



INTERTWINED HISTORIES: Plants in their Social Contexts

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periculum

artist's statement & portfolio

jennifer wanner

photography: gavin sample

"The dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination."

—Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*

My art practice examines botanical art and nature cinema in a world dominated by Marxist "second nature"—a virtual simulation of pristine "first nature" wrought by the revolution in information, biotechnologies, and consumer culture. I employ collage, watercolour painting, and stop-motion animation to explore how both art-historical constructs and scientific objective means of observing the natural world have shaped our Western concept of nature. The diverse disciplines of art and science can, at times, possess a shared language and actions. For example, in collage and genetic transfer science, respectively, artists remove an image and scientists a gene from its original context and "transfer," then "splice" it onto another image or gene to create a new "modified" or "recombined" whole. My botanical work attempts to operate between two Romantic realms: fascination with mastery over natural processes and unease with what our technology might unleash.

In my collage series entitled *Periculum*—Latin for trial, proof, danger, peril, risk, liability—I collected, and printed on inkjet paper, Internet images of the most endangered and threatened plant species throughout Canada, according to federal, provincial, and territorial governments. My "field work" has been conducted in the virtual realm of the Internet—a domain where, according to social theorist Paul Virilio, "virtuality destroys reality."¹ I then carefully cut away several plants from their original contexts to reconfigure them

into a new singular “rescued” plant. An individual collage has been generated for each of the thirteen Canadian provinces and territories. A fourteenth collage represents all of Canada and contains a plant species that is at risk from each of the provinces and territories.

We are obsessively driven to develop technologies and organizational systems that attempt to counteract the negative effects we have already inflicted upon the natural world. With my proposition to “genetically collage” all of the provincial and territorial plant species at risk together into one specimen, we would only have to concern ourselves with protecting one plant species rather than a diverse range of them—a system of “efficiency.” These botanical collage images act as another futile and preposterous proposal to help restore and protect what we are on the verge of destroying.

The plant images collaged in the *Periculum* series are deliberately not true to scale or proportional to the original plant. For example, in the collage representing Newfoundland and Labrador, the Barrens willow (*Salix jejuna*), located at the top left of the plant, measures 11 centimetres in the collage, but is in actuality a tiny plant measuring 1–2 centimetres in height that can be easily trampled. The colours represented in the collages are also not faithfully reproduced. Many factors contribute to this colour distortion, such as the time of day the photograph was originally taken, digital image manipulation, and inkjet printer colour calibrations. Through playing with both the scale and colour I am suggesting how during the process of genetic modification we can never be precisely sure of how a gene will ultimately express itself. These collages act as propositions for a botanical art in a time of virtual, high-speed systems, influenced by Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “simulacra”—where the ability to distinguish between the model and the real has been lost among the mediations of cultural constructs.²

As a species, humanities’ response to environmental crises often favours adaptation rather than conservation and preservation. Experts have estimated that the alarming rate at which species are being lost today is between “1,000 and 10,000 times higher” than the “natural” or “background” extinction rate. The responsibility for this “Sixth Extinction” crisis rests primarily on the shoulders of one species—humans. As writer Elizabeth Kolbert points out, “No other creature has ever altered life on the planet in this way before.”³ Increasing awareness through literature, documentary film, education, and the visual arts is just one of the important tactics we can use to confront the extinction problem, but it is ultimately our *actions* upon this planet that will determine the fate of all species.

notes

1. Der Derian, *The Virilio Reader*, 5
2. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2
3. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*, 2–3

bibliography

- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pp. 37–38.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- Der Derian, James, ed. *The Virilio Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt, 2014.





◀ **Periculum - Canada**

2015

Hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper
38.75 x 24.5" (98.43 cm x 62.23 cm)

▲ **Periculum - Manitoba**

2015

Hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper
30 x 39.5" (76.2 cm x 100.33 cm)

Collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts





◀ **Periculum - New Brunswick**

2015

Hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper
32.5 x 28" (82.55cm x 71.12cm)

▲ **Periculum - Newfoundland & Labrador**

2014

Hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper
18.5 x 25" (46.99 cm x 63.5 cm)

P44: **Pericullum - Yukon**, 2014, hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper, 24.75 x 20" (62.87 cm x 50.8 cm)

P45: **Pericullum - Alberta (Permutation #2)**, 2017, hand-cut inkjet paper collage on Stonehenge paper, 37 x 28" (94 cm x 71.12 cm),
Collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts





