

VACANCY

Press release

Artists: Miljohn Ruperto and Ulrik Heltoft
Exhibition title: *Voynich Botanical Studies*
Duration: June 17–July 22, 2023
Venue: Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai

Gallery Vacancy is pleased to announce Miljohn Ruperto and Ulrik Heltoft's first solo exhibition with the gallery, *Voynich Botanical Studies*, on view from June 17 to July 22, 2023. The exhibition brings forth a series of photographic works, engaging with the myths around the *Voynich Manuscript* from the 15th century.

The cryptic *Voynich Manuscript* is a hand-written codex of unknown authorship. Written in a mysterious language system, its origins and purpose stay unidentified. The strangeness and mystification of the script has inspired academic and amateur circles through visual and literal interpretations, yet the one-of-a-kind "Voynichese" text remains undeciphered. To this day, readers have explored this enigma in all its stunning detail, while the debate of it continues, whether it was coded, merely gibberish, or perhaps an elaborate hoax.

The first part of the *Voynich Manuscript* contains numerous botanical illustrations that depict otherworldly plants as baffling as they are beautiful. The identity of the plants has eluded decipherment, much like the uncoded text documented around the images. Ranging from the fanciful to the bizarre, part of the 129 illustrated plants are claimed to be identified by present-day botanists, while others believe that they are too vaguely drawn and too fantastical to match with any natural counterpart.

Ruperto and Heltoft's *Voynich Botanical Studies* continues to ponder on this contested field. Since 2013, the artists sourced images and textures of actual plants and real objects from the internet, piecing various parts together in digital 3D software to approximate the illustrations from the *Voynich Manuscript*. These digital images were then photographed on negatives and printed on fiber paper. Besides the fictional origin of the subjects, the series's chosen medium, form, and display manner all seemingly attempt at convincing the viewers of their objective truth, further presenting the ambiguity surrounding the historical text. In this exhibition, the works are arranged as different sets to reveal the changes over the course of four seasons. These carefully constructed imaginary plants are given serial numbers and titled with "specimen," lending them a layer of scientific gravity. The implication is also evident through the works' formalist quality, reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt's scientific as well as artistic documentation of botanical specimens. In the group *Specimen 11r Jaro* (2023), *Specimen 11r Leto* (2023), *Specimen 11r Podzim* (2023), and *Specimen 11r Zima* (2023), viewers can speculate the seasonal progression amongst the works and appreciate the visual variations that are not always empirical. The formalist characteristics of *Voynich Botanical Studies* differentiate through these fabricated images, accentuating the opaqueness in their authorship, history, and purpose. The exhibition's intervention of the real and the concocted reflects certain truths to our historical moment and at the same time, delineates the limits of its makers' knowledge and imagination.

Miljohn Ruperto, born in 1971 in the Philippines, now lives and works in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from Yale University in 2002 and his BA in Art Practice from University of California, Berkeley in 1999. **Ulrik Heltoft**, born in 1972 in Denmark, now lives and works in Copenhagen. He received his MFA in sculpture from Yale University in 2001 and studied at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. Ruperto and Heltoft's collaborative project "Voynich Botanical Studies" employs 3D modeling software to reimagine and decode what could be written in the cryptic *Voynich Manuscript* from the fifteenth century, resulting in a series of imaginary plant specimens. The digital collage of different textures and found objects gets transferred onto negatives and printed on paper. The ongoing series since 2013 has been exhibited at Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco, 2020; Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai, 2018; Koenig & Clinton, New York, 2017; the Whitney Biennale, New York, 2014; and Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles, 2013.