presents a PDF of the book.

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*Phytopia (installation view), Glynn  
Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea,  
15 February – 26 May 2019*



*Phytopia (installation view),  
Milton Gallery, London,  
9 November - 1 December 2017,  
showing works by Ori Gersht, Rosa  
Nguyen and Alicia Paz*

# Context

Chell has a long-standing research interest in the relationship between art and ecology, as explored in projects such as *Eclipse* (2013) and *Bloom* (2015). *Phytopia* adds to this corpus of work a particular interest in Phytotopology, a new body of knowledge in visual culture. Phytotopology is the transdisciplinary study of the way in which the constituent parts of visual relationships between people, plants and place are interrelated or arranged and is applied particularly to the condition of fragmented microcosms.

The *Phytopia* exhibitions set out to place a lens over the wide and often unacknowledged use of foliate imagery in a wide range of circumstances and contexts, from the genealogical to evolutionary and from cultural and political hierarchies to growth forms. The research sought to indirectly question just how important these subliminal signs are in our culture, colliding narratives of ecology with those of aesthetic judgement and celebrating the influence that plants and organic forms have on nearly every aspect of visual culture.

The current context of ecological crisis and climate change is a timely one in which to explore ecosystems and the interconnections between humans, plants and landscape. Indeed, in an age of catastrophe and denial many artists feel an ethical duty to respond to the world around them, to present new models of thinking or being, and to imagine new possible futures. *Phytopia* thus presented an ideal opportunity for a number of artists to respond to these pressing ecological concerns.

In addition to considering the 21st century climate crisis, Chell also connected *Phytopia* to the historical context of 'Wunderkammern', the cabinets of curiosities that became so popular among learned gentlemen in the colonial period. As with the original cabinets, *Phytopia* contains such an array of

work that encountering it might prompt amazement or even a sense of bewilderment. The eye ranges from large, bright painted mountains, full of wild faces and gemstones, to tiny ferns etched delicately in copper and protected under glass-topped vitrines.

The context of the cabinet of curiosities also highlights a lingering constructed hierarchy within ecology, art and museology. This further connects to *Phytopia's* interest in the motif of the Tree of Life, as in the illustrations of Ernst Haeckel (1866; 1879). As Chell outlines in the *Phytopia* publication, the Tree of Life is a symbol that is not only a generative origin myth but, as a network of relations between living beings, has often been political and strictly hierarchical.

## REFERENCES

- Chell, E. (2015) *Bloom*. London: Horniman Museum and Gardens.
- Chell, E. (2013) *Eclipse*. Kent: Stour Valley Arts.
- Demos, T. J. (2016) *Decolonising Nature: contemporary art and the politics of ecology* (Sternberg).
- Haeckel, E. (1866) Illustration of the 'Tree of Life' in *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. Berlin: G. Reimer.
- Haeckel, E. (1879) Illustration of the 'Tree of Life' in *Stammbaum des Menschen (Evolution of Man)*, English edition. London.
- Möllers, N. Schwägerl, C. and Trischler, H. (eds) (2015) *Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands*. Munich: Deutsches Museum.

*'Flowers', Rasheed Araeen,  
1993 – 94, nine panels, mixed  
media, 51 × 76cm (overall 153 ×  
228cm)*



*Stills from 'A Year in an English  
Garden: Flicker + Pulse', written  
and directed by Brian McClave and  
Tom Wichelow, 2016*





# Research Aims and Questions

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## Research aims:

To highlight how plants form varied strands of connectivity between a wide range of otherwise un-related art practices, celebrating both similarities and difference

To explore parallels between an ecology that is biological and one that is aesthetic

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## Research questions:

What are the relationships between plants, people and place?

Are plant iconographies used by contemporary artists and if so how?

How do relationships between the works and different spatial environments affect the overall reception of the works and how they might be understood as a whole?

How does the context of the space in which the works are shown affect our subliminal understandings?

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# Research Methods and Process

Having substantially developed his practice-based research into art and ecology in the 2015 solo exhibition *Bloom*, *Phytopia* provided Chell with a timely and valuable opportunity to both develop new artworks and to explore some of the central concepts within the work of other artists. The curation of *Phytopia* allowed him to contextualise the themes in ways that are not as accessible in a solo exhibition, assembling interdisciplinary narratives through his inclusion of a number of artists working in a range of media. *Phytopia* thus emerged through consideration of humanistic, pedagogical models within various curatorial strategies and critical art projects.

All of the artists contributing to *Phytopia* took the science of plant forms as their starting point. From this they developed commentaries on manmade fragmented ecosystems. The resulting exhibits range from enigmatic black-and-white photographs; a swirling, flora-like diagram of global stock exchanges; landscapes made from ceramics; abstract sculptures in primary colours; and floral photographic images printed onto shipping pallets. Each image encapsulates the hand of humanity as a placemaker in Earth's fragile biomes;

chopping them into isolated microcosms, a process that cannot fail to have political implications. The artworks were displayed on walls and in encasements to form new 'hybrid' assemblies of selected pictorial biodiversity and to enrich the visual experience.

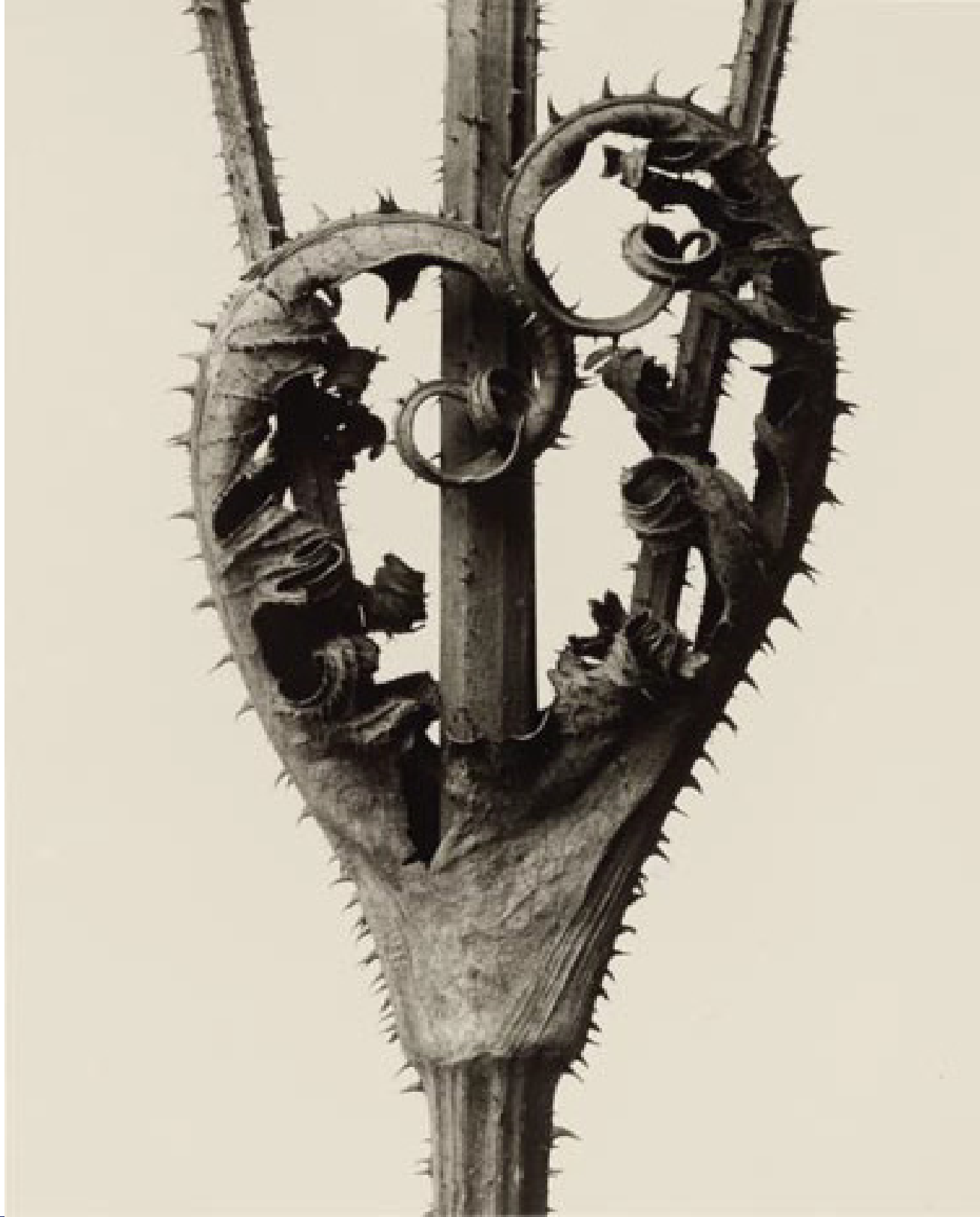
While aligning to Chell's own interdisciplinary research interests and the thematic interests of each participant, the exhibitions as a whole revealed connections between the diverse visual ecologies surrounding plant representation in art and related structures and patterns underpinning natural histories. Celebrating the potential dissonance of practitioners not normally seen in the same context, the exhibitions opened up diverse visual territories with the varying interpretations these differences bring to the subject, and like varied garden planting, provided an optically rich seedbed for fertilizing viewers' imaginations.

The publication allowed for an independent afterlife of the exhibitions, enabling thoughts and ideas to be further reflected upon through the process of writing and preparing the publication.

*'HFT The Gardener', Suzanne Treister, 2016, sixteen panels, six at 21 × 29.7 cm; ten at 29.7 × 42 cm (part of a 174 panel work), archival giclee prints on Hahnemuhle Bamboo paper, courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London*



*'Dipsacus laciniatus', Karl  
Blossfeldt, 1928, gelatin silver print,  
from Urformen Der Kunst (Art  
Forms in Nature), 25.9 × 19.8cm*



# Research Contribution and Recognition

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## Research insights and contribution:

The research highlights the need for a new subject area to contain and harness the energies embedded in tree-like pictorial information structures. There are stories to tell; stories about endangered ecosystems and species in the context of the ecological crisis of global warming.

In the book, 'Phytopia' is seen as a model of thinking about knowledge and this provides insight into how knowledge can be built with pictures. An example of new knowledge creation emerging from *Phytopia* would be an ecologist's interpretation of 'Flowers', an exhibit contributed by Rasheed Araeen, as representing a set of four random quadrants illustrating the variability in the distribution of flowering plants in an ecological microcosm.

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## Dissemination:

*Art Monthly* included a review of *Phytopia* by Paul Carey-Kent in its April 2019 edition, pages 29 -30.

An article posted in *Cultural Ecology* detailed the theoretical research underpinning *Phytopia*:  
<http://blog.culturalecology.info/2019/05/06/the-phytopia-project/>

Film documentation: Chell discussing the research ideas with some of the artists:  
<https://www.edwardchell.com/phytopia-glynn-vivian-art-gallery/>  
<https://vimeo.com/397424222/5826704638>

# Research Contribution and Recognition

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## Follow-on activities:

### MILTON GALLERY

In the first iteration of the exhibition Chell took advantage of Saint Paul's School's extensive digital networks with its lists of high profile supporters, donors and alumni to maximise on coverage and visitor numbers. The school organised an associated symposium with several of the artists contributing to the presentations.

### GLYNN VIVIAN ART GALLERY

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery is a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) and as part of the nationally supported Plus Tate network of NPO galleries has a substantial reach.

The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery provided a strong touring platform with the later timing of the tour enabling substantive reconfiguration of the exhibition. The gallery ran a related educational programme and a fully booked artists' talk event following the opening. Glynn Vivian visitor numbers: 13,061

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*Phytopia curated by Edward Chell,  
Thames-Side Studios Gallery,  
London, 2 February - 5 March 2018*



*Phytopia* curated by Edward Chell,  
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*FRONT COVER*

*Edward Chell, Plantation Hedgerow  
Pallets, 2017, acrylic and lacquer on  
gesso on pallet, 40 × 60 × 15cm*

*BACK COVER*

*Phytopia curated by Edward Chell,  
Thames-Side Studios Gallery,  
London, 2 February - 5 March 2018*

