

WHITE CONDUIT PROJECTS

SAY IT WITH FLOWERS!

6 November - 26 January

Think of flowers and you think of beauty, of romance... and, especially if they are painted flowers, of death: ever since its Dutch 17th century heyday, the Vanitas tradition has been using the transitory nature of flowers to stand in for how all of us will die. But enough of that: 'Say It With Flowers' sees a dozen artists tackle other subjects through flowers: modesty, sex, economics, menopause, cultural difference, fertility, consumerism, mystery, ageing, darkness, economics, culture, shyness, ageing, human relations with flowers, epistemology, and individual destiny... Then there's the matter of east meets west, and a link to Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging.

John Peter Askew, Ingrid Berthon-Moine, Gordon Cheung, Tania Kovats, Sophie Layton, Sarah Lederman, Lana Locke, William Mackrell, Hannah Maybank, Jiro Osuga, Rebecca Partridge, Tomoko Yoneda

Curated by Paul Carey-Kent and Yuki Miyake

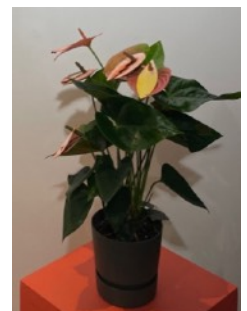
John Peter Askew: *Untitled* from the series *Flower*, 2001

John Peter Askew says he started photographing the campanulas which his father grew in his garden as a reassurance at a time of serious illness for his mother. Yet the repetition moved from that emotional impulse towards an expression of the beauty promised by concealment. The flowers seem shy in this pair of mirrored images, each depicting a white Campanula – both having turned their backs on the camera and each other, their white petals almost indistinguishable from their surroundings. They are, in Simon Morrissey's words (Portfolio magazine, 2001) 'pictures of a flower in which the flower is almost not there at all'. The turning away anthropomorphises the flower in its apparent modesty. And yet, as photographs, there is an assertiveness to opting for such an unusual view.



Ingrid Berthon-Moine: *Spadix Ring*, 2024

It's curious in a way that the Vanitas tradition of floral painting focuses on death - curious because flowers are after all the sexual organs of plants, making them primarily about life. Ingrid Berthon-Moine makes that aspect explicit by adding cut-outs that turn those sexual interior workings into the external focus of the plant. That fits with her playfully pointed way of feeding inspiration from diverse sources such as language, psychoanalysis, and feminism, into personal narratives that challenge our conventional understandings of sex, illness, and death.



Gordon Cheung: *Speculative Perspective*, 2024

'Tulipmania' was a notorious episode in 17th-century Dutch history, in which the trading of tulip bulbs became so extreme that the price of one flower would sell for ten times the annual wage of a skilled worker. Cheung presents a 3D print of a tulip on a layer of collaged stock listings newsprint from the 'Financial Times'. 'To me', says Cheung, 'it is a surreal metaphor of the madness of crowds, to spend the price of a house on a tulip bulb. Despite believing ourselves to be rational, the same impulses of greed take hold of the minds of many'. There are lessons we have yet to learn despite all the bubbles that have come and gone over the past 400 years.



Tania Kovats: *Last of My Summer Blooms, No. 6*, 2023

These works, made with dahlias from Tania Kovats' garden in Devon, have a particular personal meaning, as Kovats explains: 'The natural dyes of the blooms are released and stain the paper, while the petals merge with the fibres of the paper. As they dry, they are fixed as these beautiful ghost flowers, quiet memorials to the sweet joys and melancholy of late summer. I started to make these works as I became postmenopausal. The works mark the end of my body's fertility and my menstrual cycle stopping; a clock that has been keeping regular time since I was ten years old.'



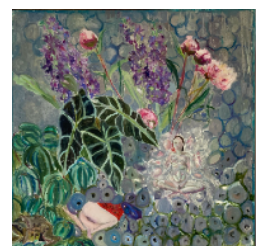
Sophie Layton: *Still Life - Detail*, 2019

Sophie Layton spent three months in Japan in 2000, where she studied woodblock printmaking – a contrast with her previous decade working with an etching press – and with that new ways of seeking to combine depth with luminosity. She also discovered the art of Japanese flower arranging. 'The aesthetic is different from the West', she says, 'the arrangements are far more sparse'. That's where the branches in this monotype come from. We see them in light projected and refracted through coloured glass – a set-up inspired by the work of her partner, glass artist Ian Rawlinson. It makes for an intoxicating combination of Japanese and European cultures.



Sarah Lederman: *In Vitro*, 2023

Sarah Lederman's flowers aren't cut and stuck in a vase, they're painted as still in the ground and growing. There is a small frog in this painting too, and many frogs' eggs, as well as two figures at matching scale. This is nature teeming with life. She thinks of 'the grossness of being covered in frog's eggs, and of frogs attempting to hump everything – I saw one on a fish'. But that's also a vision teeming with life and potential life, consistent with Lederman's personal angle on the flower paintings: in her mid-thirties, she is future-proofing the possibility of having children. So yes, these are very fertile flowers.



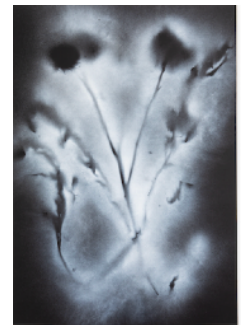
Lana Locke: *Aluminium tulip*, 2012

Lana Locke describes herself as a cross-disciplinary artist who explores the tensions of straddling domestic and art-making spaces as an artist mother, against wider political, social and ecological contexts. She explores the precariousness of human and non-human life, often by capturing perishing forms that signal our mortal interdependence on our surrounding communities and environments. Conflicting elements are forced together, and here a tulip is fused with a Coca-Cola tin. That places the flower in a consumer context – are we not consuming nature to potentially terminal extent? – as well as calling attention to how the natural world has to deal with the results of human pollution.



William Mackrell: *Cynara Scolymus*, 2023

In *Cynara Scolymus*, William Mackrell adopts the artichoke as a metaphor for life and death. He gathers up and scatters the remains of the vegetable over sheets of paper, then buries buds under a blanket of metallic paint. Lifting the paper the buds fall to the floor revealing the residue of their placement. The resulting work appears to move in and out of focus, shifting from light to dark the work offers a sense of infinite depth suggesting a dreamscape or astrological backdrop. Our eyes move across the surface of the paper in search of clues but the work ultimately refuses any true resolution.



Hannah Maybank: *Narcissus*, 2024 and onwards

This haunting painting of peonies was – in conventional terms – finished in 2020. However, the application of paint isn't the end of the matter for Hannah Maybank. She uses an intricate process of painting, masking and spraying to realise the blooms in her handmade watercolour, silver leaf, and varnish – then waits. It takes years for the chemical and environmental processes of interaction and tarnish to work through to a state at which she's satisfied that they can leave the studio. We're used to the flowers in a conventional still life suggesting transience while themselves being fixed, but Maybank builds change into the flowers on the canvas. In her words: 'The world around us is constantly changing. As are we. All the interactions we've had form who we are, what we become.' We're left to wonder – as in life – what is the best age? Perhaps that's the question *Narcissus* is pondering as he looks into his floral reflection.



Jiro Osuga: *Bindweed and Dead Flower*, 2024

The assumption that humanity should rule over nature as if it were a separate realm doesn't find the favour it once did. Not only animals, but fungi and trees are recognised for their independent systems of communication. Flowers...? Maybe less so. But not in Jiro Osuga's world, in which bindweed can constitute a genuine threat, and the death of a flower is to be mourned with the emotion usually reserved for a family member. That humorous and exuberant way of casting a critical eye over myriad aspect of contemporary life is typical of the Tokyo-born, London-based artist.



Rebecca Partridge: *Wildflowers, Night: Fairy Flower*, 2024

Rebecca Partridge is interested in time sequences and different times of day: in line with that, her practice includes expansive skylscapes on a large scale and flower clusters compressed into just 17 x 13 cm – and seen at night. Partridge uses her own photographs to set out the structure, but the results aren't photorealistic: they land halfway between what you can see and what you can't see but know is there. As such, they rather beautifully encapsulate the philosophical question of how much of our apparent knowledge of the world is objective reality, and how much comes from the assumptions and perceptual mechanisms we bring.



Tomoko Yoneda: *Entwined barbwire and flowers (near DMZ, Cheorwon, South Korea)* 2, 2015

This photograph is set in the 8km-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that stretches north and south of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), which divides North from South Korea. Civilian access to this area is restricted due to the presence of many buried landmines. Because the DMZ centres not on a national border but on the MDL—which was formed by the Armistice Agreement that suspended the Korean War on July 27, 1953—it makes us aware that the Korean Peninsula is still technically at war. Ironically, the DMZ is also a peaceful natural wonderland in which wild flora and fauna have formed their own ecosystem, heedless of the boundary that human beings have drawn. This is a reflection, says Yoneda, of how individuals find their destinies dictated as they are drawn into the larger groups represented by the state, society, and religion.



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