



## INTERTWINED HISTORIES: Plants in their Social Contexts

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ISBN 978-1-77385-091-7

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# spectral garden

## *artist's statement & portfolio*

laura st. pierre

**For** several years, I have been collecting and preserving flora from the changing landscape. These specimens then become the subject of photographs, video works, and installations. These works are all loosely grouped under the project title *Fruits and Flowers of the Spectral Garden*.

Using a technique common to botanists, I preserve the plants I collect in isopropyl alcohol. This maintains their three-dimensional form, but leaches the colour from the flowers and leaves. Unlike a seed or a cutting, these ghostly tissues cannot be used to create new life.

To contain the specimens, I use domestic vessels, such jars and bottles, in the tradition of my grandmothers. While my relatives preserved food and drink, I am preserving something else—a memory that is not yet a memory.

My interest in plants stems from what they reveal about the past, the present, and the future of a place. The presence of native species suggest wildness; domestic plants signal human or colonial intervention. Aggressively invasive plants speak to the delicate balance of ecologies, and barren land reveals a history of pollution or contamination. Plants may also foreshadow the future—the dry and dense coniferous boreal forests of western Canada tell of fires in years to come.

Specimens are chosen from sites in transition. Earlier works in this series featured plants from “wild” or unkempt spaces in Saskatoon, such as vacant lots, alleys, and parks. Specimens were collected from these places as a response to their increased development and taming. More recently, I have begun gleaning plants from ecologically sensitive areas, including the St. Lawrence River and the boreal forest. Although the specimens are not currently rare or unusual, someday soon they may be: in this sense the collection has become an Archeology of the Future. This passing into memory sometimes happens more quickly than anticipated: the location where the boreal forest specimens were collected has since been completely transformed by wildfires.

Photography is an essential aspect of this project. In the translation of a three-dimensional object to a two-dimensional image, common plants are transformed, “making visible things that cease to be of any consequence once the picture has been snapped.”<sup>1</sup> This “making visible” is taken further by preserving the plants in alcohol, which bleaches the specimens and renders some parts of the plants translucent, giving them a ghostly appearance. Furthermore, when the plants are printed at 300 per cent their original size, they become even less familiar—moss may be printed at the scale of grass, forcing the viewer to see it in a new way.

While earlier photographs in this series depicted a single specimen in a jar, I have begun stacking and positioning the specimens, using other natural materials to prop them up. In so doing, I am attempting to recreate a specific plant or landscape from memory. While the use of photography generally raises questions about time and remembrance, this process takes it one step further, reconstructing the land with my mind’s eye as well as the camera’s.

Much of Canadian identity and our understanding of our place within the natural world were forged through images created by artists (the Group of Seven, Emily Carr, and others). Along with many other artists today, I continue to explore these questions while encouraging our viewers to do the same.

## notes

1. Hamill, “The World is Flat,” 14–19.

## bibliography

Hamill, Sarah. “The World is Flat: Photography and the Matter of Sculpture,” *Camera* 36, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 14–19.



▲ **Boreal 1** (Spectral Garden), 2016/18, archival ink jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 65 x 43"

▼ **Boreal 4** (Spectral Garden), 2018, archival ink jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 78.2 x 59.5"









▲ **Boreal 7** (Spectral Garden), 2018, archival ink jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 49 x 34"

▼ **Boreal 3** (Spectral Garden), 2016/18, archival ink jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 65 x 43"



▲ **Saint-Laurent 6** (Spectral Garden), 2017, Ink Jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 39 x 26"  
▼ **Boreal 5** (Spectral Garden), 2018, archival ink jet on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 80 x 59.5"



