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Exuberant flowers, plants and herbs

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Ann Shelton, *A Lovers' Herbal*. Installation view, PHOTO OP., Tāmaki Makaurau, November 2022. Photo: Hamish McLaren, Skar Image Lab

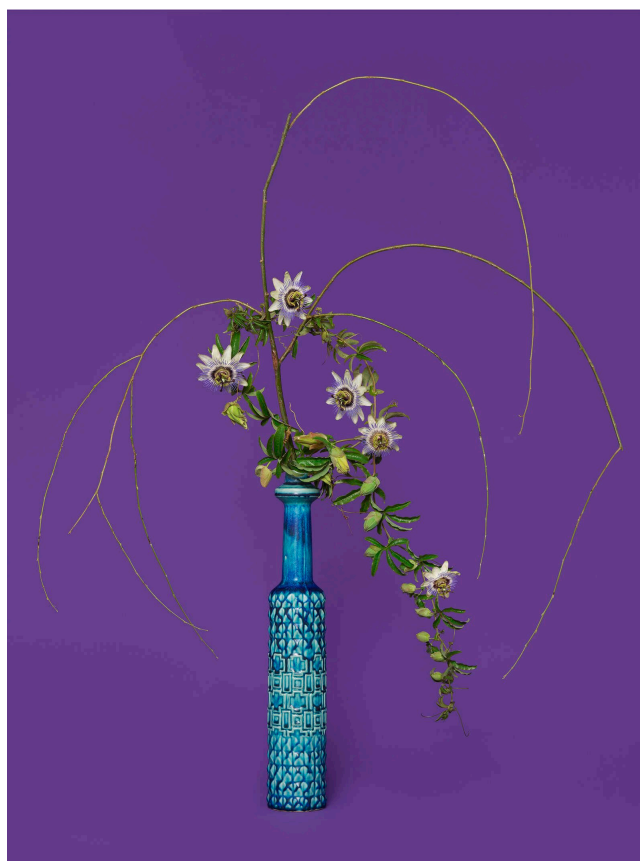
These photographs depict exuberant flowers, plants and herbs, set in beautiful glazed containers. The colours are intoxicating, like the feeling of sweet and sour candies dissolving in one's mouth. The flat backgrounds—solid masses of hot pink, purple, orange, fuchsia, olive green, cinnamon and yellow—make the arrangements pop even more, but also seem to suspend them in time, as if arrested. The result is hieratic, hovering between a hieroglyphic and a classic portrait. Elongated and upright, these still lifes conjure up necks and limbs, dishevelled manes of hair. Even the titles of the works (*The Herbalist*, *The Justice*, *The Super Model*) compound this anthropomorphic bent. I look at them trying to ascertain what makes one particular figure *The Sybil* and another one *The Diplomat*.

Ann Shelton is a passionate admirer and practitioner of Ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement that began 1,500 years ago as a spin-off of the Buddhist ritual of offering flowers to the spirits of the dead. Inspired by this ancient art, the artist has crafted these stunning compositions as part of an ongoing series she began in 2015, often using plants she grows in her garden. Looking at these images I feel invaded by the tantalising perfume of mastery, of the Ikebanist harnessing the potential and qualities of the vegetal components, willing them to conform to an idealised view, to represent certain archetypes, much like the titles of these images suggest.

But we know that a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose... until it isn't. Both hieroglyphics and portraits convey meanings that go well beyond their face value; latent contents floating under the



Ann Shelton, *The Influencer, Peony* (*Paeonia sp.*), 2020, pigment print



surface, left for us to decipher. And so do these works by Shelton, which mine the notion of the flower as cypher, as portal or conduit between

Ann Shelton, *The Justice, Willow* (Salicaceae sp.),
2020, pigment print

reality and the symbolic realm. The plot twist here, the big reveal, is that all the plants in this expanding topiary have been used as contraceptives and abortifacients in the medical canons of several ancient western traditions, as practiced by some doctors, healers, shamans or any other form of wise elder. Plants featured in this series, such as parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, are mild emmenagogues, that is, herbs that when ingested are able to stimulate the menstrual flow even when it's not due. The roots of peonies—the lush pink flowers in the flamboyant roles of *The Party Girl* and *The Influencer*—have been used in Chinese medicine for more than a thousand years as a remedy against cramps and as emmenagogues too.

According to widespread cultural conventions, to those clichés and platitudes we all know so well, flowers are meant to be beautiful, fresh, delicate, fragile. But the flowers handpicked by Shelton have a separate, hidden agenda. I enjoy the friction, the thrilling *frisson* I detect in her images, which tackle the thorny questions of control and power through a clever and elegant representation of the eternal tussle between nature and culture. On the one hand, we might see these photographs as a symbol of the control exerted over vegetation, and by extension over nature, beauty, fertility and women, by politics, institutions and patriarchal laws. But what these artworks are saying is that there's agency to be had. That there is power to be found in the cracks, growing like weeds. There for the taking.

Lorena Muñoz-Alonso is a writer based in London. She was UK Editor at Artnet News between 2014 and 2017. Her writing has appeared in publications including Frieze, Art-Agenda, The Plant, Photoworks, The Art Newspaper, Spike and Architectural Digest, as well as part of artist projects and gallery and museum publications. She has curated exhibitions in London, Madrid and Barcelona and holds an MA in Critical Writing & Curatorial Practice from Chelsea College of Art & Design. In the last few years her focus has turned towards the world of mental health and she is currently training to become a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.

A PDF version of this essay can be downloaded [here](#).



Ann Shelton, *A Lovers' Herbal*. Installation view, PHOTO OP., Tāmaki Makaurau, November 2022. Photo: Hamish McLaren, Skar Image Lab



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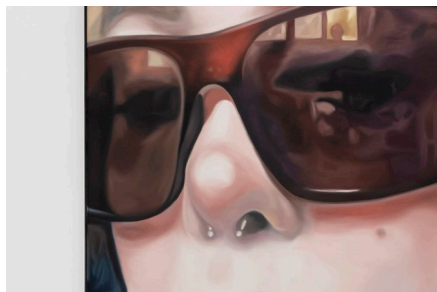


Ann Shelton, *The Super Model, Iris (Iridaceae sp.)*, 2020, pigment print in *A Lovers' Herbal*. Installation view, PHOTO OP, Tāmaki Makaurau, November 2022. Photo: Hamish McLaren, Skar Image Lab



Ann Shelton, *The Herbalist, Parsley* (*Petroselinum sp.*), 2021, pigment print in *A Lovers' Herbal*. Installation view, PHOTO OP., Tāmaki Makaurau, November 2022. Photo: Hamish McLaren, Skar Image Lab

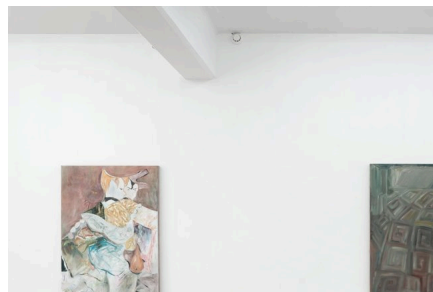
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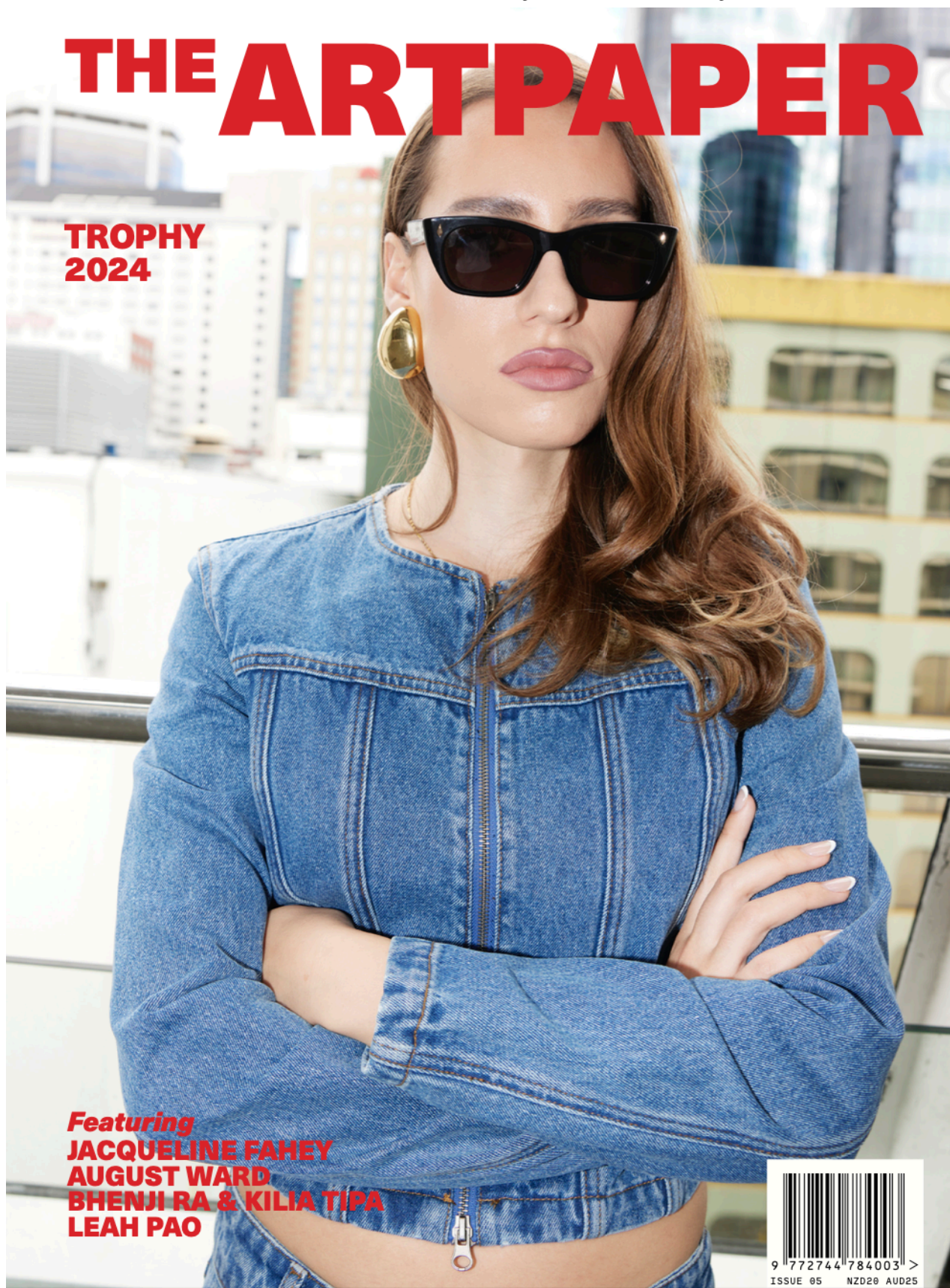
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