THE NATURAL WORLD

Jason Allen-Paisant
John Edmonds
David Hartt
Nathaniel M. Stein

cincinnati art museum

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ULINE
STORAGE BOX


speed
speed-mat






1960



NATURE AND HISTORY OUT OF ORDER[1]

Nathaniel M. Stein

When I was in graduate school, the questions that compelled me most were not strictly art historical. I once proposed a study about uncanny experiences of contact with the past at historic sites, as in touching a very old doorknob and becoming conscious of a relationship between oneself and another over the absolute gulf of time. My dissertation, concerning photography in British colonial India, is another case in point. While scholars often consider photography as a means to bring territories under the control of colonizers, my project was to think about how one photographer, very much a foil for the author, fashioned a self at the precipice of disorder. This particular disorder took shape in stereoscopic photographs that confound the fundamental distinction between representation and direct experience—a short circuit registered in the body while the intellect struggles to make it into the other kind of sense. Earlier, as a philosophically inclined (one might say ruminative) child, I remember the moment I realized that parts of the universe nest in ever larger circles until the universe itself defies location.

1 Thank you, David Hartt, John Edmonds, and Jason Allen-Paisant for embracing an intersection that could otherwise have died in my imagination, and for making it expansive, cogent, and rewarding in ways I had not imagined.

Arriving at that edge of knowability produced a frisson I revisited whenever I had left it long enough for it to regain its charge, or whenever I could find another idea to cause a similar intellectual implosion. To be fair to the discipline of art history and my patient mentors in its ways, the die was cast. The visual was profoundly compelling to me but a deeper motivation lay in my attraction to whatever the terms of inquiry rendered impossible to think.

I am sure I added years to my graduate career by trying to locate my fascinations in an inquiry that would qualify as a reputable entry in the annals of art history. Not that it would have been impossible to write a historical account of fracturing aesthetic experience. There are entire literatures on representation at the margins of the thinkable: the sublime, Cockaigne, horror, heterotopia, madness, animality. These formations are historical, but I was not really interested in writing their histories. Rather, I was interested in the havoc they wrought, on the way they seemed to break all the tools and point to an outside. I especially loved their ability to put language at an impasse—which is to say, to show up the order that we write and inhabit.

So, at the outset of an essay that will already have given pause to readers expecting conventional curatorial writing, I offer some orientation points in the form of questions. Why am I, personally, drawn to situations that dramatize the inadequacy of available conceptual tools? Why would I seek to investigate those situations within institutions that are designed to build on existing knowledge of the world rather than to confound that knowledge—contexts like a graduate art history program, or curatorial practice in an encyclopedic art museum? Why is it necessary to do so despite, or even because of, the difficulties that arise? All these questions have to do with the possibility of non-hegemonic life, and that is the possibility that animates *Natural World*. The thoughts that follow describe my own position in relation to hegemony, and from that position, the shared project I perceive among the contributors to *Natural World*.

Natural World

Natural World consists of an exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum, the book you are currently reading, and an ongoing conversation among the four collaborators responsible for the project: Jason Allen-Paisant, John Edmonds, David Hartt, and myself. Reductively stated, the collaboration includes three cisgender men who are Black, have different experiences of nationality, and occupy different relationships to heteronormativity, together with me who is white and a trans man. Each of us has a complicated perspective on naturalness, and all four of us navigate professional practice, not to mention daily life, in social and institutional structures that are problematic in relation to facets of ourselves. Thus, *Natural World* is the work of interlocutors who can and must frame a critical space relative to the world in which we all live.

Often, speakers use the phrase "natural world" to mean only things that exist before and without regard to the realm of human activity, such as tides, the movements of planets, or living organisms and mountains. These things do exist, of course. Indeed, although they do not require us, we need them. This is true in the sense that human life is contingent upon the physical world. It is also true in the sense that we conceptualize nature as an outside to culture—a non-human Other—through which we proceed to define and understand the entire edifice of humanness. From this thicket flows all manner of teleology and interestedness, not least the way in which the quality of naturalness can be deployed to secure the intrinsic rightness of one person as well as to portray another person as less than human. In other words, the concepts we have of nature are entirely bound up with human culture; nature and naturalness are understood through the prism of society and perpetually woven into a fabric of the physical, conceptual, and cultural constructions that humans make. The natural world we speak of is constituted in unending human practice. This continuous interdependence between the social and something we conceive as "nature" is important for many reasons, ranging from understanding environmental degradation to interrogating the natural world's quality of inevitability or intrinsic rightness. It is the latter inquiry—regarding the naturalness of the order that we write and inhabit—that interests me in the context of the present project.

I framed the *Natural World* project because it is important to me and some others like me to tease out the underlying structures of the world we know, and to imagine other ways they could be. "Others like me" includes members of the queer community, but more broadly, *Natural World* is a gesture to and for individuals who are incongruent with hegemonic society in some aspect of their intersectional selves, and for whom the institutions, norms, and practices that make up the everyday world are existentially threatening. The quartet reflected in this volume and the exhibition to which it relates offer an unexpected arrangement with a complicated tempo. The overarching question is, what do we know about naturalness, this quality that is both constituted by humans and mobilized as an absolute ground for truth? What do we four divergent yet interlinked speakers have to say into, across, ahead of, or even toward an outside of the known natural world?

In response to a commission to engage with the Cincinnati Art Museum's collections around the question of naturalness, Allen-Paisant, Edmonds, and Hartt created formally and materially distinct artworks. Considered individually, each body of work is an expansive reflection on knowledge-making in which museums participate. As a set of overlapping dialogues, their work suggests what might flourish in the gaps of that knowledge.

Edmonds and Hartt arrived to the project with mutual admiration and a sense of shared interest. Over the course of months they developed new understandings of the relatedness between their respective artistic projects. In one watershed conversation, Hartt observed that Edmonds's photographs (created in dialogue with African sculptures) insert Black identification into a canon of western art that has been unable to represent Blackness outside of its necessity as a ground for white narratives. In turn, Edmonds described Hartt's work (in response to modern European thought and image-making) as an exploration of "the violence in the margins of beautiful photographs, which through other men's eyes have educated us about the world."[2] Allen-Paisant—a poet and scholar based in the north of England—speaks into these ideas in his own written contribution to the *Natural World* project. Overwhelmed by and attentive to an encounter with another kind of collection in his homeland of Jamaica, Allen-Paisant tells his own body in a landscape, as a medium to plumb and hold unthinkable, unruly movements of identification, dispossession, ownership, and history. Each contributor's insights point to a concern they hold in common—to see, feel, and think agencies that are not knowable within dominant modes of knowledge.

Despite differences in content and approach, Allen-Paisant, Edmonds, and Hartt call us to see how we have learned nature, and how we might unlearn in order to know in enlarged ways. Each in their own manner, they touch on the profound excessiveness of the natural world—an entity that, if one is paying attention, already does break the tools with which humans attempt to bring it into our ken. Their work gestures toward a natural world perceived with more and braver dimensions of sense and sensing, and thus less erasure. My own offering is a parallel engagement with "the collection"—by which I mean the formation of objects, knowledge, and institutions that constitute the arena of my practice as an art historian and curator. Here too, let there be more and braver dimensions of sense, and less erasure. To invoke Allen-Paisant's words in this volume, let there be "more than the body can absorb."

Wildness and Queer Time

As it turns out, time plays a unifying and important role across the *Natural World* project. Certainly, I carried my own history, intellectual attractions, and formative desires into the project, as an author always does. Time was at play in all the remembered thought experiments with which I opened this essay—flashes of connection with the past, a collapse between representation

2 John Edmonds, conversation with the author and David Hartt, April 28, 2022.

(which requires a temporal remove) and direct experience (which occurs in the present), and even the impossible infinitude of the universe (which is bound up with the measureless measure of time). As a system of representation photography itself has been known to wreak havoc with time in the register of the body, and therein lies one reason I find photography fascinating. In each of these instances, intellectual sense falls apart around some unthinkable aspect of time. Significantly, in each instance the body is the medium capable of registering an undoing of time where the intellect is left grasping.

In his recent work on wildness, gender and queer theorist Jack Halberstam understands the wild "not simply as a space beyond the home but also as a challenge to the presumed order of things from, by, and on behalf of things that refuse and resist order itself."[3] Wildness, he continues, "names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable." As Halberstam is aware, while wildness suggests a realm of radical potential, it has also been used to legitimize hegemonic attitudes and imperial endeavors that depend on (often racialized) othering to justify their own violence. "[T]o work with the wild is also to risk reengaging these meanings," he writes. "I take the risk because wildness offers proximity to the critiques of those regimes of meaning, and it opens up the possibility of unmaking and unbuilding worlds." With that in mind, it is important that time and the body are the matrices through which we sense the presence of unthinkable disorder. Both time and the body are formations that straddle the risk that Halberstam names. Both are inscribed by and used to authenticate hegemonic norms, yet also, both are understood to be *of* nature, themselves in some way fundamentally in excess, impenetrable to our intellectual tools. Time and the body play both sides. They are formations of culture and also unsubmitting to human categories. These are the wild modalities through which we craft our orderly history.

3 Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 3–4.

The basic form of history—narrative—is a method in which the historian organizes events in time to generate certain meanings, which are accepted as knowledge based on how they relate to prior entries in the discourse. Arguably, just as language is good at directing attention to what it can say and bad at describing what lies outside its own structure, narrative is a temporal method that puts things into a familiar order. Its way of making sense is ill-suited to ruptures or whatever lies in caesura. As soon as one names something, it is no longer outside language; as soon as one narrativizes something, it is inside orderly time. Poetry is a more capacious mode of conveying meaning, but poetry is not an accepted form of historical discourse in the modern academy. This is problematic for an art historian and tricky for a curator at an encyclopedic art museum—at least, it is for me.

Along with poetry and certain other kinds of literature, art can be a medium of broken order. Ultimately, art remains excessive and irreducible in the face of the language with which curators are supposed to elucidate it. But this does not (necessarily) make for pointless folly. It means we are perpetually bound to the edge of what is possible to say, and thus perpetually grappling with that position. That is an opening. Working in three-dimensional space rather than solely through written language is also an opening. Although curators and museumgoers sometimes treat galleries like texts illustrated with objects, space is not tied to linear exposition in the way textual narrative is. A gallery can be akin to poetry, admitting both arguments crafted over time and experience in myriad simultaneous, associative and short-circuiting constellations. Some of these avenues of insight are felt rather than thought.

Still, as a curator at an encyclopedic art museum, it is difficult to escape the basic obligation to produce valid narrative. Part of the job is to assemble and convey information in a manner keyed to prior entries in the discourse, regardless of how far one might push out the boat in terms of methods and form. This is not pointless folly, either. The museum matters as a place in which to grapple with narrative—the obligation to make sense in a certain time and manner—precisely because the museum is a specific source of authority and a reification of the prevailing mode of knowledge production. In other words, the museum is an edge on which to show up the order that we write and inhabit. It is a knowledge performance space in which one might also examine the structures, projects, and consequences of knowledge, as theater.

Half a century after Hayden White's *Metahistory*, the curator's identity still is not customarily part of the catalog essay. There are pros and cons to this standard of practice. As a practitioner, I can attest that the impulse to make oneself invisible presents as deep commitment to craft. Its virtues include appropriate humbleness and a responsibility to be as transparent as possible to the truth of an artist or the character of the past, or to facilitate a viewer's unencumbered encounter with artworks. Put pithily, the better angels of museum practice tell us that the individual who selects, organizes, and presents the artwork should also somehow get out of its way. I have written in this manner in the past and I will undoubtedly do so again, perhaps even with less angst about the legibility of my perspective. However, there are other reasons it seems inappropriate, distracting, unseemly, self-absorbed, juvenile, or otherwise unprofessional to surface authorial identity in a performance of curatorial authority. To do so is to admit there is already wildness inside the theater. It is to expose the situatedness and contingency of knowledge, the techniques by which we cloak institutional myth and the foundational need to other, and our own interests and limitations as authors of history. As a white, employed museum curator with an advanced degree, who has been read as a straight cisgender man for much of my adult life, I am an implicated beneficiary of these structures and systems whenever I assent to their inability to admit my own otherness into the regime of authority. I provide my assent if I do my work in ways that eradicate what I am and the nature *I* can know.

Whether it is chosen or not, institutionalized effacement relates to the performative character of work within an institution and its discourse. Every author writes, and every practitioner practices, from a complex identity position. It is not as if members of the social majority come to work without putting away parts of themselves. The issue is the degree of congruence between one's positionality and the underlying project of the discourse in which one seeks to be recognized as a valid speaker. In other words: the more seamless the fit, the more effortlessly and with less existential cost one can don the standards of validity—including effacement in the name of authority. Thus, performing the role of the authoritative professional in a given discourse may feel natural, almost costless, and even enlarging to some. What generates friction, hence heightened awareness of the performance as such, is incongruity, and incongruity is about both identity and time. It is about being different in position but also out of sync, so to speak, with the time of the discipline and the institution. Perceived lapses in professionalism are often seen as manifestations of immaturity. If one is off beat in the social norms of a profession, or drawn to marginal questions, or seems to navel-gaze when another kind of academic narrative is expected, then one might be told to grow up, which is to say act within the nature of your role, which is to say *get right with the time you are in*. My own friction with the natural order is certainly related to embodiment but it has always also been temporal.

The economic geographer David Harvey is good at describing the way mainstream temporalities feel natural—thus right and inexorable—despite being the product of interested social relations. Because we experience time as a natural progression, he argues, we fail to realize or notice its construction. Labor and reproduction-related formations of time appear as the inevitable shape of human life, giving rise to value-laden concepts like the imperative of progress, work/life balance, austerity versus instant gratification, and postponement versus immediacy. For Harvey, all these kinds of temporality answer to the logic of capital accumulation. Thus, within capitalism we experience mainstream time as inevitable even while its demands produce marked emotional and physical responses: people feel guilty about leisure, frustrated by waiting, satisfied by punctuality, etc. In effect, these responses add to our sense of time as natural.[4]

4 This gloss is closely paraphrased from Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 7. Halberstam delivers the gloss in the context of a critique of Harvey's blindness to racism, heteronormativity, and sexism in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990).

Of course, capitalism is not the only structure, and all people do not experience mainstream time as a natural progression of certain events and experiences within a socially valorized order. Those who do not—people who are non-reproductive, migratory by choice or compulsion, or incarcerated, for example—certainly might notice that they are in a different relationship with time. Their incongruity relative to mainstream time might well lead them to perceive its construction, question its naturalness, and seek other livable temporal modes.

Enter queer time. Though coined in the context of queer theory, the notion of queer time is not necessarily tied to a relationship between a body and gender identity, nor to sexual practices. It is a way to think about the forms and possibilities of life in non-normative, even willfully resistant relationships with mainstream time. There are many ways to construe, explore, frame, or name queer time. It is common to marginalized forms of personhood and takes shape in subcultures, alternative communities, and imaginative politics like Afrofuturism—often spaces and times of possibility and joy. Or it can appear by necessity on a capillary scale, such as using slowness to resist the exercise of power over one's body. This multiplicity is important, reflecting both the intersectional nature of marginal identities and the power to be found in that intersectionality. Similarly, some theorists give the status of queer to any subject who is non-normative, which depending on context might include women, people of color, people with disabilities, sex workers, the elderly, etc. (Situationally, queer can be a radically inclusive category.)

People who are trans might follow lifeways outside of normative reproductive, economic, and family time, as some other queer subjects also do. But whether or not this is the case, trans subjects disorder heteronormative time by unwriting the prevailing narrative of gendered life. For a transgender man who has a history as female, for example, the past appears discontinuous or uncoupled from the future to which it has given rise. Nor can the out-of-order past be removed from that future. Trans life involves a kind of constitutive simultaneity, which heteronormativity wants to press into its time, its narrative form: either this moment replaced that moment, or this moment never really arrived.

Here is another way to look at this situation of simultaneity. In mainstream temporality, time is the passage from point A to B, where A is a born body and B is everything that proceeds afterward, from the moment one is inducted into gendered existence through language to the point at which one exists in the memories of others. This is the way we write humanness in heteronormative time. A to B. But for some, entering this narrative—this time—is a form of death. The fundamental need that follows is to resist a living death by negotiating life in the space of A-and-then-not-B. That is my own interval from normative time, as well as the root of my will to deconstruct and reimagine the conceived natural world in which normative time is embedded.

Unfortunately, possessing such an awareness does not make it easier to tack between the very real pragmatics of survival and the equally real, if less absolutely necessary pragmatics of professional curatorial practice. By "professional" I mean to signal something that passes not only as knowledgeable work about art, but also as a specific kind of work performed by a certain type of person in a particular context. I mean work that passes as natural in the performance time of the museum; narrative played straight in the key of A to B. And here is where the matters circulating in this essay come together, because none of the collaborators involved in *Natural World* can speak naturally in that key without in some way erasing himself. What, then, might it look like for individuals in this allied set of impossible, wild positions to make statements, in and through a museum, about the apparent naturalness of the known?

Cultivation

At the outset of *Natural World*, I knew the project would involve reframing the natural as an inside as well as an outside, as a work of knowledge production rather than a discrete, external ground upon which knowledge is built. I sought interlocutors who, in disparate but related practices, consider the complex and situated ways naturalness is written and inscribed in human life. In broad (and I now realize, flattening) strokes, I thought Hartt's work limned the underlying structures and ideas, while Edmonds's work pulled the ideas into bodies. Meanwhile, I read a gorgeous essay by Jason Allen-Paisant and felt there was a connective tissue in the way he wrote about embodied Blackness, experience of nature, the meaning in landscape, and time.[5] I also knew the collaboration required my queerness to make sense as a four-way partnership, and that I was instating that demand by framing myself within the project more frankly than curators usually do. I did not, however, set out with an understanding of time as a shared element across the collaborators' respective work, nor did I quite see how *Natural World* was related to my own identity position understood as a temporal situation. Yet time cropped up, in conversations that needed their own time to be fully understood.

When Edmonds began work for *Natural World* by delving into the museum's collection of African art, he spoke about taking an expansive and experimental approach to relationships between physical bodies, nature, and objects. As I tried to guide him through the collection, it emerged that he was not interested in the realness of objects in the museum's terms. That is, for Edmonds the interest of a sculpture was not contingent on authenticity or value by way of connoisseurship or origin in a particular date range or production context. Rather, a more compelling realness inhered in materiality, and in the fact of an object's ongoing existence in time. The materiality of an object might function as a transhistorical connection between the physical body of a sculpture, the physical body of one who feels its presence, the history of that feeling body, and the continent—in the sense of territory but also quite literally, the elements—of Africa. This is not to say the object sheds its specificity, but that it is opened to a fuller range of facts. For Edmonds, the range includes facts perceived by and inscribed in his own body. Like a living body, the object's life is real; it is physically built up in a complicated relationship to nature, valued, and open to damage. An object's suspension in the museum does not remove it from time, nor does it necessarily condemn it to death by narrative. Gaps in knowledge—all the "possiblys" and "maybes" Edmonds noticed in institutional research files—become points of connection to the lives of the living, and openings to alternate possibilities. The institution's forms of object care—high-density shelving, storage mounts, condition reports, record photography, modes of gallery presentation—also suggest wounding, trauma, and the potentiality of desire, healing, and holding *among the living*.

Over the course of months, Edmonds's work took shape as a meditation on the present that is full with all time, with history and the forward imaginings history suggests are impossible. His pictures embody a place of suspension, in which experiences of Black masculinity including conflict, loss, fraternity, mourning, love, rupture, and wholeness are mutually known and held in the presence of golden archetypes, amid elemental smoke, sweat, blood, tears, and light. In an unending still moment, something has happened or will happen, forever. This is the peculiar temporality of the tableau, its stillness always cut across by potential. Edmonds's methods, images, and the very presence of his photographs in museum galleries make manifest a fact that much museum practice works to foreclose: museum time can also be cut across. For, what is the museum but a collection of tableaux about the natural world?

At the end of Edmonds's work, I understood why, early on, he had responded so strongly to a phrase from Allen-Paisant's writing—"reclaiming time"—and why Edmonds,

5 Jason Allen-Paisant, "Reclaiming Time: On Blackness and Landscape," *PN Review 257*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2021): 31–34.

too, anchored that claim in his own body.[6] Importantly, Edmonds's pictures are not referential. While his motifs are resonant for viewers familiar with European art, they are not restagings in which an artist replaces white figures with Black figures to make a critique. Rather, Edmonds is bodying forth an actual trajectory of human life—one that was always simultaneous with the time and space of western art history, but must be imagined into its limited range of sense.

Hartt entered the *Natural World* conversation thinking about parts of the collection that speak to photography's entanglement in the mindset and practices of European imperialism. Specifically, he was interested in the ways certain narratives and representational techniques extended through time and space, operating as means to anchor the colonial project as well as to secure apparently domestic questions of cultural patrimony. In verdure tapestries for the palaces of the elite, government-commissioned photographs of architectural sites in France, Grand Tour imagery of Rome and the Campagna, visual aids for the applied arts, and the photographic jottings of the Barbizon School, for example, one sees not only particular ways of inscribing the natural world inside a human order of representation, but also an unrelenting, often recursive effort to inscribe human history in the natural world. And why not? Of course, one might argue, that is what humans do. Any stroll through the museum, let alone a foray into museum storage, yields an endless set of propositions and claims seated in nature—from landscape paintings, figural images, and foliate decorative art objects to the less-noticed details of the frames, architectural spaces, and campuses in which we situate and encounter these works. All of this together comprises a densely written and self-referential text about human relationships with the environment, taken in the largest sense to include elements both natural and built. Indeed, as Hartt has learned from the environmental philosopher Steven Vogel, while we are part of the environment, the environment is itself our text. Important matters for Hartt include both our evolving ability to recognize the hegemonic telling of nature, and the possibility of making space in that telling for positions and agencies to which it is blind.

Hartt's method brings together chronologically and geographically disparate visual evidence that is itself shot through with temporal anxiety. The work of the *Mission Héliographique* in the early 1850s forms just one example. To gloss, the *Mission* was a government-funded effort to manifest a unifying origin story for the French nation under the Second Empire. This was to be done through a photographic survey of "ancient" sites (primarily medieval buildings, but also prehistoric and Roman constructions) deemed constitutive of French cultural memory and identity. Photographers including Édouard Baldus were commissioned to make images that worked in tandem with the activities of figures like the architect and theorist Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, who proposed (and indeed committed to stone) a certain medieval past as the model for a more perfect future, even while that past was understood to be an imaginary ideal. This nested historical project "became a problem of eliding space and time. It entailed converting ancient sites from landmarks of particular regional significance into durable symbols of a unified country via renovations that could signify both a new and an ancient France, thereby confounding the passage of time [and] promoting empire as the descendant of a gloried past of autocratic rule."[7]

Yet, what is indexical about photography (its tendency to see without selection) is also what makes photographic documents so unruly. Much like survey photographs made in colonial territories, the meaning of such images made in France was destabilized by the present. *Mission* photographs were documents not of a distant past that could be made to stand as a ground for a national narrative of progress and legitimacy, but rather of the intractable contingency of pictured sites in the contemporary moment. Unintentionally, what photographers documented was a competing set of agencies—national and local, imperial and colonial, human and non-human—making adaptive reuse of aspects of the environment.

For Hartt, the fact that time and distance lend us the ability to decipher past visual campaigns and read them anew is as important as the ways in which time and distance are at play in the original representations. Thus, his own work often reprises the modes of picturing he is asking us to see anew, working within a tradition to parse it. By transporting the media and visual strategies of prior representations into and out of his own pictures, he doubles and breaks up their telling of the world. Yet the present moment into which Hartt imports old negotiations of the environment is no more or less complicated than the present moment in which they first occurred. Crucially, he is calling us to attend to the possibility in a wildness that was always already there—in photographs, in pictures, and in the knowledge we want them to secure. That possibility is twofold. First, non-hegemonic life is everywhere already negotiating existence in our environment, despite our inability to know it. Second, our ways of knowing can be cut across. Indeed, Hartt's work also bears on the *museum's* representation of history—the museum's knowledge project. To paraphrase the artist, his work is an intervention of reality in museum discourse. I might say it is a reality check on museum time.

Natural World offers an accumulation of work inquiring into the nature of naturalness, which seems to share in an unlearning of time. In hindsight, I wrote this into the framework of the project by asking collaborators to engage with collections. In doing so, I was asking for work about the concept of history—a past arrayed in an order with particular outcomes—and its active relationships with the presents in which histories are perpetually written. Regardless of their state of preservation, collections share some characteristics with ruins. They are a medium in which we inscribe a past and through which we attempt to both write and encounter history. These efforts are often in tension with the fact that, also like ruins, collections and the objects in collections exist in the present. They are untethered from their origins and freed up to carry new meanings—something we (meaning museum stakeholders and society at large) do not always want them to do. As each of the contributors to *Natural World* demonstrates in some way, the ruin is a time traveler, an old formation always shifting into new contexts of recognition, inscription, and occupation. Collections, like ruins, are an intersection of anxious conservatism and radical potential.



Library Transfer
Unidentified photographer (probably American, late 19th or early 20th century)
Fritz in Court of Palazzo Vecchio, circa 1895–1920
cyanotype
4 15/16 x 3 11/16 in. (12.6 x 9.4 cm)
[Author's notes: Blue boy, learning how to be natural inside culture, under a then-gaze and a now-gaze. Blue boy in transit with Gainsborough, Oscar Wilde, Marlene Dietrich, Robert Rauschenberg, gay men's magazines, Quentin Tarantino, Rakesh Satyal, and Kehinde Wiley. Temporal wildness. A possibility.]

6 Interestingly, Edmonds's central gesture with respect to collection objects ended up requiring an act of replication. Because collection objects could not be transported or touched in the ways Edmonds's artistic vision required, the golden figures that appear in his photographs are 3D-printed analogs of Baule and Igbo sculptures, respectively, that are part of the museum's collection. The female-bodied spirit spouse and the male-bodied Ikenga carry dense connotations around femininity and masculinity. They also suggest generational descent—maternity and paternity—that Edmonds explores in some of his images. Yet, replication queers reproductive time, opening up a possible set of relationships that are not bound by the usual order of heredity. To reach forward in the framework of this essay, to replicate something might be thought of as an act of cultivation.

7 Stephen Monteiro, "'Nothing Is So Dangerous as Hypothesis': The *Mission Héliographique*, Photography, and the Spectacle of History," *Photography & Culture,* vol. 3, no. 3 (November 2010): 303.

In the *Natural World* exhibition, one of the ways Hartt and Edmonds activate this tension is by using museum storage equipment to present artworks in the galleries. Museum storage suggests the orderly suspension of objects in time. It is an offstage, functional environment, even, through a certain critical eye, a carceral one. When objects go on view in the galleries, they are customarily placed into a different presentation regime, including recognizably special treatment in term of display poses, lighting, protection, security, adjacency, and language. This is the object set to work on the proscenium, set in place within the generational time of history. Yet in fact these two environments—storage and gallery display—are continuous; facets of the same endeavor.[8] To display objects on storage furniture in the gallery is to make manifest the temporal anxieties that are already at play in the knowledge project of the museum. It is to deploy the most loaded apparatus of objects' physical and temporal suspension in the institution to emphasize the fact that, actually, the objects are always constituted in the contemporary moment, and are held as signs of a past to do work in the present. But what work, in which kind of time? In *Natural World*, a key part of the work is the imaginative transportation of signs not only over ages, but also across temporalities. I would argue that Hartt, Edmonds, and Allen-Paisant put nature and history into queer time—a temporal situation that is not strictly narrative or generational (both rules of order: from this, then that), but rather, willfully recursive and simultaneous. This transportation of signs across temporalities is necessary for the same reason it is necessary for me to frame institutionally discomfiting questions. Namely, because the methods we otherwise have are inadequate. Unless we break our tools, they show us only the nature that we have already written.

Fittingly, at the close of a set of thoughts about human practice, temporality, and the natural world, I find myself thinking about cultivation. The word "cultivate" derives from other words, which circle around ideas of tilling, toiling over, and caring for. These meanings apply to developments one might nurture in society as well as those one might generate in the soil, or indeed in a laboratory. To cultivate is to improve by care, to care something into existence through, but also against the nature of the known—for it seems to me a process that sends nature back on itself with results that are neither intrinsic nor inevitable. They are, precisely, toiled over, developed, made from available resources but in a relationship of resistance to the limited range of the already existent. If it is chosen work, to cultivate is to labor in the name of possibility. Perhaps, it can even be thought about as a queer activity. Interesting, then, that gardens, cities, pictures, institutions, bodies, and time are already meeting places between work and desire. Cultivation is a potential already written into the natural world. While I do not wish to reach for a neat exit, I do like this fact: "to care for" is also in the etymology of the word "curate"—we are supposed to care the past into the future. This is always a practice of cultivation. It can be a labor in the name of possibility.

8 These physical museum environments have analogs in the modes of presentation used in exhibition catalogs.

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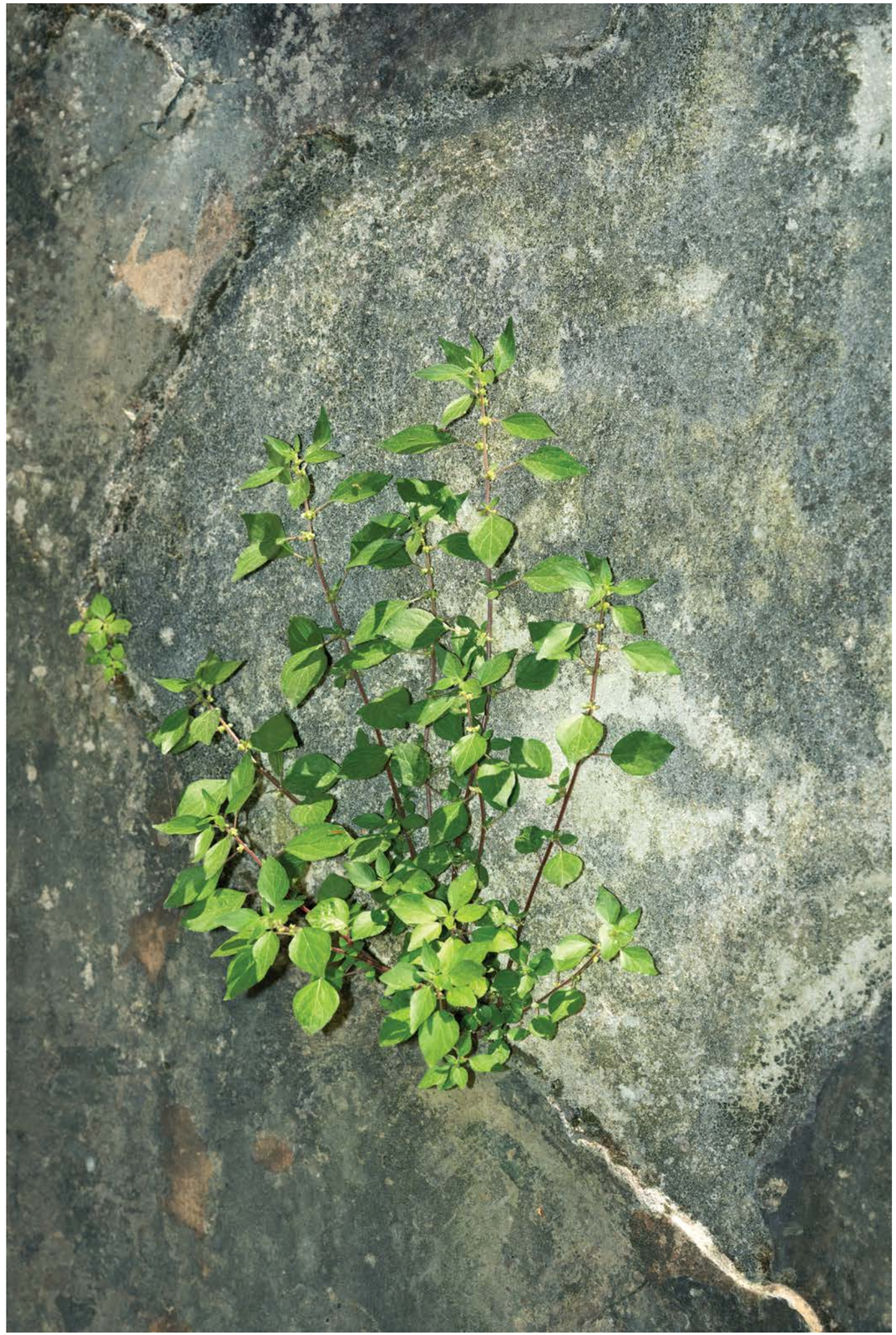
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THE GARDEN

David Hartt



David Hartt
The Garden (Papaver rhoeas, Brassica tournefortii, Raphanus raphanistrum, Avena fatua & Bromus diandrus / Rome, Italy / May 20, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Parietaria judaica / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022







Captioned clockwise from top left:

1940.594
Théodore Rousseau (French, 1812–1867)
Le Cerisier de la Plante à Biau (Cherry Tree at Plante à Biau),
from the portfolio *Quarante Clichés-Glace*
1862, published 1921
cliché verre
8 1/2 x 10 7/8 in. (21.6 x 27.7 cm) on sheet 9 1/4 x 11 3/4 in. (23.5 x 29.8 cm)
Gift of Herbert Greer French

1981.157
Charles Nègre (French, 1820–1880)
Plants in Sunlight, circa 1865
albumen silver print
8 3/8 x 6 11/16 in. (21.3 x 17 cm) on sheet 8 3/8 x 7 7/16 in. (21.3 x 18.9 cm)
Museum Purchase: Gift of John Sanborn Conner, by exchange

1980.93
Charles Aubry (French, 1811–1877)
Roses, circa 1864
albumen silver print
9 13/16 x 12 7/8 in. (24.9 x 32.7 cm)
The Albert P. Strietmann Collection



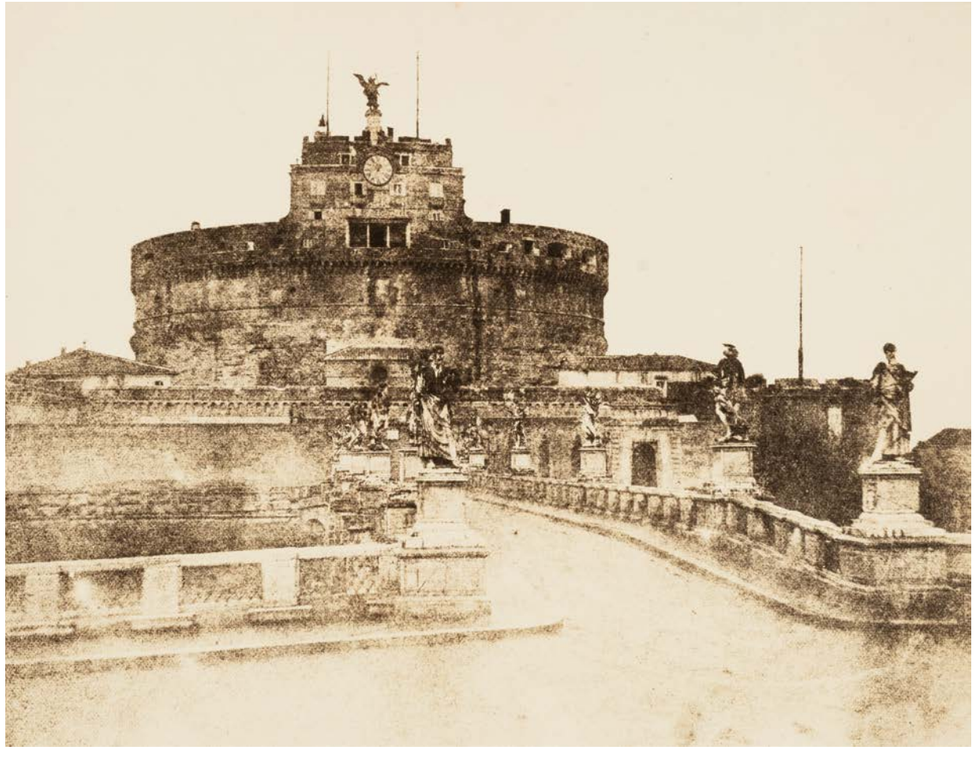
David Hartt
The Garden (Acanthus mollis, Urtica dioica & Oenanthe javanica / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Urtica dioica, Parietaria judaica & Cardamine hirsuta / Rome, Italy / May 16, 2022), 2022



1979.41
Gioacchino Altobelli (Italian, 1814–about 1879)
Castello E Ponte St. Angelo, Rome, circa 1868
albumen silver print
9 5/8 x 13 7/8 in. (24.4 x 35.2 cm) on mount 18 7/8 x 23 5/8 in. (47.9 x 60 cm)
The Albert P. Strietmann Collection



2013.251.47
Nathan Flint Baker (American, 1820–1891)
Leavitt Hunt (American, 1831–1907)
Ponte and Castel S. Angelo, Rome, from the album *Souvenir of the Orient*
1851–1852, printed and album assembled 1900–1910
gelatin silver print from waxed paper negative
6 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. (16.5 x 21.6 cm)
FotoFocus Art Purchase Fund and Gift of Frederick Rock



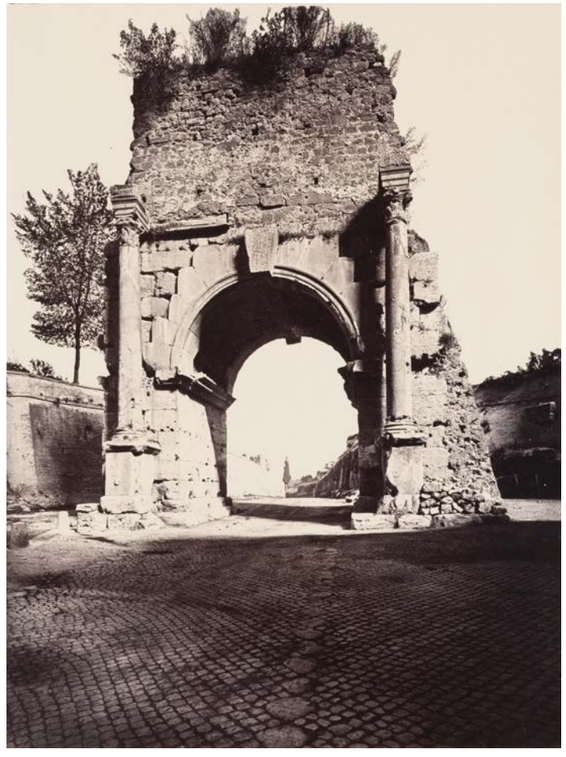
Captioned clockwise from above:

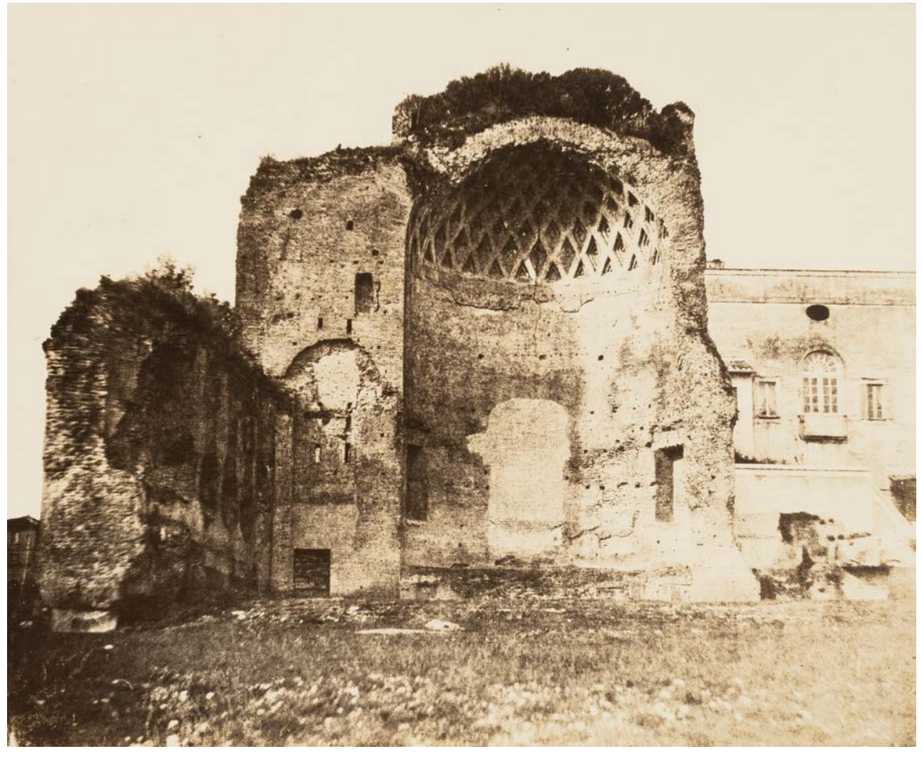
1981.715.28
Probably **James Anderson** (British, 1813–1877)
Temple of Minerva Medica, Rome, from the album *Roma*
1855–1870s, album assembled circa 1861–1878
albumen silver print
11 1/4 x 14 1/4 in. (28.6 x 36.2 cm) on mount 19 x 24 3/8 in. (48.3 x 61.9 cm)
Gift of the Sons and Grandsons of Susan L. Winslow, 1905 (Library Transfer)

2013.251.9
Nathan Flint Baker (American, 1820–1891)
Leavitt Hunt (American, 1831–1907)
Remains of the Temple of Venus and Roma, Rome,
from the album *Souvenir of the Orient*
1851–1852, printed and album assembled 1900–1910
gelatin silver print from waxed paper negative
7 1/2 x 9 3/16 in. (19.1 x 23.3 cm)
FotoFocus Art Purchase Fund and Gift of Frederick Rock

2013.251.30
Nathan Flint Baker (American, 1820–1891)
Leavitt Hunt (American, 1831–1907)
Basilica of Constantine and Maxentius, Rome, from the album *Souvenir of the Orient*
1851–1852, printed and album assembled 1900–1910
gelatin silver print from waxed paper negative
7 5/8 x 9 9/16 in. (19.4 x 24.3 cm)
FotoFocus Art Purchase Fund and Gift of Frederick Rock

1981.715.45
Probably **James Anderson** (British, 1813–1877)
Arch of Drusus, Rome, from the album *Roma*,
1855–1870s, album assembled circa 1861–1878
albumen silver print
15 x 11 3/16 in. (38.1 x 28.4 cm) on mount 24 3/8 x 19 in. (61.9 x 48.3 cm)
Gift of the Sons and Grandsons of Susan L. Winslow, 1905 (Library Transfer)









David Hartt
The Garden (Hordeum murinum, Trifolium repens, Crepis capillaris, Fumaria capreolata, Catapodium rigidum, Parietaria judaica, several species unidentified / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Rosa hybrida & Wisteria sinensis / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022



1959.238
Manufacture Royale de Beauvais (French, est. 1679, closed 1780)
after cartoon by **Francesco Giuseppe Casanova** (Italian, 1727–1803)
Les Quatre Ages: L'Enfance (The Four Ages: Childhood and Infancy), 1778–1780
wool, silk
117 1/2 x 76 3/8 in. (298.5 x 194 cm)
Gift of the Duke and Duchess of Talleyrand-Perigord

1960.19
Manufacture Royale de Beauvais (French, est. 1679, closed 1780)
after cartoon by **Francesco Giuseppe Casanova** (Italian, 1727–1803)
Les Quatre Ages: Le Concert (The Four Ages: The Concert), 1778–1780
wool, silk
120 1/4 x 75 3/4 in. (305.4 x 192.4 cm)
Gift of John W. Warrington and Joseph B. Hall





David Hartt
The Garden (Sonchus oleraceus, Cymbalaria muralis & Adiantum capillus-veneris / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Papaver rhoeas, Sonchus oleraceus, Matricaria discoidea & Hordeum murinum / Rome, Italy / May 20, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Urtica urns / Rome, Italy / May 16, 2022), 2022



1960.558
Manufacture Royale de Beauvais (French, est. 1679, closed 1780)
after cartoon by **Francesco Giuseppe Casanova** (Italian, 1727–1803)
Les Quatre Ages: La Danse ou la Promenade (The Four Ages: The Dance or the Promenade , also known as The Marriage of Antoinette de Bertier de Sauvigny to the Marquis de la Bourdonnaye), 1778–1780
wool, silk
118 3/4 x 82 3/4 in. (301.6 x 210.2 cm)
Gift of John J. Emery

1960.559
Manufacture Royale de Beauvais (French, est. 1679, closed 1780)
after cartoon by **Francesco Giuseppe Casanova** (Italian, 1727–1803)
Les Quatre Ages: L'Etude de la Sphere (The Four Ages: The Study of the Globe), 1779–1780
wool, silk
121 x 80 1/4 in. (307.3 x 203.8 cm)
Gift of the Duke and Duchess of Talleyrand-Perigord





David Hartt
The Garden (Passiflora foetida / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022



David Hartt
The Garden (Lactuca muralis, Valeriana officinalis, Adiantum capillus-veneris / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022



Captioned clockwise from above:

1981.335
Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)
Avignon, circa 1861
albumen silver print
7 11/16 x 10 3/8 in. (19.5 x 26.4 cm) on mount 10 x 14 1/16 in. (25.4 x 35.7 cm)
Bequest of Elizabeth Haven Appleton, 1891 (Library Transfer)

1978.250
Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)
Pont du Gard, circa 1861
albumen silver print
7 9/16 x 11 in. (19.2 x 28 cm) on mount 12 5/16 x 15 7/8 in. (31.2 x 40.3 cm)
Museum Purchase: Gift of H. Tracy Balcom, by exchange

1981.327
Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)
Place du Carrousel [Tuileries from Pavillon de l'Horloge, Louvre, Paris], early 1850s
albumen silver print
7 13/16 x 11 3/4 in. (19.8 x 29.8 cm) on mount 11 x 14 3/16 in. (27.9 x 36 cm)
Gift of Alfred Traber Goshorn, 1892 (Library Transfer)

1944.104
Unidentified artist
after **Jean-Antoine Houdon** (French, 1741–1828)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 19th century
plaster
27 1/4 x 19 1/2 in. (69.2 x 49.5 cm)
John J. Emery Fund









David Hartt
The Histories (after Duncanson), 2020



David Hartt
Fragment, 2014



Captioned clockwise from above:

1989.77
Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)
Ile de la Cité, Paris, circa 1855
salted paper print
13 9/16 x 17 1/2 in. (34.4 x 44.5 cm) on mount 18 3/4 x 24 5/8 in. (47.6 x 62.5 cm)
Library Transfer

1981.334
Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)
Les remparts d'Avignon, 1856, printed later
albumen silver print
5 15/16 x 8 1/4 in. (15.1 x 21 cm) on mount 10 x 13 15/16 in. (25.4 x 35.4 cm)
Bequest of Elizabeth Haven Appleton, 1891 (Library Transfer)

Library Transfer
Édouard Hautecoeur (French, 1847–1904)
Rue de Rivoli et Jardin des Tuileries, circa 1880
albumen silver print
8 3/8 x 10 3/4 in. (21.2 x 27.3 cm)







David Hartt
The Garden (Capsella bursa-pastoris, Stellaria media, Poa annua, Taraxacum officinale, Hordeum murinum / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022

VIEWING PLEASURES AND VANTAGE POINTS: UNCANNY EMBODIMENTS IN A JAMAICAN GREAT HOUSE

Jason Allen-Paisant

Greenwood Great House. As our guide, Jenny, takes us through the tour, I'm thinking about scale, vantage points, and verandas. I want to remember just how much land the Barretts, the slave-owning family that built this great house, owned. Jenny informs us that their lands stretched from Little River in Saint James, somewhere near where we currently are, all the way to Falmouth in Trelawny; eighty-four thousand acres of land. "Their land." Staggering, the very idea that this English family "owned" the land, that it could be called "theirs." Jenny tells us about the number of slaves they owned—over two thousand—and how they were known to be "humane masters"; they were known to treat their slaves well, she says. "These solid mahogany roll-top desks in the study are thought to have been used by some of the Barretts' slaves. The Barretts were of the rare kind of masters who taught their slaves to read."

It is in this room, the study, that I became struck by the portrait of the man who built the house, Mr. Richard Barrett, cousin to Edward Barrett, the head of the family at the time and father to the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. At the time when the Greenwood Great House was built,

the family also owned a house in London, the site of which, located near the present-day Selfridges, is still known as Barrett Street. The Barrett family were part of the very first English settlers of this island. Hersey Barrett, the patriarch of their tribe, was an officer in the expedition commanded by Penn and Venables which captured Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655. The website of Greenwood Great House tells me that Hersey was "granted lands in Jamaica" for his role in the expedition.[1]

As I looked at the portrait of Richard, its out-of-place-ness seemed both a kind of magic and a sort of mystery. I noted how the demeanor and attire of this man contrasted with the reality of slave labor which marked and dominated this land. The parallel reality of gentility, high society, food, and leisure, the grotesque play of music, transplanted English culture and faux-aristocratic manners, this sense of play happening among the whites who became a new class in a so-called new world, all this world existing in parallel to the world of their slaves. It is this reality that strikes me with strange and startling physicality, as if the spirit of this absurd time manifested itself suddenly in my body, or in the space, extending its tightness all around me. I felt the cruel, strange absurdity, an absurdity so strange and uncanny as to almost produce laughter. That absurdity which was to be offered to another time, a gift of tragedy stored up by one age and offered to another, as if that earlier age was incapable of viewing itself, as if the near artistry of its own evil were lost on itself.

I was feeling it now in the images on the wall, in particular in this portrait of Mr. Richard Barrett, which seemed like something I might have looked at in the National Portrait Gallery in London, where I'd have found that it was at home, within its own landscape. Or in one of the many stately homes of the English countryside—though the irony of this is that all the British stately homes I've visited have brought me back to the plantation. I had never thought so much about the strangeness of images within the plantation museums we have inherited, which were, of course, anything but museums for my ancestors and for their masters who inhabited them—about the strangeness of the images of the Plantation.

Here I am visiting a great house in 2022. These buildings typically serve the viewing pleasure of mostly white North American and European visitors in Jamaica's tourist paradise; they are part of our "tourist product." They are not thought of as sites of pilgrimage, of crime, museums to an age of grotesquery. Black Jamaican tourist guides usually give a learnt-by-heart tour, reeled off, very often with some form of an American twang—to be "understood" by the poor tourists; since the English we Jamaicans speak among ourselves is considered too alienating to them, the guides dress their language in a twang they have heard on television or learnt on the streets of the north coast tourist havens.

The buildings are tourist attractions—there is an abstraction of the images, an abstraction of the grotesque absurdity which they embody. To recognize this absurdity might be to alienate the tourists, these white working-class consumers of sand, sea and yeah mon, even further. Many of the great houses, including this one, are in the private hands of wealthy, upper-class, light-skinned Jamaicans, some of them descendants of the same people who owned the land two hundred years ago. Some, including the Rose Hall Great House, listed in most tourist guides of the north coast, form part of a sizeable wealth-generating economy, as the "attractions" can be rented for weddings and other social gatherings that frequently make the "social" pages of the local newspapers. Tourism, paradise, socialites.

I'm struck, then, by the images thrown up by the great house, images of who we are as a people, and of who can naturally be seen in these spaces, on their extravagantly long and spacious verandas, on their manicured lawns. Images of vantage points and viewing privileges.

But back to Jenny, who is not a "usual" tourist guide. A dark-skinned, bespectacled woman of average height, with hair in neat cornrows, she is wearing a dark, knee-length skirt and a coffee-brown polo-shirt, what may be a sort of uniform, or a gesture to the idea of uniform for the benefit of a clientele accustomed to such forms of presentation in the tourist "attractions" of a similar theme. Jenny's English, riding on her musical Jamaican accent, is grammatically precise, lively and effortless. I imagine her to be a retired teacher, who, throughout her entire life, has cultivated a curiosity about the world and her own space in it, in this patch of Earth called Jamaica. She emphasizes the extraordinary details about the great house and the lives of those who have inhabited it since its creation, about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the English poet, heiress, and cousin to Richard, who never ventured to Jamaica. She speaks about numbers of slaves, their occupation, the work they did in this house, the spaces in which they worked. She speaks about regalia and paraphernalia, about grand objects, about the mahogany desks of the study, about a piano made by John Broadwood, an eighteenth-century piano maker who famously gifted one of the instruments to Beethoven in 1813; about a chair bearing ornately carved reliefs in its oak. Shipped from Belgium, a chair like this would have been used to augment the weight of a slave ship's "cargo," reducing the amount of ballast needed. (At the time, ballast would have been rocks and the very hewn stones used for the making of the great house.) She names the individuals featured on the portraits, speaks of the places and lands they owned, the marriages they formed; describes the histories of land ownership of this small island, linking it to the faces, ghosts in a certain way, of this great house, mapping the who's who of the Jamaican plantocracy from the rooms of this great house, from the ground that we stand on.

She's giving the tour to my wife, our two babies, my mother, and me. There's too much information for me to digest; my head is swirling with newly acquired facts. They are still swirling as I put these thoughts down, except that I can no longer pin them down to my paper with clarity and precision; it is as if there is a vapor of these historical facts and stories, or more like the strong impression one wakes with out of a dream, but not the clarity of articulate speech. While Jenny is talking, I am busy taking photographs; I'm absorbed in the images of this place; the images want



The author under the cupola of Harmony Hall Great House, St. Mary, Jamaica.

to tell me their own stories. It's as though their ghosts were animate, though invisible, and I could feel their presence and the impressions they send me through the air and energy of these rooms. Jenny speaks fast, and there's not enough time to register what she says against the background of what the objects of the house are saying. The speech is not human speech, it is energy written in the flesh, feelings sent to the body, which speak more forcefully, more engagingly, than words.

When the formal tour is over, I ask her permission to go back up on the veranda. It's a long shot, I think, but somehow I feel pressed to do this; the least I can do is ask. I explain my motive—I want to photograph myself in that space. I'm drawn to these long, spacious verandas with their Georgian fretwork; I'm fascinated by their extravagance, and the fact that, in the great houses I've seen, these verandas tower over a hill below them and often have a grand view of the sea.

1 Greenwood Great House's website, https://www.greenwoodgreathouse.com/. Consulted 31 May 2022.

I'm fascinated by the narrative of space that's being told by these verandas and want to feel myself stand in an owner's stance in them. I want to feel what it might feel like to own this space, to stand looking out with the knowledge that this place is my rightful place, that nothing assails my right of ownership of this vantage point; that nothing could. Might it be impossible for me to know how that can feel? Somehow on this day, I am impelled to try, to enact this performance. Could I become a white planter for a moment, feel their embodiment in my flesh?

The veranda towers over the hill below. From its vantage point, what would the house's inhabitants have seen in 1800 when its construction was complete? A sugar cane plantation? Mills, presses, ploughs, beasts of burden? I do not know what the exact layout of the land below the house would have been, given that the great house was used primarily for entertainment, though I do know that Cinnamon Hill with its sugar plantation, built by Samuel Barrett Jr., is only twelve kilometers away. Like Greenwood, and like Rose Hall Great House, the famous tourist attraction located next to it, like so many other great houses on this island, Cinnamon Hill overlooks the sea. Would this colonizing European viewer have looked out on sugar works, woodlands, a network of roads linking properties, leading to the sea? How many African bodies would have been there? The practice of looking out, down, over, was obviously one to which the colonists attached much importance. In this gesture, aesthetics and power could not be unlinked. The privilege of viewing was also the privilege of space, of control over the land and over that other territory—the enslaved African body.

I look out through the wide, flung-open windows, I stand on the sprawling veranda of the time portal that is this house; an anachronism, it keeps alive the traces of a different reality. But is that reality dead, or am I still standing in it? What I see below me is a chaotic jumble of houses which seems to have sprung up from a manic imagination. A visual depiction of our history, of its dramatic form. This landscape of today, suggesting an unsettled calamity, is a palimpsest. It is difficult to isolate the multiple layers, to see where one becomes superimposed onto another, but what seems present and inescapable is the sense of multiple layers of a single time, of which the construction of this great house forms a part. Down on the hill, the descendants of slaves now clearly have the right to own property and build houses of their own. In their slapdash chaos, the constructions seem to emerge from each other, like proliferating beings. There is no end to how big they will be, as people compete to outdo each other in three- and four-story houses, in broad villas with their swimming pools, in palatial fortresses. All these lie among and alongside tawdry mansions, exaggerated structures owned by people whose ambitions far outstrip their means. One is struck by the imperatives of splendor, the grandeur that inhabits these builders. The grandeur of power, property and visibility is the presence of the great house which haunts the mind like a spectre. The dream of the big house is the fantasy of having such an expansive vista as that of the great house, such an all-embracing visual clasp of territory, or simply the ambiguous claim of poor Black people to luxury and to what has been existentially denied them for centuries—land. The viewer standing on this veranda in 1800 could not have imagined a sight like this. People's progress and upward mobility, this mass of concrete which is also environmental tragedy, is the excrescence of poverty and our history of dispossession. One might have to look at the land from up here to appreciate this. For the people looking out at the sea from their big houses down the hill, it may be difficult to see anything but a certain kind of order, a sense of their body now being in the right place.

I wanted to place myself on the sprawling veranda. A part of me felt timid and slightly embarrassed to ask Jenny this favor. Throughout the visit, we had established a certain rapport via the gazes and looks we exchanged during her commentary, via my family's emotional response (gasps, essentially) in response to the information Jenny made available to us. It was significant that a knowledgeable woman was doing this tour, a woman not just doing this for a job, as it seemed, but out of a real passion and commitment to the memory that attends this place. It was significant that a descendant of slaves was speaking to other descendants of slaves. We were not tourists. And so, our gasps and sighs spoke of a shared history, of a coming together around something that united us; we had a stake in this so-called great house, and in that tour we formed a kind of kinship with each other.

Given the rapport we'd established throughout the visit, I was embarrassed mainly at the thought of Jenny's own embarrassment at having to turn down my request; I thought that that would dispel the gravity of the moment. But to my pleasant surprise, she acquiesced; she did not seem to find my request surprising. By the time I explained my reasons to her, she was already receptive, greeting my question with an almost imperceptible smile, always looking towards the ground as we walked to the old great house kitchen (converted into a bar), but smiling, saying nothing. I could see from where I stood outside in the sun, having just exited, that she was gesturing to me to come. The photos were taken by her; they ended up being the beginnings of a project to photograph myself in places of power which bear the history of colonialism, in power stances and postures (which may simply mean standing and looking, being there), in places historically inhospitable to my body, or in which my body cannot easily be imagined: great house verandas are a start.

The owner of Greenwood Great House is a Black man. This, to me, is an astounding fact; the optics of it are powerful. Mr. Betton hails from Mandeville in Manchester. A well-spoken man whose carefully tended appearance—well-ironed grey bush jacket over blue jeans and leather moccasins—suggests a kind of culture that people here might call "high breeding," while also betokening the era, the 1970s, the era of black power—whence the bush jacket—in which he became a man. If I were to guess, I'd say a Michael Manley sympathizer, of the intellectual type. Listening to the proper and worldly quality of his speech, I wonder what it must have taken in terms of guts, or insight, or even money, or all the above, to purchase a property like this, a property in which he had no stake other than the stake that's also mine, which is the fact that, as recently as two hundred years ago, he and I could not have entered this "great" house except in the subordinate role of the enslaved. That he could not have imagined purchasing this property, that he would have had no claim on this patch of land. It is astounding to think of that flip in physical reality, and, no doubt, such a flip must have been very present to his mind at the moment in which he determined that he would purchase this house. As someone from a dark-skinned family from the southern part of the island, he had no familial connections with these Barretts—no known ones, at least.

One must admire Mr. Betton for his decision to contend with the plantation great house viewing reality, to play with it, to subvert it. Who knows if that is what he had set out to do, but the optics of this can't have escaped this sharp-eyed man.

At the time of my visit, he had been proprietor of this house for over forty years, and Jenny referred to it as "his home." It was she who informed me, and I could see her delight in being able to say so, that the house belonged to Mr. Betton: "That's the owner, the same gentleman who you saw in the bar when you arrived." Perhaps it is my own prejudice which hadn't allowed me to imagine that that gentleman was the owner of the great house we were about to visit; perhaps it is also that I had never imagined the owner of a great house to be the one to greet its visitors. The fact that Mr. Betton didn't conform to that prejudice, to that experience, also spoke much about not only his self-presentation but the way he situated himself in relation to this "property." "His home. He lives here," Jenny adds. When I express my pride in the fact that this house, charged with history, is not in the hands of one of the Jamaican whites, or even those of an overseas baron, but owned by someone who looks like me, she tells us about the numerous instances, over the years, in which Mr. Betton has been pressured to give up his property. In one case, she claims, a cruise ship company wanted to purchase the great house and sent their Jamaican legal representative to negotiate. When Betton rejected all their offers, the man, outraged, enquired whether him no realise she this ya house ya too good fi him [Betton] to have? The question had the merit of being sincere.

Granted lands in Jamaica. For me, this phrase has always produced a sense of alienation, always been existentially discomfiting. What is disconcerting is, of course, the history and lives that the phrase both evokes and silences, the colonists' viewing of the land as free, available, unpeopled, as theirs for taking and giving. Hersey Barrett was granted lands—for his role in capturing Jamaica for the British. Behind the quietness of the apparent anodyne phrase lies the entire uncanniness I feel as I look out over the hill and to the sea.

Some days after going to Greenwood, I visited Dunn's River Falls with my family. I had emerged onto the beach, where I played with my children in the water, my mind staggered by the dazzling brightness of the sunshine, by the resplendence of the blue. Despite the tourist commerciality of the setting, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the scene before me, as I often am by the coastlines in this part of the world. The colors, untempered and unrestrained, seem almost forceful, more than the body can absorb; it is more than beauty, it is perplexity. In the flash of an instant, I begin to see this patch of coastline and its waters as they were, before the island was "discovered." The experience reminds of novelist V. S. Naipaul's in his book *A Way in the World*,[2] when, standing on a Trinidad coastline, a gift of sight is given to him, and he perceives the trees in an Amerindian land, before the arrival of the Europeans. I begin to see this coastline as it must have appeared to the first Europeans who arrived here in ships with a notion of acquisition. All that is before me conjoins, and in it I perceive the shock, the sense of the unutterable that those Spaniards felt as they first saw this island. How does this sense of acquisition, of granting and taking, reconcile itself with the overpowering physicality of this place? From the beach as much as from the great house, I try to make sense of the mystery and absurdity of capture.

2 V. S. Naipual, *A Way in the World*. London: Heinemann, 1994.

Reading

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FATHER'S JEWELS

John Edmonds



John Edmonds
Losing fathers we never knew, 2022





John Edmonds
Two Slaps, 2022

Following two spreads:

John Edmonds
Three Brothers, 2022

John Edmonds
Nightmares, 2022



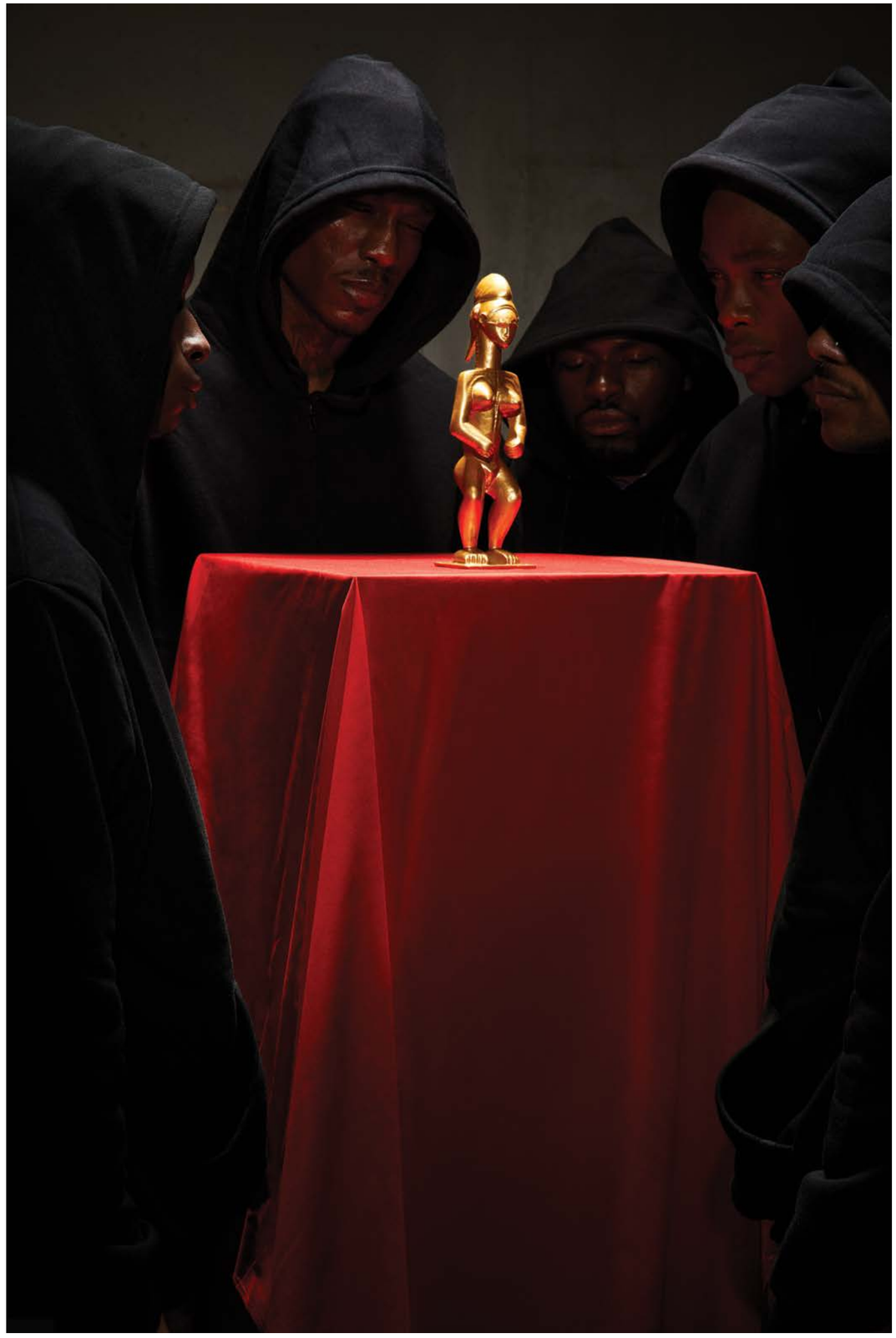




Object File Record
1890.1545, Unidentified Lumbo artist, *Female figure*



John Edmonds
Refuge, 2022



John Edmonds
What is the way?, 2022



1976.427
Unidentified Baule artist
Blolo bla (Female spirit spouse figure), 20th century
wood
16 1/16 x 4 15/16 x 3 3/8 in. (40.8 x 12.5 x 8.5 cm)
Gift from the Edwards-Britt Collection

Object File Record
1976.427, Unidentified Baule artist, *Blolo bla (Female spirit spouse figure*) and
1976.425, Unidentified Baule artist, *Female figure*

Prepared by Lynn Bilotta
Assistant Curator
January-July 1988

Female Figures
Baule, Ivory Coast, 20th century
Wood
Gifts of the Edwards-Britt Collection, 1976.425, 1976.427

Human figures carved by the Baule are believed to contain one of two kinds of spirits - the nature spirit whose dangerous power must be appeased through sacrificial offerings, or the spouse spirit, the supernatural mate every married person has and who may cause trouble if not given appropriate care and attention. The figures representing both types of spirits are carved in similar style, and once removed from context, it is nearly impossible to distinguish the original function.

CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM

ACCESSION REQUEST WORKSHEET

ACCESSION NO: 1976.427

LOAN NO:

TEMPORARY RECEIPT NO:

Recommending Department:

Date Received: Dec. 15, 1976 Date Accepted/Returned:

PROPOSED ACQUISITION:
(Please include artist, nationality, dates, title, dimensions, signature/marks and brief description)

(AB 18) Ivory Coast: Baule Standing Female Figure

Wood H. 40.8 W. 12.5 D. 8.5

Elaborate hairdo with single high dome and queue; elaborate cicatrization, front and back. A notably pretty face. Hollow in right hand to hold something now missing

CONDITION: Split down center of torso, neck, lower 1/3 sinister side of torso, sinister side of head + neck. Both heels missing

PROVENANCE: Donor says he purchased from Allan Brandt, N.Y.C.

NOTED PUBLICATIONS/EXHIBITIONS:

OTHER WORKS BY ARTIST IN CAM COLLECTION: (on display?)

1976.427 Wood A5, 2, EE6



African
Ivory Coast; Baule

FIGURE: STANDING FEMALE

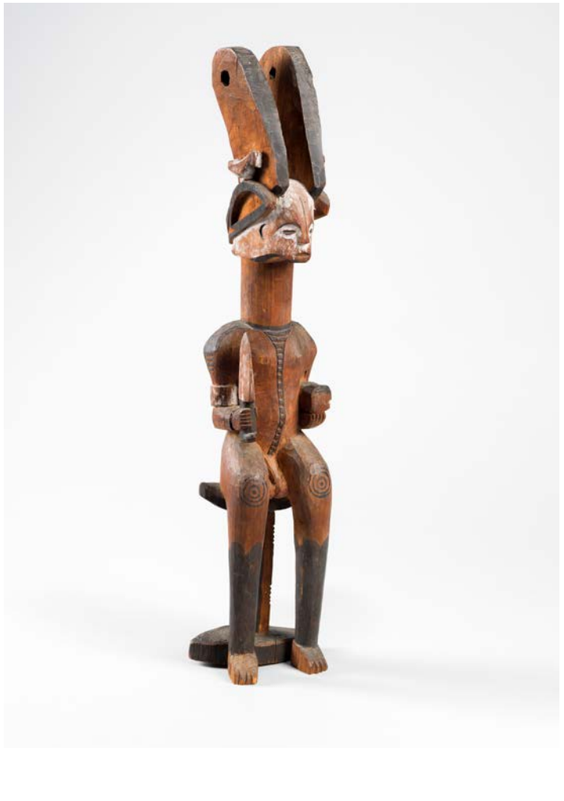
H 40.8 cm. W 12.5 cm. D 8.5 cm.

Wood figure of female; elaborate hairdo with single high dome and queue; elaborate cicatrization, front and back. Hollow in right hand to hold something now missing.

Gift from the Edwards-Britt Collection

Left and above:

Object File Records
1976.427, Unidentified Baule artist, *Blolo bla (Female spirit spouse figure*)



1988.124
Unidentified Igbo artist
Ikenga (Right hand altar figure), mid 20th century
wood, pigment
23 1/2 x 5 3/16 x 4 in. (59.7 x 13.2 x 10.2 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Strauss

Object File Records
1988.124, Unidentified Igbo artist, *Ikenga (Right hand altar figure*)

Prepared by Lynn Bilotta
Assistant Curator
January-July 1988

Male Figure
Igbo, Nigeria, 20th century
Wood, pigment
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Strauss, 1988.124

The seated male figure (ikenga) with stylized ram's horns is a man's personal shrine dedicated to the right arm, where the power to achieve success in all endeavors is believed to lie. The figure holds a knife and severed trophy heads, traditional Igbo symbols of masculine achievement.

CAM REGISTRAR

JUL 22 1988

CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM

ACCESSION REQUEST WORKSHEET

RECOMMENDING DEPARTMENT:
Costumes, Textiles, and Tribal Arts

ACCESSION NUMBER: 1988.124
LOAN NUMBER:
TEMPORARY RECEIPT NUMBER: 87/8.124.2

DATE RECEIVED: 8 June 1988

DATE ACCEPTED/RETURNED:

PROPOSED ACQUISITION:

Wood

AFRICA: Nigeria, Eastern Guinea Coast style zone, Igbo (Ibo) people, 20th c.

SEATED MALE FIGURE (IKENGA)

H. 23 1/2 " 59.7 cm. W. 5 3/16" 13.2 cm. D. 4" 10.2 cm.

Carved wood figure of seated male with stylized horns projecting from top of head, small bird carved on exterior side of each horn, hole through top of each horn. The male, seated on a stool, holds a knife in his right hand and two severed trophy heads in left hand. He wears arm bands, has scarification marks carved on the chest, and black-painted patterns on shoulders, knees, and lwoer legs. White pigment has been applied to his head and arm bands.

CONDITION: Scattered nicks and wear marks overall. Both feet and knife-holding hand have been previously broken and reglued. Old crack ca. 16cm long at proper left side of torso - associated with five holes (over)

PROVENANCE: Purchased by Louise W. (Mrs. Albert) Strauss, mother of donor, Carl Strauss, at Asher Gallery, Paris, France, c. 1950s-60s.

NOTED PUBLICATIONS/EXHIBITIONS:

OTHER WORKS BY ARTIST IN CAM COLLECTION: There are no other works from the Igbo (Ibo) people of Nigeria in the CAM collection.

CURATORIAL INFORMATION:

Object File Records
1988.124, Unidentified Igbo artist, *Ikenga (Right hand altar figure*), recto

Condition (cont.)

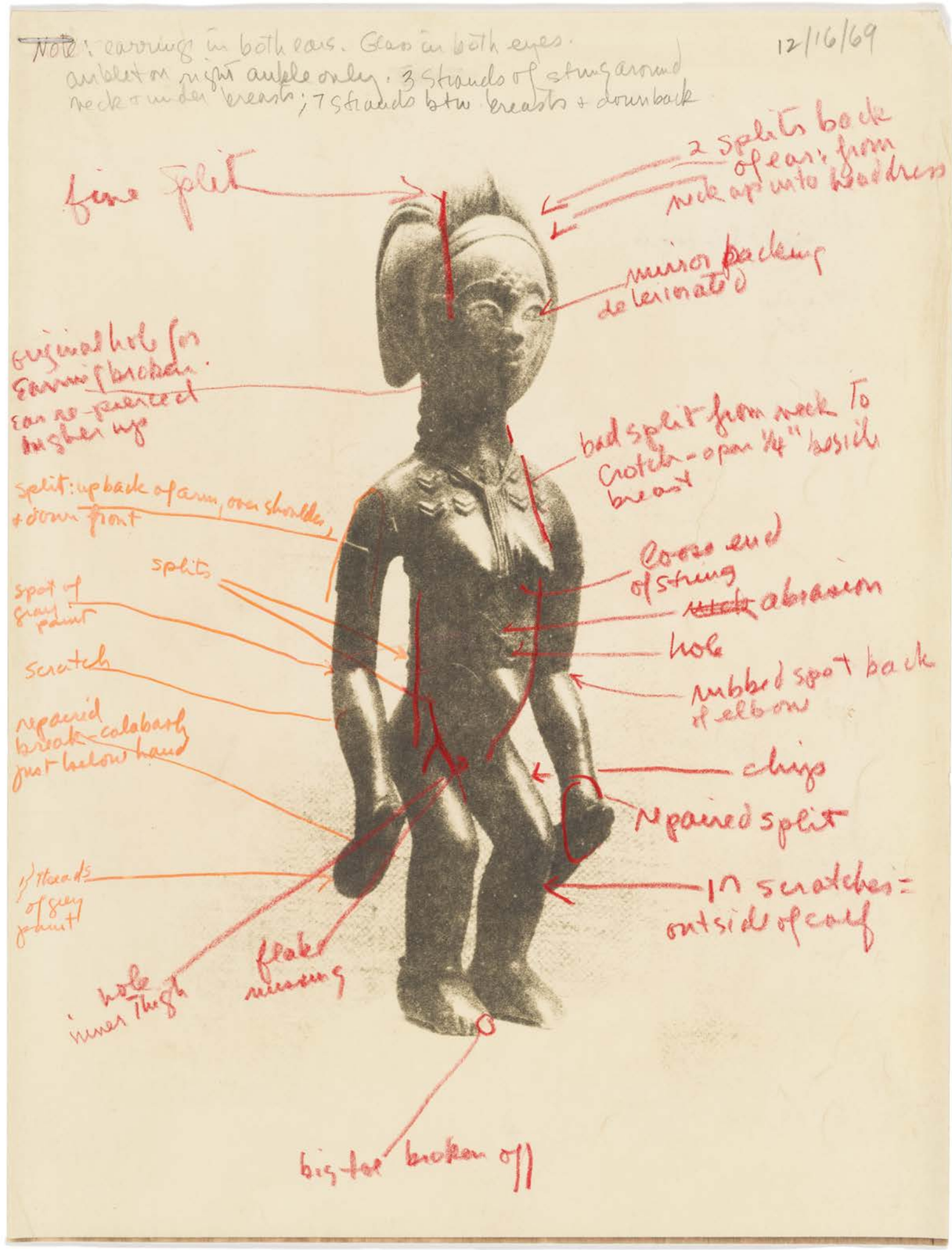
These holes may have been drilled at a later date to be used for mounting. White-powdery residue fills bottom hole. Small longitudinal crack in base.

SDB 7/15/88

Object File Records
1988.124, Unidentified Igbo artist, *Ikenga (Right hand altar figure*), verso



John Edmonds
Father's Jewels, 2022



Object File Records
1890.1545, Unidentified Lumbo artist, *Female figure*



John Edmonds
Tending to the wounds, 2022



John Edmonds
When Time Passes, 2022

David Hartt (Canadian, 1967)
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, except where noted. Works dating to 2022 commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum.

The Garden (Acanthus mollis, Urtica dioica & Oenanthe javanica / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022

The Garden (Passiflora foetida / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022), 2022

each:
polyester, cotton, wool, acrylic, KGem (cotton mercurise) mounted to linen, wood stretcher, aluminum frame
114 x 76 in. (289.6 x 193 cm)

The Garden (Parietaria judaica / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022

The Garden (Rosa hybrida & Wisteria sinensis / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022), 2022

The Garden (Papaver rhoeas, Sonchus oleraceus, Matricaria discoidea & Hordeum murinum / Rome, Italy / May 20, 2022), 2022

each:
dye transfer print, window mat, aluminum frame
20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm) print, 23 5/8 x 29 1/2 in. (60 x 74.9 cm) frame

The Histories (after Duncanson), 2020
photogravure from 18 1/4 x 27 in. (46.4 x 68.6 cm) plate
22 1/4 x 31 in. (56.5 x 78.7 cm) sheet, 24 3/8 x 33 3/8 in. (62.5 x 84.8 cm) frame

Fragment, 2014
cast bronze
48 x 48 x 24 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 61 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery, NYC

John Edmonds (American, 1989)
Courtesy of the artist, except where noted.
All works commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Losing fathers we never knew, 2022
What is the way?, 2022
Father's Jewels, 2022
When Time Passes, 2022

each:
framed pigment print
60 x 40 in. (152.4 x 101.6 cm)

Three Brothers, 2022
Nightmares, 2022
Refuge, 2022

each:
framed pigment print
40 x 60 in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm)

Untitled 3D print of *Ikenga (Right hand altar figure)*, an Igbo sculpture from the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum (1988.124), 2022
23 1/2 x 5 x 4 in. (59.7 x 12.7 x 10.2 cm)

Untitled 3D print of *Blolo bla (Female spirit spouse figure)*, a Baule sculpture from the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum (1976.427), 2022
16 x 5 x 3 1/2 in. (40.6 x 12.7 x 8.9 cm)

each:
fused deposition modeling, thermoplastic polymer
Courtesy of the artist and Cincinnati Art Museum

Available via Cincinnati Art Museum Library & Archives:
Checklist of collection works selected by the artists and displayed in the *Natural World* temporary exhibition galleries.

Documentation of additional temporary installations by the artists, in dialogue with museum permanent galleries and public spaces, on the occasion of *Natural World*.

Jason Allen-Paisant is Associate Professor of Aesthetic Theory and Decolonial Thought in the School of English and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. His forthcoming monograph, *Engagements with Aimé Césaire* (Oxford University Press, 2023) is a philosophical study of poetry from the perspective of African metaphysics. He is the author of *Thinking with Trees* (winner of the Poetry category of the 2022 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature) and of *Self-Portrait as Othello* (forthcoming in 2023 from Carcanet Press). He is currently at work on a memoir titled *Second Lives: On Blackness, Landscape, and Reclaiming Time*.

John Edmonds is an American artist and photographer who first came to public recognition with his intimate portraits of lovers, close friends and strangers. He earned his MFA in photography from Yale University and his BFA at the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design. His work explores themes of identity, community, desire and belonging. Collections include: The Brooklyn Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario, Whitney Museum of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum of Modern Art, New York, SFMoMA, Rubell Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Milwaukee Art Museum, J. Paul Getty Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, RISD Museum, and Yale University Art Gallery. Recent exhibitions include *Black Modernism—Africa and the Avantgarde* at the Kunstmuseum Pablo Picasso Münster, Germany; *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at David Zwirner, New York; *Ex-Africa* at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, France, and *The Slipstream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time* at the Brooklyn Museum. In 2019, he was included in the 79th Whitney Biennial.

Edmonds has taught at Yale University and the School of Visual Arts. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, and is Visiting Lecturer on Art, Film and Visual Studies at Harvard University.

David Hartt is an artist and Associate Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Histories* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; *A Colored Garden* at The Glass House, Connecticut; and the group exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. His work is in several public collections including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, RISD Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, J. Paul Getty Museum, National Gallery of Canada, and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

He is represented by Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; David Nolan Gallery, New York; and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

Nathaniel M. Stein is Curator of Photography at the Cincinnati Art Museum. He has held curatorial positions, taught, and lectured in the history of photography at institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center; RISD and the RISD Museum; Brown University; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Selected prior publications include *The Levee: A Photographer in the American South* (2020), which was the first major study of Indian photographer Sohrab Hura, and *Interference: Andre Bradley and Paul Anthony Smith* (2017). Stein holds degrees in art history from Wesleyan University, Connecticut, and from Brown University, where he earned his doctorate.