

Francisca Duran: Research garden: a compendium of lost moments

Curated by Lesley Loksi Chan

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In ***Francisca Duran: Research garden: a compendium of lost moments***, the experimental media artist takes her analog film practice away from the screen and creates a multisensory installation centred on plant-based images. Meticulous and dreamy, the interactive exhibition includes wiry film flower sculptures sprouting from local soil, cascading film test strips on a large light table, hanging digital prints of enlarged film fragments on walls, a collection of optic objects for our viewing pleasure, and in the midst of it all, a 16mm film projector plays on loop her most recent piece, *Compendium* (2023). *Compendium* is the original work from which most of the plant-based images in the space are derived. Full of lush shapes and vivid hues, the film loop was handcrafted by Duran using the techniques of phytography and optical printing. Phytograms are created by the exposure of black and white celluloid or photo-paper overlaid with plant material and dried in daylight. With this technique, plants are both the subject of phytograms and also provide the necessary chemistry to produce them. As Duran puts it, “It is part science, part cooking, part magic.”

Mapping and cataloguing over two years of her work with the plantlife of Kensington Market in Tkaranto where Duran has lived for decades, she sees these phytograms as forging an inquiry into inscription, translation and power. Duran’s previous work has also been concerned with what she describes as “the practical and critical human relationships with other-than-human-species.” With her film *It Matters What* (2019), she created a poetic manifesto based on Donna Haraway’s essay “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene” using phytograms alongside in-camera animation, contact prints, text, voice and soundscape. *Compendium*, though, is soundless and wordless. The raw visuals bathe everything and everyone in the space and confront us in silence. Vibrant leaf-prints, fingerprints, scratches and tape marks on celluloid work with the various phytographic offspring to evoke human entanglements with nature. With every touch of the hand or lamplight, the phytograms are simultaneously illuminated and deteriorated. How are we to care for continual loss?

Duran’s exhibition and artistic practice raise questions about the meanings of iteration, archive, preservation and desire in a time of ecological crisis. Rather than providing clear answers, she offers an untidy compilation of analog and digital prints, maps, charts, and objects for handling, hearing, smelling and viewing so that we can experience a garden of loss as she has tended it. Haptic, optical, sensuous and philosophical, *Research garden* is an enticement to fumble in the dark by plantlight.

Lesley Loksi Chan, October 2023

In autumn 2023, Francisca Duran and Lesley Loksi Chan had a conversation. Here is an excerpt from it.

LLC: Throughout your experimental media arts practice you've worked with analogue film and hand-processed film, on and off, but the work you've been creating for *Research garden* in particular is also in dialogue with phytography. I guess this is kind of a funnel shaped question: how has your relationship to analogue film changed since you began working with film and what draws you to phytograms and phytogramming now?

FD: I'm not a purist. It's all medium to me: film, digital, paint, ink, photo-chemistry, code...

For the past 6-years, I have been working with plants and other humans in my art-practice, and specifically using eco-photo-chemical and printing techniques such as phytography. I spend a lot of time looking closely and considering plants and the gardens they create. Plants that are curated and those who grow anyway, uninvited, unwanted. I see this as a collaborative, quietly transgressive process. It forces us to challenge the idea of human-exceptionalism.

I started with analogue film and fell in love with the physical film object that you hold up to light so you see the discrete images the camera had captured. And to know that the represented moment is both held there and lost. The relationship to inscription draws me back to film, over and over again, the mark-making with light, as well that you need a projector to make sense of or contextualize the tiny images.

My first films were autobiographical, experimental, diary-like documentaries. This impulse still exists in that all the beings I come into contact with make their way into the work.

I began hand-processing film (in buckets) in earnest when I made *Traje de Luces* (Suit of Lights), a found-footage film about history, memory, violence

and photography that looks at the flawed transition to democracy from facism in Spain. I buried footage of a bullfight and because film emulsion contains gelatin which is an animal product, the microbes in the soil eat away at the film images, leaving time-marks. I spent a lot of time in the darkroom contact-printing and processing with industrial photo-chemistry and the toxicity of the process affected me. And so in line with the content of the film, I wanted to seek out ways to work that do less harm.

Film is made of plastics and the emulsion is made of chemicals and there's the gelatin of course... There's that story that Kodak had a pig farm and the pigs were fed a specific diet so that the gelatin would be consistent. And I think it was Hollis Frampton who referenced the Argentinian cows that were preferred by a different film company. Digital media requires a huge amount of power to keep data server facilities functioning...

A truly ecological art practice is impossible and making art for me is a necessity—no doubt for many other artists. What do we do about that?

I learned the phytogram technique at Philip Hoffman's Independent Imaging Retreat (Film Farm) from Dutch artist Karel Doing, the creator of the process. I have been working with plants in this way and sharing this knowledge through workshops, mentorships and friendships ever since. It is our responsibility to share this knowledge. Artists Terra Long and Zöe Heyn Jones state that "there is no recipe without a lineage" in *Eco Processing from Site + Cycle 2018*. This extends to all techniques which also have attachments to other beings and their histories; this is an ongoing process.

Phytogramming is a cameraless, direct animation and printing process created by the exposure of BW film or photo-paper emulsion overlaid with plant material soaked in a solution of water, vitamin-c and washing soda and then dried under light. It is part science, part cooking, part magic.

Traditional photochemistry contains metol and hydroquinone and these function together to make developing possible. These compounds can be classified as “phenols.” Many plants contain phenols or polyphenols and when combined with water, sodium carbonate and ascorbic acid they will act as a film developer.

The process of making phytograms is as rewarding as the results, it's certainly performative. It starts with the act of opening up the film stock in light. Those of us who started out with film were programmed to fear light even though we love it so. You have to protect your raw film stock and exposed film from light before it is processed or your images disappear and all that time, energy and money is wasted. But with phytography, you can take your time, choose your plants, think about their proportions and physical properties, your connection to them, how you'll arrange them on the film...It always works and looks good.

We can imagine languages and narratives for other-than-human species, many of whom have been on earth longer than humans have been. But I think we lack the sophistication to interpret their communication systems, to understand their messages. There is something about wanting to commune with, to work alongside, that keeps me coming back to plants.

LLC: In Scott McDonald's piece “Toward an Eco-Cinema” he says, “The filmstrip embodies the struggle between permanence and transience in a way that is remarkable: we can hold the filmstrip up to the light and see the image captured there, but we know that whatever light is allowing us to see the series of fixed images along the celluloid strip is causing them to fade, and further, that the formal presentation of *this* Art accelerates its inevitable destruction.” This idea that “availing ourselves of what we love helps to destroy it is” comes to me when I think of your installation - every component you've brought into the space has an anti-component. The

projection looper that plays the filmstrip simultaneously destroys the filmstrip; the light table that allows us to see the filmstrips simultaneously destroys the filmstrip; the presence of soil threatens to harm the projector and the celluloid and the prints... Does this relationship between permanence and transience concern you?

FD: I love the accident, the mess, the muddle. It takes longer and it isn't tidy, but it is more stimulating. And so, I guess I embrace and want to exploit the permanence and transience of film, as you describe it. There is something about allowing uncertainty and accidents to shape the next steps and refine previous steps that is crucial to experimental art practices.

I came out of filmmaking where the models are usually collaborative even if rigid, and where the work is necessarily reproducible, not original. I like to explore these boundaries, edges and overlaps. Ownership and the proprietary nature of art and the politics and the political economy around showing work—beyond issues of copyright—may be antithetical to alternative practices. I want to challenge the idea of the artwork as a precious object, an original, the artist as the sole creator of a work. Phytography or working with plant-based imagery fits into this. So do the components of the installation.

The Research garden project brought the inquiry home to my tolerant, complex, mixed, somewhat anarchic neighbourhood, Toronto's Kensington Market (KM). KM is a commercial/residential neighbourhood with about 10,000 residents and 250 businesses. It has been home to working class and immigrant communities through the decades and we are known to resist City imposed changes and fight gentrification through participatory democracy. The neighbourhood has evolved organically because the City has mostly let it. Now because of rising rents, Airbnb, and other forces, raw food sellers are being pushed out and KM is a tourist and entertainment

district. Between 2020–2022, I mapped and archived intentional and unwanted plants in KM. I invited other artists to work with me using (what I hope is) a quiet, respectful politic and ethic, gathering, researching, and reproducing plants and layering and assembling meanings through phytography. The images in the *Compendium* loop, on the lightbox, in the film flowers and on the walls bring these plants, people and any microbial species into the gallery.

LLC: Yes, your installation made me think of Laura U. Mark’s book “Touch” where she was interested in restoring “a flow between the haptic and the optical” and she spoke about the haptic and the optical as not dichotomous. In *Research garden* you offer us a box of optic objects, old lenses, to play with. There is an invitation to sensuousness, the smell of the earth, the sound of the projector, the glowing lights in the dark all working together to create a multisensory experience. Does Mark’s idea of “flow” resonate with you? How do you think about film differently when it is beyond the screen?

FD: I’m drawn to film’s physicality: the scratches, grain, and imperfections are old friends. Analogue film is both tactile and visual, and it invites other senses by association. So yes, it resonates.

I wanted to create an environment that is immersive and engages all of the senses. When I was working through the ideas for the installation, I thought about how I might suggest an explosion and a blossoming, and tensions between movement and stasis.

The optic objects are mostly donated eye-glass lenses, but there are broken camera lenses and magnifying glasses too. People can look through others’ eyes, and distort and enlarge the components they find in the gallery space. It is an invitation to play, and engage with the forms, colours and textures, to

be mad scientists or researchers.

LLC: I think you are both. When I look at your notebooks and all the records you've been keeping, I see you have a methodical and rigorous process in those pages. Can you speak about how you have been thinking through or working through the questions or problems for *Research garden*?

FD: Making the exhibition components has been laborious, but I am not a perfectionist or tidy. Since you asked about the notebooks, I'll outline some technical elements that informed my decisions.

My notebooks are a technical record of *Compendium*. In them are exposure and colour filter tests for the optical printer, and these objects themselves are appealing and may appear cryptic to people who don't know how an optical printer works. Optical printers contain a camera that faces a projector mechanism. You basically rephotograph each frame of existing footage one at a time. In doing so, you capture the dust, scratches, tape, all the textures, darks, lights and colours that are on the film's surface at that moment. The image diffuses and softens as you rephotograph the various iterations, a bit like soaking something in water for a long time. Different film stocks and the qualities of the image you are replicating affect the exposure you need so exposure tests are crucial. Exposure is controlled by the aperture on the camera, the brightness of the bulb, neutral density and colour filters and the shutter angle of the camera. Like anything, you need to understand the system, so that you can experiment and explore the boundaries.

They also contain eco-developer recipes and times. The filmed images in *Compendium* are of the sage, butterfly bush, lilac, dogwood, hens&chicks, silver maple and clover plants that live in my front yard. They were shot on Kodak 3378 which is a black and white high contrast sound stock that experimental filmmakers like because it has a distinctive high-contrast look. It can also be processed in any plant part or fruit: cilantro, hyacinth, mint, lavender, grapes, anything except citrus.

There are also phytograms of these same plants, made on Kodak 3378, 7363 and ORWO PF2. The colours occur because of the base colour of the stock, the amount of liquid held by the plant and likely the internal chemistry of the specific plant at that moment in its life cycle.

One of the challenges of projected phytograms is that you lose the beautiful details: veins, tissues, fronds, barbs, needles etc... visible when the film isn't moving. It is wonderful and chaotic, but it's a lawless blur. This is one of the reasons I wanted the installation to show projected film and also large format prints. It ties back to the tension between movement and stasis. Gardens themselves display that tension: seemingly quiet and still by human standards, but plants are engaged in constant motion and change.

In the past, I've had my phytograms digitally scanned. Editing software allows you to slow down the images, but I knew I wanted to finish this piece on film, to present it on a looper. I decided to optically print the phytogrammed images in order to slow them down and draw attention to details. I also wanted colour: to speak to the colours in the original phytograms and also expand them out towards other imaginaries. You can't process colour film using eco-developers so, I compromised and used industrial E6 chemistry. For the first stage developer, we used caffenol, a developer you make with coffee. It expired and started distorting the results and that was amazing. I plan to keep reusing this chemistry until it produces no images.

LLC: Oh my god... In conjunction with your exhibition, you'll be teaching a one day workshop and earlier in the year when we were trying to decide on the season for this you mentioned that "the idea is together we are archiving the plants there on the day, no matter what conditions!" Your insistence that all conditions can be archived is compelling to me. Many of your previous works have a critical concern for the archive or counter-archive, and maybe

every work you've made is a kind of archival work, but this current work with phytograms has a very specific and tangible way of recording or remembering. You are registering plantlife directly onto the celluloid that is so palpable, physical... What does the act of archiving (or archiving in this way) mean to you?

FD: As I mentioned earlier, phytograms always work and always look good, but plants provide different results at different times of the year. New growth in the spring is powerful and makes strong solutions. In the fall and winter, you may have to soak plants longer or look further (like your home or the grocery store) for plant parts for your recipe. You can still document dry leaves, they block light and will leave a silhouetted impression, but they need to be soaked in a solution with living plants. These differences are unique and so is the dynamic a specific group of people brings to the activity. Their thoughts, and histories, energies, the collision of minds. A phytogram is a record of a specific time, place and the beings that made it.

In terms of archives/counter-archives and my previous work... I have always worked with found imagery as well as images that I capture. My family left Chile under duress and we didn't bring photos from when we lived there. They were destroyed by the military when they ransacked our home. So televised, iconic and all images became substitutes for what other families had. This experience left me with a broad understanding of how images might be repurposed in critical artworks and frameworks. You have an ethical responsibility to the source, content and to give credit where it is due, of course, but since I don't make work for broadcast, I've never worried about copyright laws.

There is also something important about knowing how our materials are connected and to what and who they are connected, cataloging the overlapping strata of histories and voices even if we might not know how to

interpret them, and mark-making, archiving, documenting in the face of climate change and an uncertain future.

LLC: The film you made, *Compendium*, is so striking... It's visceral, veiny, beautiful and terrifying. On the one hand, the scratches move like rapidfire whereas the plant-prints and finger-prints seem to languish. Are they resting, refusing? The compendium's rich and changing colours/ movements/shapes/lines – from the blood red to pink whispers to midnight aquas to bold solar buzzes and back to deep red – come together to create something that is part erotica and part philosophy. Am I right or what?

FD: YOU ARE RIGHT. It is part erotica, part philosophy. But so are gardens, aren't they?

I paid special attention to and considered every single frame. When phytogramming and when working on the 1700 and the JK optical printers, I was working frame by frame. I am in love—perhaps obsessed with—every single frame. We made about 2500 feet of 16mm and 35mm phytograms and optically printed footage. That's approximately 100,000 discrete images. Each one refers back to a singular moment in time and space.

The loop is structured by colour and loosely arranged like the visible spectrum. I struggled with the loop because I wanted it to be so much longer than its final 7-minutes. So I made use of as much of the film as possible in the rest of the installation. And coming back to the conversation about original works, phytograms and the optically printed film are original works – like paintings are. Copying them changes them, makes them something else.

I also hand-painted and dyed a lot of the film, you can see these on the lightbox. These are techniques artists and technicians have been using since the invention of photography. I made dyes from turmeric and black walnut. I used copper ink made by the Toronto Ink Company and cochineal ink by the Botanical Ink Company. I also used commercial acrylic inks.

Finally, the loop is silent so that we will look closely at the images. While flowers may appear silent to humans, they have adapted to be loud: they're smelly, the nectars taste great, and visually they are vibrant. Plants have spent millions of years in complex evolutionary conversation with other beings. KM is a complicated acoustic space and it's often hard for humans to sleep and think. Conversations with people who like to use the neighbourhood as temporary recreational space can get uncomfortable and even threatening. I focused on plants because sonically they make quiet instead of noise and they are often ignored here. Urban sprawl and lack of green space destroy the potential and necessary conditions for comprehensive plant communication.

LLC: I won't tell you who told me, but I heard that you were working the optical printer at LIFT so hard that you made it explode into flames. What kind of a person would set a piece of film equipment on fire?

FD: The rumours are true! The transformer that powers the bulb on LIFT's Oxberry 1700 optical printer caught fire when I was working on *Compendium*. The bulb had its own power source to keep the signal steady. This was important when the machine was used for high-level optical effects in the film industry (pre-digital effects). Filmmaker John Price fixed the problem by powering the bulb and the printer through the same power source. Apparently it's fine now... but I haven't used it since it caught fire.