

CAC Cincinnati Premieres Group Exhibition Using Plant Life to Examine Ecology, Race, and Queerness

Ecologies of Elsewhere Features Works by 16 Artists Across the World,
Including Firelei Báez, Michaela Yearwood-Dan, and Torkwase Dyson,
and Commissions by MADEYOULOOK and Lorena Molina



Installation views, *Ecologies of Elsewhere*. Photos: Wes Battoclette, 2023. Images courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH.

Cincinnati, OH – Updated February 23, 2023 – The **Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati** is now premiering *Ecologies of Elsewhere*, a major group exhibition that encourages visitors to consider how plants, seeds, and botany generate sensuous systems of knowing and power, and examine the material, ritual, and spiritual qualities of plant life. Featuring work by an international group of 16 artists and artist collaboratives who use plants as medium or subject matter—such as Johannesburg-based artist collaborative **MADEYOULOOK**, multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker **Zheng Bo**, abstract painter **Michaela Yearwood-Dan**, and interdisciplinary artist **Rashid Johnson**—the exhibition includes new commissions and site-specific installations.

Ecologies of Elsewhere is organized by the CAC and guest curated by **Dr. Chandra Frank**, an independent curator and Assistant Professor at the University of Cincinnati, and **Dr. Portia Malatjie**, Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures at the University of Cape Town’s Michaelis School of Fine Art and Adjunct Curator of Africa and African Diaspora at Tate Modern, London. The exhibition will be on view through August 4, 2023.

“*Ecologies of Elsewhere* continues the CAC’s dedication to curatorial initiatives that engage with current issues. As society continues to grapple with its own complex relationship with the natural environment, this exhibition is a timely examination of how we connect with the environment and what it can teach us about ourselves in turn,” said **the CAC’s Interim Alice & Harris Weston Director, Marcus Margerum**.

“I’m honored to welcome Dr. Malatjie and to welcome back past CAC collaborator Dr. Chandra Frank as guest curators,” said **CAC Senior Curator at Large Amara Antilla**. “Their expertise and vision are invaluable on this important project that prompts us to reconsider the metaphorical and literal ways in

which plant life and botany can help us to recalibrate our relationship to each other, history, and our environment.”

Through a dynamic presentation of multidisciplinary artworks and activations, *Ecologies of Elsewhere* uses the physical and symbolic properties of plant life as a means to explore issues that shape contemporary society, such as migration and diaspora; gender and sexuality; extraction and exploitation; the legacies of colonialism; and the potential for healing. Each work in the exhibition offers a critical ecological lens on to a range of subjects, both personal and political, and contemporary and historical.

Torkwase Dyson takes on the ongoing legacies of plantation economies by drawing connections between ecology, infrastructure, and environmental racism; with the forced movement of people came the movement of seeds, plants, and crops. Similarly, **Kapwani Kiwanga** explores how rice grains traveled with enslaved people—in clothing or braided into hair—from West Africa to the Americas as a form of survival. **Sammy Baloji**’s work takes on the large Western conglomerates implicated in the destruction of African environments and ecologies.

From the struggle for land ownership to healing foraging practices and the fraught histories of food production, **Las Nietas de Nonó**, **Emily Hanako Momohara**, and **Ilze Wolff** are attentive to colonial garden inheritances, the over-industrialization of food, and immigrant labor practices. Others, such as **Firelei Báez** and **Lisandro Surriel**, address the spiritual, diasporic, and symbolic images of place and plant life such as cotton.

Ecologies of Elsewhere sheds light on knowledge formations informed by ancestral connections to plants or queer erotic desire and magic realism. Recognizing the material, spiritual, and historic importance of plant life, **Zheng Bo**, **Eric Gyamfi**, and **Abel Rodríguez** delve into plant matters, interactions, and intimate conversations with what is conjured by the land and water. Works by **Michaela Yearwood-Dan** and **Rachel Youn** embrace the performative, sensual, and ceremonial qualities of plants and flowers, and **Rashid Johnson**’s use of shea butter and black soap in his large-scale sculptural installation symbolizes the medical and healing qualities of plants.

The exhibition also includes two site-responsive commissions by **MADEYOULOOK** and **Lorena Molina**. These site-specific works encourage visitors to consider farming and botanic practices in the wider Ohio Valley region. Exploring the relationship between forced immigration, diaspora, and home, Molina is developing a work that references the importance of cornfields. Artist duo MADEYOULOOK is presenting a new, site-specific iteration of their multimedia art installation and garden, *Ejaradini*, that reflects on Black gardening practices and the ongoing legacies of colonialism and apartheid. The CAC commission addresses the often-overlooked histories of Black farming in the greater Cincinnati and northern Kentucky region, incorporating new archival research undertaken by the collective.

Ecologies of Elsewhere also includes a slate of public programs that engage with the exhibition and its themes, including performances, workshops, and other discussion-based programming. Additional details will be announced later.

“This exhibition was born out of the mutual interest in botany that Portia and I share, as well our shared curatorial focus on the various intersections of gender, sexuality, and race. *Ecologies of Elsewhere* considers how plants are bearing witness to ecological interferences and destruction, like colonialism,

racial capitalism, and persistent deprivation of food security, while also paying close attention to the spiritual and healing properties of plants” said co-curator **Dr. Chandra Frank**.

“By centering epistemologies of botany and plants, *Ecologies of Elsewhere* offers new interpretations of our natural world, and the human histories and social systems that coexist alongside it,” added co-curator **Dr. Portia Malatjie**. “Dr. Frank and I are excited that this exhibition will be deeply embedded into the fabric of Cincinnati, both through the presentation of offsite works and programs, and with the archival research MADEYOULOOK is conducting on Black farming communities in the area, bringing the exhibition’s themes and ideas closer to home.”

Participating Artists:

- **Firelei Báez** (b. 1981, Dominican Republic; lives and works in New York, NY)
- **Sammy Baloji** (b. 1978, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo; lives and works in Lubumbashi, DRC and Antwerp, Belgium)
- **Zheng Bo** (b. 1974, Beijing; lives and works on Lantau Island, Hong Kong)
- **Torkwase Dyson** (b. 1973, Chicago, IL; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY)
- **Eric Gyamfi** (b. 1990, Accra, Ghana; lives and works in Accra, Ghana)
- **Emily Hanako Momohara** (b. 1974, Seattle, WA; lives and works in Cincinnati, OH)
- **Rashid Johnson** (b. 1977, Chicago, IL; lives and works in New York, NY)
- **Kapwani Kiwanga** (b. 1987, Hamilton, Canada; lives and works in Paris, France)
- **Las Nietas de Nonó** (Mulowayi Iyaye Nonó b. 1979, Puerto Rico / Mapenzi Chibale Nonó b. 1982, Puerto Rico; both live and work in Rome, Italy)
- **MADEYOULOOK** (Molemo Moiloa/ Nare Mokgotho; both live and work in Johannesburg, South Africa)
- **Lorena Molina** (b. 1985, El Salvador; lives and works between Houston, TX and Cincinnati, OH)
- **Abel Rodríguez** (Nonuya, b. 1941 in Cauca region, Colombia; lives in Bogotá, Colombia)
- **Lisandro Surriel** (b. 1990, Saint Martin; lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
- **Ilze Wolff** (b. 1980, Cape Town, South Africa; lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa)
- **Michaela Yearwood-Dan** (b. 1994, London, England; lives and works in London, England)
- **Rachel Youn** (b. 1994, Abington, PA; lives and works in St. Louis, MO)

Also on view at the CAC in spring 2023:

Later this spring, the CAC will also present a first-ever career retrospective of Cincinnati-based painter Robert O’Neal, featuring 30 of his intimate portraits of Black residents in Cincinnati; and an exhibition organized by interdisciplinary artist and curator Luis Camnitzer examining how and why we memorialize through proposals from more than 100 artists for monuments to honor unsung heroes in the aftermath of the pandemic. More details on these exhibitions follow below:

Luis Camnitzer: Monuments to Unknown Heroes | April 28, 2023 – August 27, 2024

Conceptual artist and pedagogue, Luis Camnitzer (b. 1937, Germany) presents a series of posters by more than 100 artists depicting proposals for monuments to under-recognized heroes. Originally organized in the days following the pandemic, this visual archive captures various perspectives on the ways in which we memorialize, while raising questions about the socio-political and economic underpinnings that typically accompany the production of public monuments. Curated by Amara Antilla, CAC Senior Curator at Large.

Robert O'Neal: A Retrospective | April 28 – October 7, 2023

Featuring more than 30 paintings, alongside drawings, prints, and photo collages, this exhibition is the first museum retrospective to explore the work of Cincinnati-based painter and activist, Robert O'Neal (b. 1940, Covington; d. 2018, Cincinnati). It highlights O'Neal's longstanding interest in portraiture and documenting Black community life in Cincinnati's West End. Curated by Stephanie Kang, Independent Curator and Assistant Professor, Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, Denver.

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About the *Ecologies of Elsewhere* Curators

Dr. Chandra Frank is a feminist researcher and independent curator who works on the intersections of archives, waterways, gender, sexuality, and race. Chandra holds a PhD from the Department of Media, Communications, and Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths, University of London. Her curatorial practice explores the politics of care, experimental forms of narration, and the colonial grammar embedded within display and exhibition arrangements. She has published in peer-reviewed journals, exhibition catalogues and art publications, including *Feminist Review*, the Small Axe VLOSA catalogue, *The Place is Here*, *Tongues*, *Foam Magazine* and *Stedelijk Studies*. She held a Curatorial Fellowship at the Institute of the Creative Arts (University of Cape Town) and a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati. Dr. Frank is Assistant Professor of Communication, Film, and Media Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati.

Dr. Portia Malatjie is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. She is Adjunct Curator of Africa and African Diaspora at the Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational at Tate Modern and holds a PhD in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths University of London (2020). Her recent essay, "Ritual, Song and Spirituality as Radical Healing Praxes in the Work of Dineo Seshee Bopape" is part of the Whitechapel/MIT Press book, *Health*. Malatjie was Head Curator of Brundyn+ Gallery, Cape Town; Director of the AVA Gallery, Cape Town; and curator at Tiwani Contemporary, London. She is a 2021 American Council of Learned Societies' African Humanities Fellow, as well as a 2022 NRF Black Academic Advancement Programme fellow. Her visual, cultural, and curatorial research explores African conceptions of Blackness through Black feminisms, as well as African sonic, spiritual, and technological praxes. Her current co-curated exhibition, *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940 – 2000* (2022 – 2023, co-curated with Nontobeko Ntombela), brings together works of over 40 Black South African women modernist artists.

About the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC)

The Contemporary Arts Center is a catalyst for dialogue and discovery, driven by the art, artists and ideas of our time. Through an innovative slate of exhibitions, performances, educational and community programs and partnerships, the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) provides opportunities for encounter: with trailblazing artists both local and global, with cultural thought leaders, and with one's own creative potential. Embedded in the fabric of its community and committed to lifelong learning, the CAC serves as an integral forum where people can reflect, create, collaborate, and connect around a more inclusive and sustainable culture of tomorrow.

Since its founding in 1939, the CAC has been a champion of emerging ideas in contemporary art, hosting one of the first Midwest exhibitions of Picasso's *Guernica* in 1939; mounting an early exhibition of Pop Art in 1963; representing the United States at the São Paulo Biennial in 1975; and presenting—and successfully defending—the 1990 Mapplethorpe retrospective that became a lightning rod in the era's culture wars and propelled the CAC into the national spotlight. Today, the CAC occupies the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, the first museum designed by architect Zaha Hadid and the first U.S. museum designed by a woman. The building will be celebrating its 20th anniversary in the 2023-2024 season.

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