

IF WISHES
WERE
THRUSHES,
BEGGARS
WOULD EAT
BIRDS

STUART WHIPPS

Exhibition Notes | Sat 12 September - Sun 15 November 2020

DCA

Dundee Contemporary Arts

152 Nethergate
Dundee, DD1 4DY
01382 432444

Scottish Charity No. SCO26631

Open Wed - Sun 11:00-18:00
Open late Thu 19:00
Admission free

www.dca.org.uk

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition comprises a newly commissioned body of work by Stuart Whipps, exploring specific histories within plants and minerals in different parts of the world.

Whipps is known for often making work about things he does not understand, or skills he does not readily possess. This practice of rigorous curiosity and learning has resulted in projects slowly unfolding where the artist has trained in various other professions and disciplines. In recent years this has included restoring a 1979 Mini with the assistance of former British Leyland workers, training to make geological thin sections at the University of Birmingham and working with a 17th century sign language devised by Sir Christopher Wren.

Over the last two years, much of Whipps' time has been focused on the disciplines of gardening and horticulture. He has devoted countless hours to cultivating a small private garden at his home in Birmingham, as well as a patch at a community allotment in the city. This hands-on work has developed alongside further intellectual curiosity and artistic labour in the studio, where Whipps has been sinking into histories of botany and garden design, investigating the ways in which we have to come to understand and value flowers, plants, stones and soil in the world around us.

Whipps often employs storytelling in his work, and his mode of address is gentle and meandering. He gives us as viewers glimpses of the vast amount of research he has amassed to explore these ideas, and allows the narrative to drift and alight upon new subjects that may not seem immediately connected. As writers and artists Michele Horrigan and Sean Lynch comment in our new publication produced as part of this project,

“His approach appears to be deliberately disheveled and uncentred, always on the lookout for surprises rather than finding evidence that might defend some ingrained idea or theory that he started off with.”

At the heart of this new exhibition is an exploration of specific gardens and horticultural architecture through characters and stories connected to them. Using installation, photography, film and sound, Whipps explores ideas of cultivated landscapes through wildly different timeframes and personal narratives tied to particular sites and materials.

The work is installed within the gallery as a choreographed sequence of moving images. Some of these images form a new film work projected upon a freestanding wall in the space. Other images appear and disappear via two

carousel slide projectors; some slides containing photographs of objects and landscapes, others containing pressed leaves or exceptionally thin sections of stone.

Both these digital and analogue means of projection and representation work in sequence to form a visual accompaniment to the artist's voiceover. The narration gathers together histories and stories from Scotland, Ireland, England, France, Switzerland and Mexico, whilst macro and micro imagery moves from industrial scenes of limestone quarrying and cutting, to minute details of leaf veins and organic plant structures.

The work begins by focusing on a detail of a carnivorous pitcher plant. We hear the artist loosely describe the physics behind the photographic image we are looking at, the way "light bends around and through the tendrils in order to register their form." Whipps originally trained as a photographer, and has sustained an interest throughout his career in the mechanics of image making: how light, space and time operate together to form representations of particular subjects or materials. This constant curiosity makes subtle appearances throughout this new work, especially when we are presented with slide projections comprised simply of raw organic material pressed between glass and illuminated by the projector lamp.

From these minute details, the work then takes us in various directions to touch upon different histories of botany, horticulture, mineralogy and architecture in different locations and time periods.

We are introduced to figures such as Samuel Chearnley and his surreal folio of 18th century drawings of garden sculptures, follies, fountains and architecture. Written in the 1740s, his *Miscellanea Structura Curiosa* remained hidden in the library of Birr Castle in Ireland until its rediscovery in the late 1990s. Had it been published at the time it was written, it would have been the first ever book devoted to garden architecture and design anywhere in Europe.

Elsewhere in the work, Whipps hones in on individual plant species such as begonias, tracing their history and the way in which they were claimed, named, and classified according to Western European colonial systems of exploitation. The plant we now know as begonia was named after Michel Bégon, the last administrator of the French colony of Santo Domingo (now Haiti), and it was here that the plant collector Charles Plumier claimed to have discovered this flowering perennial in 1689.

Beyond floral details, we also hear of collections of rare minerals and diseased stones, such as those held within Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, amassed by Georgiana Spencer, the 2nd Duchess of Devonshire, in the late 18th century.

Further unfurling this thread of interest, the writer Nancy Mitford also appears in the work, as Chatsworth House was the primary residence of her sister Deborah Cavendish and Mitford recalls the aforementioned stone collection in her 1945 novel *The Pursuit of Love*. Whipps goes on to linger over the provenance of a poem in this novel, tracing its roots back to a book of 17th century Scottish verse. It is from this collection of poems that the artist has taken the title for the project, *If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds*. This title is a provocation of sorts, in the way it speaks to the power and privilege held within historical aristocratic voices and bourgeois modes of address. By taking this phrase and divorcing it from its original context, Whipps seeks to highlight these biases and offer these words up anew for fresh interrogation.

With this new exhibition, Whipps generously invites us into his work and research so we might consider the ways in which people have worked with plants and minerals over vast periods of time, whether through practical practices of resource extraction or through wider political frameworks of empire building and colonial thinking.

GLOSSARY

Horticulture: The science and cultivation of plants for food, materials, comfort, beauty and decoration. Horticulturists apply knowledge, skills, and technologies to grow intensively produced plants for human food and non-food uses and for personal or social needs.

Botany: Also called plant science, plant biology or phytology, botany is the scientific study of plants, including the study of their structure, growth, classification and development. Botany is a branch of biology, which is the study of all living organisms.

Macro [short for macroscopic]: Objects or phenomena that are large enough to be seen by the human eye, without the use of magnifying optical instruments. Relating to the whole of something, rather than its parts. It is the opposite of microscopic.

Micro [short for microscopic]: Something so small that it can only be seen by the human eye through a microscope.

Pitcher plant: This name refers to a group of plants that have evolved to become carnivorous. They have special, modified leaves known as 'pitfall traps' which feature a deep cavity filled with liquid. Prey in the form of insects and small creatures fall into the 'trap' and are then unable to escape. The liquid slowly digests the prey, providing the plant with nutrients.

Mineralogy: The scientific study of all aspects of minerals, closely related to geology. Areas studied within mineralogy include the analysis and classification of the chemical composition, structure and properties of minerals, as well as how and where they are formed in nature and how they are used.

Samuel Chearnley (circa 1717–1746): Chearnley was an Anglo-Irish architect primarily remembered as the creator of an 18th century album of garden designs titled *Miscellanea Structura Curiosa* (see below). His other main surviving legacy is a stone column erected in 1746 in the town square in Birr, Ireland, which supported a statue of the Duke of Cumberland. Although the statue was removed in the early 20th century, the column still stands. Little is known about Chearnley's life and he died prematurely at the age of 29.

Miscellanea Structura Curiosa: A volume of designs for garden buildings created by Samuel Chearnley between 1745-1746. The designs are notable for their fantastical and grotesquely humorous nature. It is one of the earliest surviving works of Irish architectural design, as well as the first book in 18th century Europe devoted to garden buildings. The original manuscripts have been preserved in an album at Birr Castle in Ireland for over 260 years. A facsimile was published by Churchill House Press in 2005.

Begonias: A type of perennial flowering plant belonging to a family of plants with the botanical name Begoniaceae, which contains over 1,800 different species. Begonias are native to moist subtropical and tropical climates and are more commonly grown indoors in cooler climates. They are named after Michel Bégon, a former governor of the French colony of Santo Domingo (now Haiti).

Perennial: Perennial plants, also known as herbaceous perennials, live for at least two years and flower every year. Some perennials, such as begonias, typically last for two to three years whereas others such as peonies can live for 100 years or more. The origins of the word 'perennial' literally translate to 'through the years'.

Chatsworth House: Chatsworth House is a stately home in Derbyshire, England, in the Derbyshire Dales. It is the seat of the Duke of Devonshire and has been home to the Cavendish family since 1549. The house is set in expansive parkland and backed by wooded, rocky hills rising to heather moorland. It contains major collections of paintings, furniture, Old Master drawings, neoclassical sculptures, books, minerals and other artefacts.

Georgiana Spencer (1757–1806): Lady Georgiana Spencer married William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire in 1774, becoming Duchess of Devonshire. She was a famous and charismatic English socialite, political organiser, style icon, author, and activist. She was also an early enthusiast of mineral collecting and her collection remains at Chatsworth to this day.

Nancy Mitford (1904–1973): Nancy Freeman-Mitford was an upper-class English novelist, biographer, and journalist. The eldest of six sisters who were famously known as the Mitford sisters, she was regarded as one of the ‘Bright Young People’ in London during the 1920s and 1930s. *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) was her fifth novel and a huge bestseller, followed by *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949). In the 1950s she began writing acclaimed historical biographies, notably of Louis XIV and Frederick the Great.

Resource extraction: This term refers to the processes, procedures and techniques involved in withdrawing materials from the natural environment. Examples of resource extraction are logging, quarrying, mining and oil extraction.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Stuart Whipps (b. 1979) is an artist based in Birmingham. He has undertaken the following solo exhibitions in recent years: *The Kipper and the Corpse*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2019; *Isle Of Slingers*, Spike Island, Bristol, 2016; *Photo Colour Services*, Ithuba Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2015; *Birth Springs, Death Falls*, Flat Time House, London, 2013; *Why Contribute to the Spread of Ugliness?*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2011; and *New Wooabbeleri*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-On-Sea, 2010.

His works are held in several collections including Arts Council England, British Museum, New Art Gallery Walsall, Deutsche Bank and Birmingham Central Library.

NEW PUBLICATION AND EDITION

A new chapbook has been published as part of the exhibition. Speaking to, thinking through, and stepping off from some of the ideas in Whipps' new body of work, *Notes from the Belly of the Beast* is a new collaborative text by artists and writers Michele Horrigan and Sean Lynch. Drawing together ruminations on global pandemics, sculptural reparations, mineral extraction and storytelling through exhibition-making, the writers craft a beguiling invitation for us to re-examine the makeup of the landscapes around us.

Copies are available to read in the gallery and the Information Space, and to buy in DCA Shop and online, priced £4.

In addition, Whipps has been working with DCA's Print Studio team to develop a new, limited edition print. This is available to view in our Editions Space and to purchase from DCA Shop and online.

INFORMATION SPACE

Visit the Information Space next to the galleries to learn more about the exhibition. Here you will find a video interview with the artist, alongside a selection of books (listed below) that have been influential to his thinking.

READING LIST

The Pursuit of Love, Nancy Mitford, 1945

Entitled: A Critical History of the British Aristocracy, Chris Bryant, 2017

Transparent Things, Vladamir Nabakov, 1972

The Passage of The Mountain of Saint Gothard, a Poem; Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, 1802

Hidden Nature, Alys Fowler, 2017

My Garden, Jamaica Kincaid, 1999

The Gardener who Saw God, Edward James, 1937

Modern Nature, Derek Jarman, 1991

Granta 102: The New Nature Writing, Summer 2008

The Mineralogical Record, Vol 36, 2005

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- Sarah Hughes and Tom Brown at West Dean
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- Brendan and Alison Rosse at Birr Castle
- Paul McAree at Lismore Castle Arts
- William Bracewell
- Niall Kavanagh at McKeon Stone
- Clare Mullet, Jenny Lance and Dr Andrew Reese, University of Birmingham
- Katie Hodson
- Charles Noble at Chatsworth House
- Everyone at DCA

The script for *If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds* is informed by and compiled from the following sources:

- Christine Casey's introduction to *Miscellanea Structura Curiosa* by Samuel Chearnley
- Anthea Phillips' article on begonias in the Malaysian Daily Express
- Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love*
- Deborah Devonshire's *All in One Basket*
- The Mineralogical Record, Vol 36, 2005
- Georgiana Cavendish's *The Passage of the Mountain of Saint Gothard*
- Conversations with experts and amateurs along the way
- And Wikipedia, of course

TALKS AND EVENTS

For more information and to book tickets visit www.dca.org.uk

Curator's Tour

Thu 24 September, 18:00-19:00

Gallery 2

Free, but ticketed

Please book in advance

Join our Head of Exhibitions, Eoin Dara, for a conversation in the gallery where he'll be talking about working with Stuart Whipps over the past 18 months to develop the exhibition *If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds*.

Notes from the Belly of the Beast: Michele Horrigan, Sean Lynch & Stuart Whipps in Conversation

Thu 8 October, 18:00-19:00

Online via Zoom

Free, but ticketed

Please book in advance

Join us for an online conversation between Michele Horrigan, Sean Lynch and Stuart Whipps to celebrate our new chapbook, *Notes from the Belly of the Beast*, published as part of the exhibition.

Speaking to, thinking through, and stepping off from some of the ideas in Whipps' new body of work at DCA, Horrigan and Lynch have written a new text drawing together ruminations on global pandemics, sculptural reparations, mineral extraction and storytelling through exhibition-making.

Horrigan and Lynch are Irish artists, who together work at Askeaton Contemporary Arts. Established in 2006, the project continues to commission, produce and exhibit contemporary art in the locale of a small town in the southwest of Ireland.

Since 2017 they have worked closely with Whipps, initially as part of *The Expanded Field*, a nationwide programme in Ireland developed through Askeaton Contemporary Arts, culminating in an exhibition at Lismore Castle Arts, Waterford. In 2019 they co-curated *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*, an exhibition at the Irish Architectural Archive in Dublin, where Whipps' work again prominently featured.

In the Evening There is Feeling: Reading Jamaica Kincaid

Thu 22 October, 18:00-19:30

Online via Zoom

Free, but ticketed

Please book in advance

Led by Eoin Dara, *In the Evening There is Feeling* is DCA's reading group. It takes its name from Gertrude Stein's 1914 book *Tender Buttons* and focuses, in an informal and welcoming way, on feminist and queer texts from the worlds of art and literature.

Connected to the work in the gallery examining different histories of plants and minerals, this session will introduce and discuss some of the ideas contained within Jamaica Kincaid's brilliant book of horticultural meditations, drawn together in a group of essays titled *My Garden*.

In this book, Kincaid gathers together all that she loves (and hates) about gardening and examines it passionately, with generous intellect and razor-sharp wit. Through an intimate decolonial lens, she highlights the systemic racism embedded in what we understand as horticulture in the West, exposing systems of renaming, appropriation and erasure that have gone unchallenged for centuries in garden writing and literature.

To join the conversation, book your place before 17:00 on Wed 21 October. We will then send you soft copies of the texts and details of the Zoom meeting. We will also send an audio recording of Eoin reading excerpts of the writing for those of you who may find it easier or more enjoyable to listen.

CINEMA SCREENING

Artist Choice Film Screening: The Arbor

Wed 14 October, 18:30
Cinema

Whipps has chosen to screen the debut feature by DJCAD graduate Clio Barnard, which is a deeply moving, formally inventive look at the troubled life of the late Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar. Eschewing traditional documentary or biopic techniques, Barnard's film is something else entirely, an alchemical exploration of memory, trauma and personal truths.

A title card tells us that this "is a true story, filmed with actors lip-synching to the voices of the people whose story it tells", and these heart-breaking testimonies are interspersed with footage of actors performing Dunbar's first play, *The Arbor*, in situ on Brafferton Arbor, the street in Bradshaw's notorious Buttershaw council estate after which it was named. Archival footage of Dunbar and her family add another layer of textual (and textural) interplay to the film, but under this experimental surface, Barnard excavates something raw, painful and honest in these stories.

Dir: Clio Barnard / UK / 2010 /
1h 34m / 15

FOR YOUNGER VISITORS AND FAMILIES

Create Space: Gallery 1

Sat 12 September - Sun 15 November

Wed - Fri, 11:00-13:00

Sat - Sun, 11:00-15:00

Gallery 1

Free, but ticketed

Please book in advance

To accompany this exhibition, we have designed our new Create Space to offer up experiences that link to the artist's ideas.

Our learning programme is inspired and delivered by artists; we aim to 'see, think, make and do' with visitors of all ages alongside each exhibition.

This autumn visitors will be able to see a display of work made at DCA through learning projects with local community groups featuring:

ST/ART@DCA with our partners
Tayside Healthcare Arts Trust

DCA Young Photo Club's wall of
images by 14 local young people

Art at the Start, our PhD research
programme in collaboration with
the University of Dundee

There is also plenty to help our youngest visitors to think about the exhibition and the artist's ideas. We have a beautiful display of plants and minerals and a cheerful, socially distanced seating area so that families can sit and spend time together safely.

Families can also make together by picking up one of our pre-packed Art Activity Packs, inspired by the exhibition. We have a Wee Ones Pack for ages 0-3 and Family Packs for older children. Each pack includes coloured pencils or crayons and suggestions of things to do both in Create Space and at home: exploring plant names and shapes, creating a plant alphabet, imagining garden designs and making up stories.

We are also inviting visitors to leave their own artworks, stories or poems in Create Space as part of our Say Hello with Art project. With this initiative, we are partnering with Dundee Pensioners Forum to reach out to older, more isolated people in our community.

Although designed with families and younger children in mind, we hope that visitors of all ages will enjoy spending some time in Create Space.

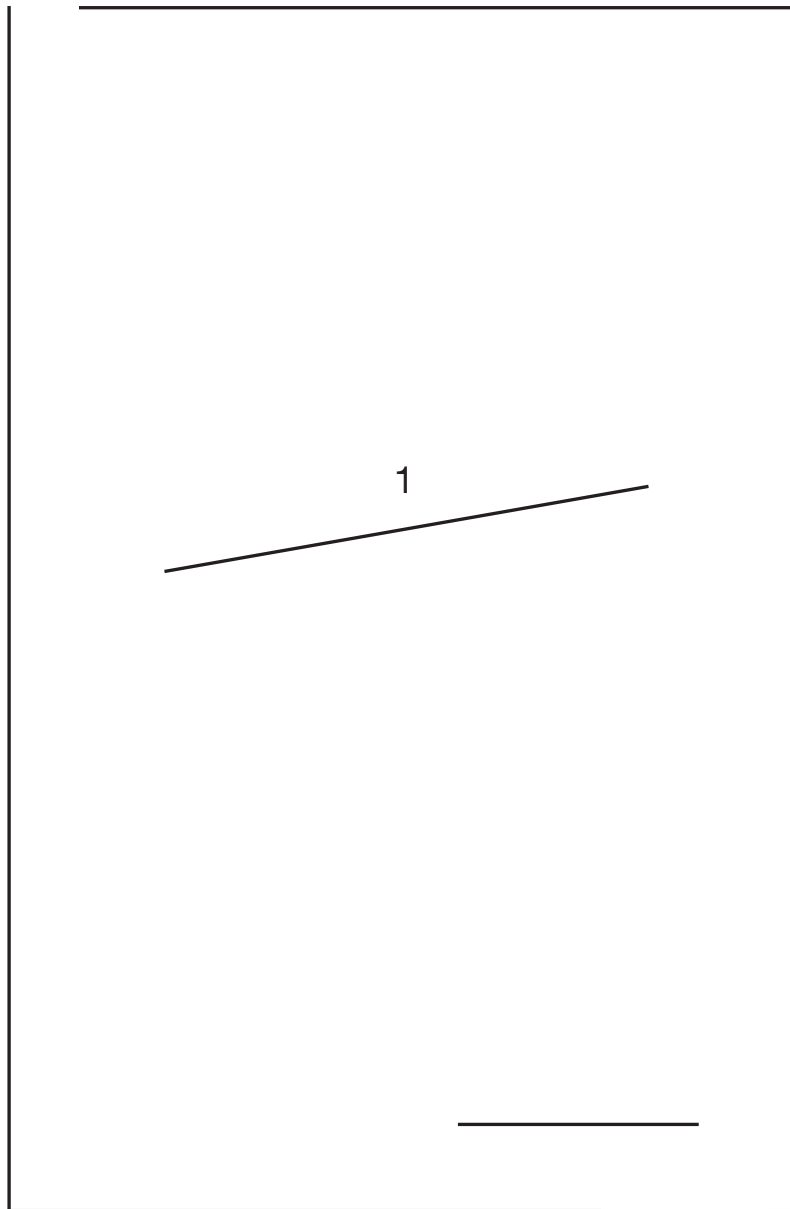
JUST ASK

Our friendly Visitor Assistants are always happy to help with your questions.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Keep up to date with the very latest from DCA by visiting www.dca.org.uk or by following us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Tweet us your thoughts on the exhibition using **#helloDCA**.

EXHIBITION FLOOR PLAN



1

If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds

Digital film, photographic slides,
begonia leaves, limestone

21 minutes

2020