

Extinct Botanical Statement

Penelope Gottlieb

This new series of paintings arises from my attempt to synthesize concerns both artistic and ecological. Imagery of extinct plant life, at once real, imagined and reinvented, becomes a metaphor and literal iconography, subject to processes of explosive fragmentation.

The project is based around loss, language and imagination. Through the process of studying vintage botanical renderings and researching the steadily growing list of plants on the “confirmed extinction” list, I flexed my interpretive impulses in recreating plants of which there is little if any visual reference. Botanists’ descriptions provided the texts on which my visuals are based, generating a critical language-to-image progression.

Whereas older traditions of botanical art and still life painting involved calm, studio-bound reflections of natural beauty and visual order, a new paradigm seems appropriate in the more fragile condition of the world in the early 21st century. We’re in a state of accelerated change, possibly teetering on some sort of Apocalyptic brink. We naturally feel a sense of anger. The plants I am painting are under assault. They’re being attacked. They’re being blown up.

Contextually, the work could trigger disparate cultural associations. The imagery, for instance, might suggest cartoon panels or stills from animation. It may appear that explosives have been detonated in the greenhouse. There are also references to early modernist ideals, including Kandinsky’s vibrant abstractions or the knotty forces of Futurism. While the Futurists implicitly championed a sense of social dynamism through futurethink and better living through technology, my work tries to sound an alarm about the grim prospects of a future in which extinction is a way of life.

This art addresses the dire state of the planet, offering visual “eulogies” for lost plant life, and larger patterns of ecological destruction. At the same time, the paintings represent one artistic response to the contemporary world’s concentrically dizzying spin.