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Plant Power!

A Rebuilding of Women's Knowledge in the Work of Ann Shelton

Ann Shelton is one of New Zealand's leading photographic artists, and her ongoing work not only offers us some of the most exciting contemporary photography, but also allows us a captivating understanding of the relationship among women, knowledge, and the natural world. The legacy of the "missing" knowledge that women once possessed is of particular interest to Shelton, and indeed all of us who study the history of the botanical sciences, contemporary reproductive politics, or perhaps most importantly, how they coincide.

Shelton's most recent research for her photographic work engages with plants and plant narratives, in particular the intersection of plant histories with human knowledge and belief systems. As if directly influenced by some of the work in this field of feminist science studies, her recent work, including the 2022 exhibition *i am an old phenomenon*,[1] begins with these connections that feminists often make to the development of science and its impact on women's knowledge.

For those of us who study abortifacient plants and the legacy of women's knowledge especially, Shelton's work is more than timely and powerful; it is rewriting a history of the botanical sciences. Her exhibitions on botanical themes are many, and include *A Lovers' Herbal, Dark Matter*, and *The Missionaries*.[2] Shelton has had solo exhibitions since the 1990s, and they have been covered internationally. A 2019 Artnet article and interview by Sarah Cascone highlights the "hidden meaning" of much of Shelton's work. "Historically," Cascone writes, "[the featured] plants arranged in each vase have been used to treat various reproductive health issues. Shelton has chosen one fertility-linked plant for each photograph and titled the works after stereotypical female archetypes—the vixen, the ingenue, the scarlet woman."[3] This speaks to the legacy of midwives and *sage femme* who passed down botanical knowledge, which allowed women to manage their own fertility and reproductive health. "Knowledge of botanical abortifacients," Shelton

1. *i am an old phenomenon* was on view at Denny Gallery, New York, November 4–December 22, 2022.

2. *A Lovers' Herbal*, Denny Gallery, New York City, 2021 (online); *Dark Matter*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, New Zealand (2016); *The Missionaries*, Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, New Zealand (2021).

3. Sarah Cascone, "This Artist Arranged Botanical Abortifacients Into Stunning Floral Designs for a Timely Show About a Woman's Right to Control Her Fertility," Artnet.com, May 17, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ann-shelton-botanical-abortifacient-photos-1549537.

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says, "was largely lost as the church sought to eradicate the tradition by equating the work of herbalists with witchcraft." She continues, "This suppression of information can be seen as part of a long line of alienating acts for women centering around the female body—reaching from the medieval period through colonization and into medicine through the invention of hysteria." Shelton argues that the lack of understanding about plants and their uses easily translates to limited understandings of health and women's access to healthcare for women, and even into contemporary debates in the United States surrounding abortion.[4]

Where does this interest in plants and their meaning come from? In a 2020 interview with Joy Garnett in *Evergreen Review*, Shelton says,

> I grew up in small-town Aotearoa New Zealand, in the South Island, where the landscape is complex and profoundly beautiful. I had access to the coveted lands of the Southern Alps and Otago, which have now famously been exported to the rest of the world through digital and cinematic narratives. In contrast to this "blockbuster" setting is the particular cultural context I experienced then, one that alienated young women, indigenous peoples and "Southern" or "Antipodean Gothic", is not so much castles as car wrecks, and a wealth of bogans rather than witches. It was and is a violent, isolated, conservative place, which actively represses narratives it doesn't wish to confront. I guess my work is all about ripping the scab off those omissions, pulling knowledge that's just under the surface back into circulation.[5]

Described by Donna West Brett as an "aesthetics of displacement,"[6] Shelton's work employs a feminist methodological approach toward concepts of natural knowledge and knowledge production. One could argue that her recent exhibitions even look specifically at the legacy of women's knowledge of plants and their properties, while her series *jane says* (2015–ongoing) focuses more specifically on those plants used for fertility, midwifery, menstrual regulation, and birth control. Spanning a range of traditional applications within reproductive health, the series features the photograph *The Witch, Pennyroyal (*Mentha *sp.)* (2020), highlighting a highly toxic abortifacient, pennyroyal, which has a long and complicated history in Europe going back to ancient Rome. Parsley is another featured plant in the photograph *The Herbalist, Parsley (*Petroselinum *sp.),* (2021), as a possible emmenagogue, or plant that brings on menstruation. In another work in this series, *The Handmaid, Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus *sp.)* (2015–16), Queen Anne's Lace is featured, which has been anecdotally recorded as being used in Appalachian Mountains communities as a contraceptive, and *The Courtesan, Poroporo (*Solanum *sp.)* (2015–16) features a plant native to New Zealand that has been grown commercially as a contraceptive.

In a recent collection as part of *i am an old phenomenon*, Shelton investigates the centrality of natural knowledge to the development of differing historical perspectives on

4. Cascone, "This Artist Arranged Botanical Abortifacients."

5. "Ann Shelton interviewed by Joy Garnett," *Evergreen Review*, 2019, evergreenreview.com/read/interview-ann-shelton-jane-says.

6. Donna West Brett, "Ann Shelton, in a forest," 2013, donnawestbrett.com/art-writing/1.

*The Courtesan, Poroporo (*Solanum *sp.)* from the series *jane says* (2015–ongoing).

nature as well as the relationship between the development of European botanical sciences and natural knowledge, mostly held by women, outside of the professionalization of botany. She demonstrates her interest in activating reclaimed knowledge fragments as she learns about and from plants in her work. In one of the new works in this ongoing series, *Tied together with red thread (rowen, moon tree, mountain ash)* (2023), Shelton uses clumps of Rowan berries, a plant of importance in European folklore and one that

has long been associated with magic and witchcraft. Although the tree was once highly prized in Europe for culinary, medicinal, and magical uses, it has mostly fallen out of use in modern times. In Shelton's work, the berries are recovered and layered thickly, dripping down over a ceramic pot, and roughly held together by red cord, alluding to pagan amulets made and worn for good luck. Rowan wood was used both for magic wands and increasing psychic powers; trees located near stone circles were believed to be the most potent. The plant is often considered sacred for its medicinal qualities, both in berry and bark.

In an earlier exhibit, Shelton cited Londa Schiebinger's classic work, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (2004), which details the uncovering of "exotic" New World plants by early modern botanists on exploration trips and scientific voyages. One of Shelton's works in this ongoing series makes a clear connection to the labeling of women's knowledge as witchcraft, and the exhibit cites the work of Silvia Federici, to whom we owe the most extensive study of the European witch hunts.[7] Shelton's works depict suspended plants, which according to the gallery's press release, denote images of flight associated with witches and wise women, as well as the vulnerability of the female body.[8] *On certain days or nights she anoints a staff and rides* (2022) depicts the plant Brugmansia, which becomes a visual metaphor of the witch's broomstick with its horizontally positioned stem and bell-like flower. This plant, also known as Angel's Trumpet, contains tropane alkaloids that are found in the nightshade family. These chemicals are known to have hallucinogenic properties that can be highly toxic and poisonous. To have innate knowledge of a plant and its properties made those women who understood them both fearful and dangerous. Records state that certain wise women would use flowers containing similar chemicals to grease their brooms and then rub the broom on their labia, thereby absorbing the hallucinogens most efficiently and giving life to the pervasive imagined specter of the flying witch—weaving together fact and fiction. The pertinence of this imagery comes at a point of rupture for women who are literally and successively becoming alienated from their own authorial bodies.[9]

Indeed, Shelton "has explored the micro, marginal, bleak and traumatic counter-histories of plants,"[10] linking gender politics and botanical understanding. In *i am an old phenomenon*, she reinvestigates lost plant knowledge and a relationship to female ontology. Certainly, this current work builds on Shelton's series *jane says*, which looked even more specifically at plants with herbal usages of interest to women and reproduction, including ancient recipes for abortifacient plants. In *jane says*, Shelton's revisiting of plants of use to women and reproduction reimagined nature-based knowledge that is

7. See, for example, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Automedia, 2004). John Riddle includes parsley in his list of early modern emmenagogues in his book, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

8. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*, Denny Gallery, New York, November 4–December 22, 2022, dennygallery.com/artists/ann-shelton.

9. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.

10. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.

hidden from us or lost, perhaps part of a covert understanding of knowledge that women develop and maintain on their own.

In her work, Shelton makes clear that her research really matters, articulating how much of our plant knowledge is speculative, conflicted, impacted by both patriarchy and colonialism, and fragmented, as it has historically been passed down orally. Shelton even updates the common names she collects as part of her titles as she learns more about the plants. She sees herself as a student of botany, an incredibly complex field, as she tries to understand the plants historically, socially, and artistically, allowing room for conjecture and seeing her works as catalysts to renewed conversations and the many layers of inquiry of botanical study, rather than as botanical illustrations.

As such, "alternative" ways of looking at the role of plants in the everyday lives of women emerge repeatedly in Shelton's work, as she takes on the evolution of science throughout early modern history, as it both professionalized and centered plant-based knowledge and was often blind to the role of science in the persecution of witches and women. Shelton's photography therefore reimagines the role of women in botanical history, not only historically documenting the importance of this knowledge as it was created and often persecuted, but its importance now, to our contemporary lives. What knowledge of plants should we have or be searching for? What properties of nature-based knowledge do we want to return to and share? Shelton's work ultimately undertakes a critique of the contemporary political situation, noting it as gendered, and sees our relationship with the natural world and perhaps even plants themselves as among the most important part of this relationship.

How did the disappearance of women's role in plant knowledge happen and why is it of interest to a photographic artist such as Shelton? Through witch hunts from the Middle Ages onward, both nature and women were stripped of their individual agency and power, since women's ability to harness nature's herbs to heal and manipulate natural processes threatened the power structures founded on the rationalization and mechanization of natural processes and human life. Francis Bacon and other early physician-botanists of the early modern period in Europe established empiricism and rationality as standards for modern science. This in turn lead to the domination of nature as a necessity for development, as the holistic understanding and enchantment of the natural world had to be eliminated. Amid the construction of strict economic and social hierarchies in Europe, the worldview of the witch and folk healer directly threatened these power structures. Since "witches" and wise women or *sage femme* relied on holistic understandings, their views of nature promoted the notion that anyone could access the powers that existed within the natural world. In this worldview, individuals were capable of healing themselves and could access the powers of the natural elements, which in turn threatened capitalist organizations of work and waged labor that depended on the domination of the natural world.[11] Female healers threatened the establishment of male-dominated economic and political hierarchies. Through the demonization of alternative ways of knowing and using the natural world, proponents of Baconian scientific ideals and professional

11. See, for example, Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*.

medicine established themselves as the sole legitimate approaches to healing—leaving a legacy that continues to subjugate healing rooted in herbal medicine and the way we continue to conceptualize health, bodily processes, and botanical study.

Shelton moves this botanical study to the visual in her photographic works. She has researched extensively the ways in which women's relationship to nature through botanical studies was continually used to reinforce existing gender norms and societal structures of power and knowledge. Though her work is rooted in European knowledge bases, she acknowledges how much Indigenous knowledge has been removed over time, and sometimes even made criminal through colonization. Shelton demonstrates her clear knowledge of women's history and places her works within it. *The Witch, Penny Royal (*Mentha *sp.)* (2022) depicts a gnarly branch arranged at a diagonal before a stately navy ground. In *The Super Model, Iris* (Iridaceae *sp.*) (2020) the flower's long and lean stalks are juxtaposed with blooms resembling spiky pom-poms. A trio of pictures—or "three sisters," as the artist refers to this grouping—were inspired by Judy Chicago's sculptural tour de force *The Dinner Party* (1974–79).[12] The photographs present several magenta peonies posed against an equally vivid pink backdrop. Shelton has chosen titles for these works based on modern archetypes who construct their images for public consumption—*The Influencer*, *The Party Girl*, and *The Congress Woman*. In each piece, peonies are potted in low vases, which are dwarfed by the flowers' blushing crowns of petals.

In Shelton's exhibitions, we also see the relevance of these plants to ancient and pre-Christian women. The consequence of her work at a time of global subjugation of the female body politic cannot be downplayed; it is poetically navigated by Shelton who, through her timeless imagery and extensive research, advocates a new frontier for inclusive feminisms by championing this ancient knowledge that has been fragmented, suppressed, and partially lost. She in part focuses on the suspension of plants in water, depicted in various forms of decay, as can be seen in the photograph *And as she said thanks and spoke spells (yarrow, yarroway, yerw, gearwe, field hop, achillea, archillia, old man's pepper, devil's nettle, devil's plaything, bad man's plaything, sanguinary, soldier's woundwort, hundred leaved grass, thousand seal, thousand weed, carpenter's weed, milfoil, millefolium, knight's milfoil, knighten milfoil, nosebleed, herbe militaris, staunchweed, wild maiden herb, schafgarbe, bloodwort)* (2022), where stems of *Achillea millefolium* are seen immersed in water and awaiting their own breakdown. According to the Denny Gallery press release, these works have a literal reference to witches' brews, tinctures, and teas as well as a submerged pedagogy of plant lore and the physical drowning of witches. Shelton describes them "like wading deep below the surface of a swamp or contemplating the watery grave of a witch. They are emblematic of underworlds, debased knowledge and rotting order and decay."[13] Her work is therefore a vital piece of the complex web of twenty-first century artists and writers who are rebuilding women's herbals, beginning new gardens of abortifacient and contraceptive plants, and reimagining the professional world of botany, noting that plants and their uses have historically been part of women's

12. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.
13. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.

And as she said thanks and spoke spells (yarrow, yarroway, yerw, gearwe, field hop, achillea, archillia, old man's pepper, devil's nettle, devil's plaything, bad man's plaything, sanguinary, soldier's woundwort, hundred leaved grass, thousand seal, thousand weed, carpenter's weed, milfoil, millefolium, knight's milfoil, knighten milfoil, nosebleed, herbe militaris, staunchweed, wild maiden herb, schafgarbe, bloodwort) from the series *i am an old phenomenon* (2022–ongoing).

repertoire, much like recipes from the kitchen. These other projects include *The Abortion Herb Garden* at Bard College (2022–present); Wendy Morris's *Rooted Encounters: Fields, Forests and Other Encounters* at Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (2022); *Trigger*

Planting for Art Frieze New York (2022) by the art collective How to Perform an Abortion; and *Mrs. Roe* (2023–present) by Kerry Lemon, which clearly articulates the role between plants and women in the post-Roe relationship between women and nature.[14]

At about age seven, Shelton was first encouraged by her mother to enter flower arranging competitions in the Timaru Horticultural Society Show in the Canterbury Region of New Zealand. In an interview with *Homestyle Magazine*, she reports:

> I won some prizes and gradually moved through the floral art sections of the show. Mum tells me I did do some ikebana-style entries, which she taught me the principles of from a book. . . . The bright colour fields that formed the backgrounds of the photos of arrangements in the magazine have always been in my works, from Redeye to jane says. I guess that's where they came from.[15]

Shelton notes little about the process of her work but says "The first thing to do is to look at the plant."[16] Indeed, she does more than look at each plant. She not only arranges it and photographs it but researches its history and includes it in her work. Again, she sees her work as speculative and fragmented and updates her titles methodically. Her books that accompany her international exhibitions are meticulously researched and give any viewer of her work a sense of the methodological work that accompanies it. A new 312-page book titled *worm, root, wort . . . & bane* was released in March 2024 alongside her exhibition of the same name at Alice Austen House in Staten Island, New York.[17]

Continuing negative associations with women's bodies, pregnancy, contraception, and menstruation have helped maintain women's subordinate political, economic, and social positioning into the twenty-first century. Work like Shelton's reminds us how much of the world's knowledge exists outside of what is considered "science" and the Western medical tradition. And as postcolonial scholars consistently remind us, "woman" has in Western history been a developed social construction, as a more carnal being, and Western culture has perverted nature alongside this concept. Shelton's new book, mentioned above, includes Indigenous perspectives and critiques of Western botanical classification and concepts, as well as new ideas about plant subjectivity. Still, in much contemporary scholarship in both politics and history, the sexuality of women is often deemed unimportant or not mentioned at all, and much of this history is lost to us.[18]

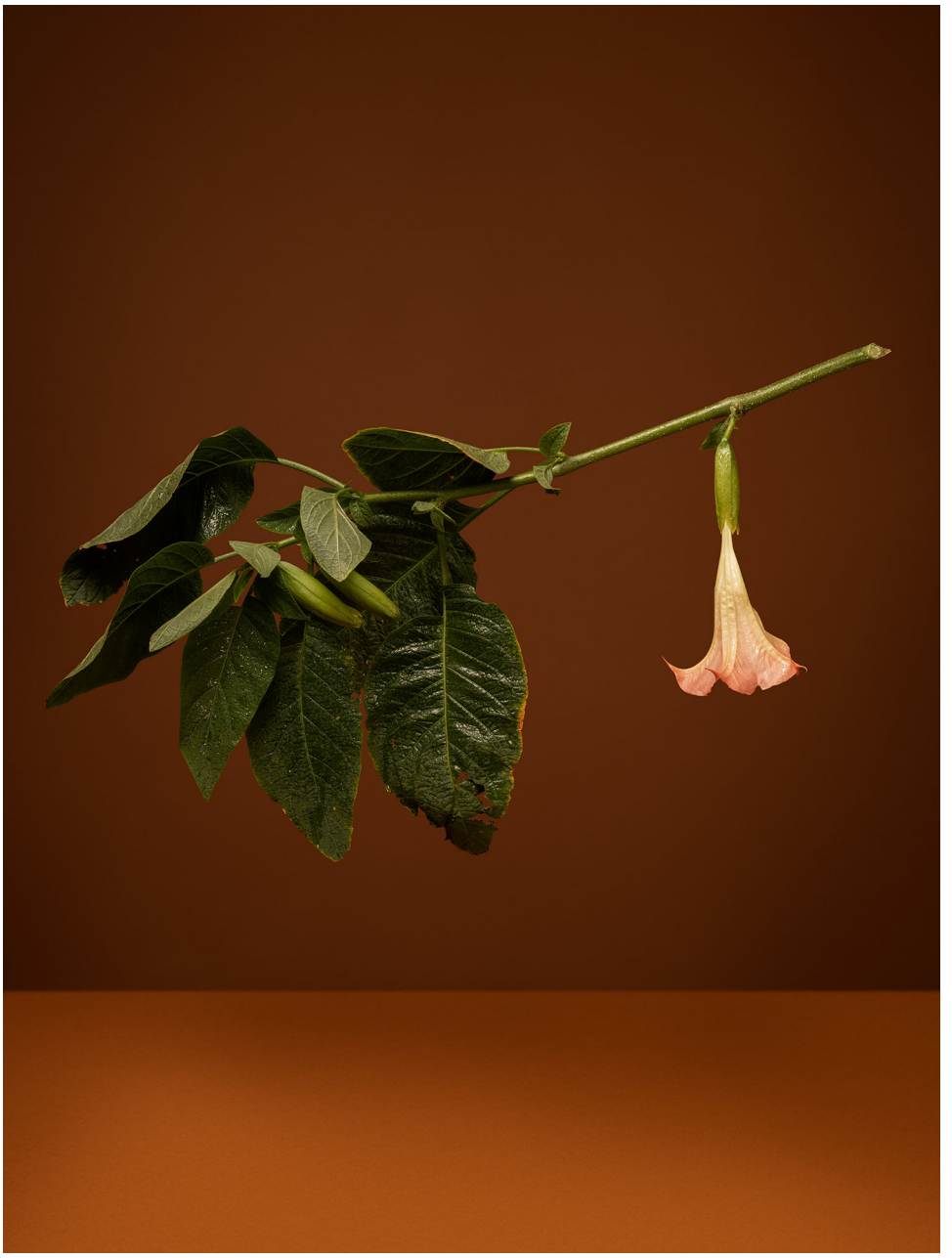
14. *The Abortion Herb Garden* at Bard College (2022–present), https://eh.bard.edu/plants-plants-plants-the-abortion-herb-garden; Wendy Morris's *Rooted Encounters: Fields, Forests and Other Encounters* at Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, in 2022, www.luca-arts.be/nl/rooted-encounters; *Trigger Planting* for Art Frieze New York (2022) by How to Perform an Abortion, www.howtoperformanabortion.com/trigger-planting; and *Mrs. Roe* (2023–present) by Kerry Lemon, www.kerrylemon.co.uk/exhibitions/69-mrs-roe.

15. Peter Shaw, "For Artist/Photographer Ann Shelton, The Japanese Art of Floral Arranging is a Medium for Messages," *Homestyle Magazine*, February/March 2022, https://homestyle.co.nz/contemporary-artist-ann-shelton.

16. Shaw, "For Artist/Photographer Ann Shelton," https://homestyle.co.nz/contemporary-artist-ann-shelton.

17. *Ann Shelton: worm, root, wort . . . & bane* was on view at Alice Austen House, New York, March 9–May 26, 2024, aliceausten.org/exhibitions.

18. See, for example, Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).



On certain days or nights she anoints a staff and rides (brugmansia, datura [misleading], huacacahu, trumpet flower, angel's trumpet, snowy angel's trumpet, angel's tears) from the series *i am an old phenomenon* (2022–ongoing).

Shelton's work *She addressed the tree with the respectful name (sloe, sloe berry, blackthorn, spiny shrub, Mother of the Wood, wishing thorn)* (2022) revisions women's relationships to plant life and natural knowledge. In it, she highlights a plant of particular interest to women. Shelton tells us that sloe berry, which appears almost personified in

her image as some kind of witch figure, is a prolific and consistent component of the hedgerows spread throughout Europe. Carried by colonizers, they have expanded to the corners of the globe, including to New Zealand, where the artist lives. Sloe berry is a spiky plant, perhaps effective for fencing both animals and people, and is also used for making gin. Its berries prosper in Europe and are much larger than their counterparts in New Zealand. Shelton reports that it can be found roadside, twisted in unison with rosehip, hawthorn, and blackberry. Hedges also hold interest for the artist through their delineating capacities, use within settler culture, and the rich cache of plants found in hedgerows, many of which are often used in herbal healing. This photographic work addresses the importance of the hedgerow for the figure of the wise woman or witch and the significance of this transitional part of the forest for herb and berry gathering.

In contrast, Carl Linnaeus, still considered the father of modern botany, linked species names to descriptions and concepts of other botanists within a structural framework of carefully drafted rules. He reduced much botanical work to the counting of a plant's individual parts. He found the variety of local European flora frustrating and sought an encyclopedic system of classification instead. In fact, according to the Linnean Society, London, he had many of his students rewrite local flora using his principles, removing common names and identifications and replacing them with diagnostic functions, as well as listing each plant by its parts. It has been argued by numerous scholars that Linnaeus greatly devalued the contributions of local naturalists and of various kinds of local information. Earlier flora authors did not necessarily see an incompatibility between studying the local and learned medicine and included in their work information about the kind of landscape in which to find each plant, its taste or smell, its many names, and its medical uses. Linnaeus sought to eliminate from botanical texts anything but a physical, observed description of a plant. Local floras had listed multiple names for the same plant or sometimes even invented one; Linneaus chastised the authors of local flora for what he saw as general description and arbitrary naming. He urged educated men to take up the practice of naming the natural world and dismissed the multiplicity of naming and knowledge that had existed until that point.

In earlier herbals of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, plants were classified by "virtue," their uses considered significant for understanding and classifying them,[19] not merely their directly observable physical parts. Linnaeus urged the omission of any sort of potential uses in the floras. This reflects widespread fears among Linnaeus and his colleagues that lay people may treat themselves without a physician's care (and often without paying for a physician's "expertise").[20] Indeed, the cryptic names and charts reserved for physician-botanists and accessible only to experts effectively sealed this information from lay people for centuries. To this day, without special botanical training, it is nearly impossible to make sense of botanical flora or catalogs of herbs, as they read much the way any scientific publication reads. Michel Foucault writes in *The Order of*

19. Agnes Arber, *Herbals, Their Origin and Evolution: A Chapter in the History of Botany 1470–1560* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 171.

20. Carl Linnaeus, *Bibliotheca Botanica* (Amsterdam: Salomen Schouten, 1736; 2nd ed., 1751), 85.

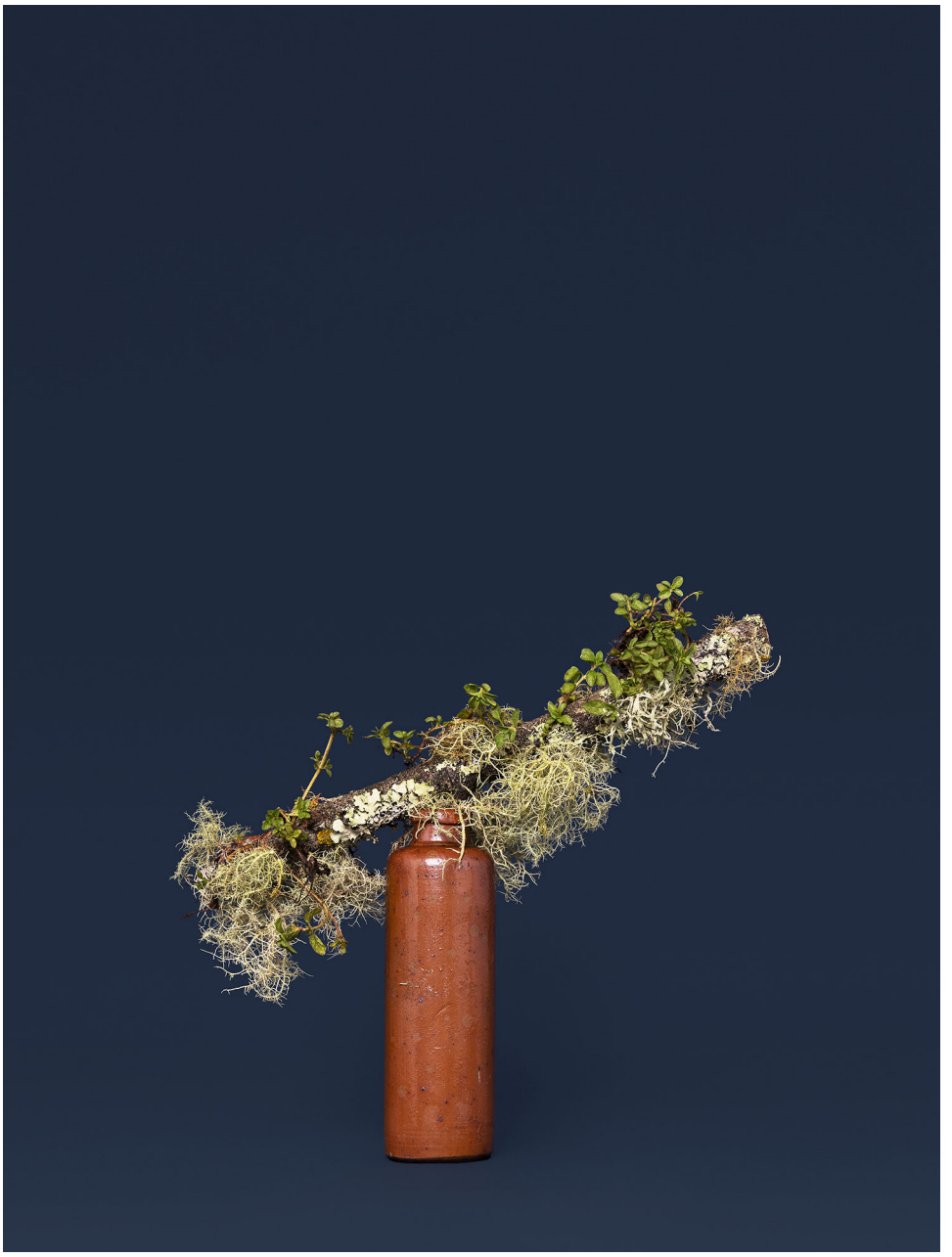
Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (1966) that the process of science often reduces the natural landscape to a list; indeed, this was most often the process of botanical science as it became "taxonomy" by the end of the eighteenth century. Linnaeus urged a reorganization of botanical relations and enabled a universalization of botanical knowledge, at the same time effectively eliminating all the recorded uses for a plant; hence, over the course of what developed into purely Linnean botany and taxonomy, the known medicinal properties of many plants remain often invisible. In one of her photographic works of a plant submerged in water, *Loss paving the way for her new enclosure (Larkspur, Lark's Claw, Lark's Heels, Lark's Toes, Knight's Spur, Delphinium, Dolphin Flowers)* (2022), Shelton recognizes and highlights local names for plants, in the way that everyday healers most likely referred to them as they used them for remedies. Certainly, these are the medical properties Shelton reimagines in her photographic works, pushing back against their disappearance by centering them in her work.

During the seventeenth century, more "natural histories" were written that did not limit themselves to plants but encompassed all living organisms. The beginnings of natural history specimens and the museums that would hold and display them were developed, and scientists soon targeted specialized kingdoms. Natural history came to focus on taking inventory of natural phenomena and traveling to locate such marvels of the world. Linnaeus urged his students to travel; even Robert Boyle's earlier *Designe about Natural History* (1666) was specifically addressed to "travelers and navigators," demonstrating how natural history and travel were intimately connected.[21] Natural histories drew on knowledge gained from inhabitants of specific areas, those who often found that a particular herb was useful for ailments. These individuals are often referred to in natural histories as wise women, apothecaries, florists, or gardeners. Often these people provided a great deal of medical knowledge as well, although much of it was deemed superstitious or at least suspect.

It is often assumed that little classification of plants in Europe existed prior to Linnaeus, but in fact, the classification schemes were often just different, and focused more often on the properties of plants instead of their physical characteristics. Pharmacopeia, or books containing ingredients and recipes for the mixing of medicines, entered mainstream European medicine in the early modern period,[22] and by the eighteenth century, nomenclature and taxonomy became singly important to botanical science. Indeed, it has been repeatedly argued that Linnaeus's influence was vast, and that the 1730s was really the end of a holistic natural history, as Linnaeus and his followers published definitive texts on flora and fauna that were long lists of physical and observable characteristics of the natural world only. We see in the history of "New World" plants that after the 1750s, local names were soon dropped from botanical texts. Instead of recording local names, the goal was to revise and update flora in the Linnean system. Linnaeus has even been described as a teacher of alienation from nature, since he asked

21. Robert Boyle, *Designe about Natural History* (London: Royal Society of London, 1666), 2.

22. See Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 178).



*The Witch, Penny Royal (*Mentha *sp.)* from the series *jane says* (2015–ongoing).

his students to distance themselves from local people and surroundings and use purely what he recommended as the learned technique for natural observation.

Shelton's series *jane says* and *i am an old phenomenon* both record and highlight the work of these plants and the women who had knowledge of their medicinal properties. This is knowledge women have always possessed. In fact, feminist historians have tracked disciplinary methods of the Western European state designed to reduce or eliminate

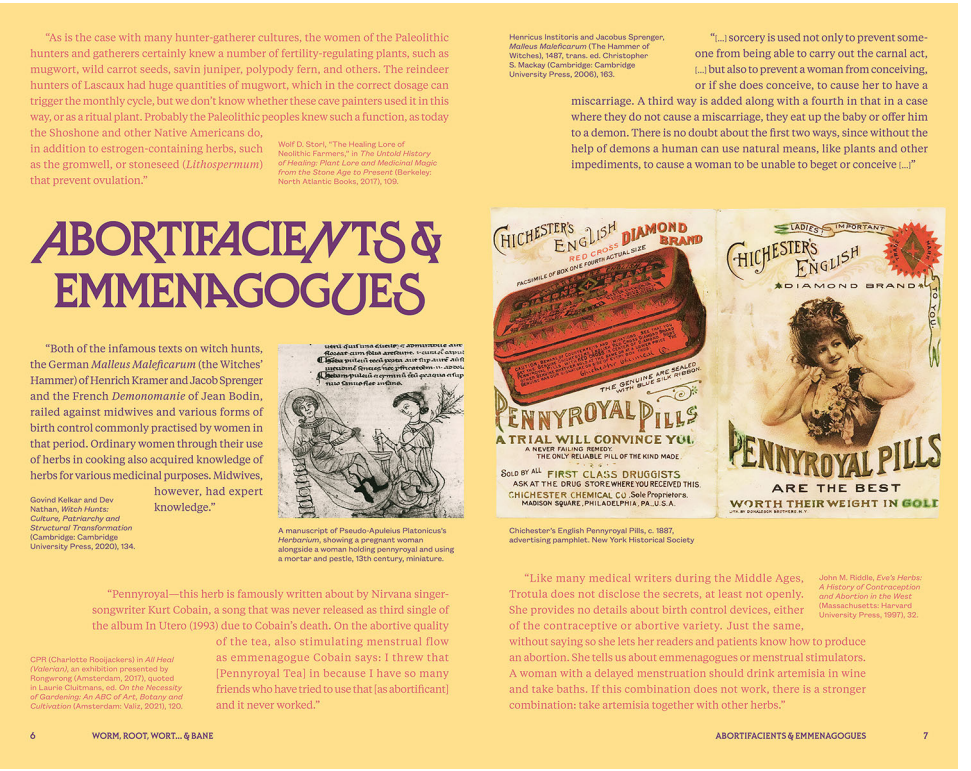
women's control over reproduction. Many "contraindications" listed in published European herbals and flora offered European women clues on how to terminate pregnancies. It cannot be a coincidence that the ideologies of reproductive crimes and the fears of population decline went hand in hand throughout the colonial period. Indeed, at the start of the sixteenth century, when the first ships were returning to Europe from the Americas with human cargo, the most severe penalties against contraception, abortion, and infanticide began. Further, the regulation of women's sexual relations and reproductive patterns became more systematic and intense beginning in the seventeenth century as botanists began to explore the Americas and record what they found. Shelton's deeply rooted artistic research, in both botanical and feminist histories, appears clearly throughout her work, and reconceptualizes the relationship between women and their plant-based knowledge. Writing about *Once upon a time forest floor (elder, black elder, common elder, sweetedler, boor tree, elderberry, elder bush, pipe tree, bour tree, old ladybore tree, old gal, lady eldhorn, edler mother, hylder, hylantree, hollunder, hildemoer, eldrum, elhorn, sureau, witch's tree* (2022), Shelton describes elder as

> a fascinating and old tree steeped in pre-Christian folklore and tradition regarding communing with those on the "other side" and with goddesses, and witches themselves. The wood itself is sacred and forbidden to be burned in some cultures and the plant has many medicinal uses. The work is intentionally structured as a heap or assemblage using stones, moss, ferns, leaves, and white elder flowers.[23]

The barely visible horizon line refers to the darkness of the woods connecting this image to the dark forest floor compositions of Rachel Ruysch, a Dutch still-life painter and leading protagonist of this European genre who was internationally famous during her lifetime (1644–1750). Shelton's *Once upon a time forest floor* references still-life paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, specifically Ruysch's *A 'Forest Floor' still life of Flowers* (c. 1650) and embodies a discussion around the critical reception of flower paintings, seen perhaps as oversentimental and yet crucially a site of significant cultural, social, and political meaning. The work also signals the confinement of women to domestic quarters and the legacy of painting sitters and plants that were part of the domestic sphere.[24]

Plant knowledge from women has been an important piece of the political landscape. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, botany developed as a professional field along scientific lines and makes concrete use of scientific categories and methods. These imperial processes forever altered the landscape of botanical study in the Americas and what is "known" about plants, especially those with healing properties or of use as fertility, medical, or menstrual regulators. "Knowing" of plants was limited to visual knowledge, and the plant that was "discovered" and named in the eighteenth century and explored throughout the nineteenth would soon be dissected and made of use to science and medicine in the twentieth century. Local knowledge was replaced more fully by the scientific as plants moved to the laboratory for pharmaceutical research. Shelton

23. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.
24. Press release, *i am an old phenomenon*.



Page spread from *worm, root, wort . . . & bane* (2024) by Ann Shelton.

reframes this visual knowing process, offering it to us as we try to see and reimagine the plant knowledge that has been lost to us. We will look forward to continued conversation on plant knowledge, as Shelton's body of work continued with a solo exhibition in 2024, as part of this ongoing artistic dialogue on plant-based knowledge, women's bodies, and the history and contemporary cultural politics of women's knowing.

Ann Shelton's work highlights the importance of imagining the plant-based knowledge that women have had and may continue to be in possession of, even though it is often tentative, as oral history and historical botanical knowledge itself is often speculative. It can also be seen as a new natural history, one that makes use of women's and local natural knowledge systems. Shelton's *jane says* has been exhibited internationally and the accompanying performance, *The physical garden*, has been performed at least twice.[25] Most importantly, in her exhibition *i am an old phenomenon*, we have a revisioning and refashioning of the history of botany, one that highlights women's knowledge and scientific understanding, and honors it in its appropriate place. In this reclaiming of women's natural knowledge base, Shelton's work counters and beautifies this missing knowledge, demonstrating the importance of these lost narratives and our continual

25. *The physical garden* has been performed at the Inside Gallery, Sydney, Australia (2017) and Denny Gallery, New York (2019).

work to recover them, as we move forward to imagine a different world, where women's knowledge is respected and understood, where plant properties are to be valued, and not shamed, buried, or disappeared. We have Shelton to thank for much of this revaluing of the botanical knowledge of women across the globe. ■

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