ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Candice Lin's Garden of Earthly Delights

Anuradha Vikram | August 25, 2015

Candice Lin, "Sycorax's Collections (Happiness)," 2012, etching with watercolor and dried plants.

***In partnership with 18th Street Arts Center**, an artists' residency program that provokes public dialogue through contemporary art-making.*

Dragon's Blood. Star Anise. Yerba Santa. Mugwort. These are some of the evocatively named plants that Candice Lin investigates for their social and biological properties. The Los Angeles-based artist is currently in residence in the Artist Lab at 18th Street Arts Center, where she is engaged in a materials-based investigation of the history and science of plants we commonly find in our environment. Her residency and exhibition, "Sycorax's Garden," explores

the intersection between science and mysticism in the evolution of organic chemistry, considering how botanical treatments were historically associated with female social roles of healer, herbalist, and witch, as well as how many of the plant-based materials we use today were introduced to the Western world through global exploration and conquest in the Age of Empire. Lin's exhibition is on view in 18th Street Arts Center's Main Gallery through September 18, with a reception on Saturday, August 29, from 6 to 8 p.m.

"Sycorax's Garden" takes its title from the figure of the witch Sycorax, mother of Caliban, in William Shakespeare's "The Tempest." Caliban, described by Shakespeare as "a savage and deformed slave," is an archetype of European attitudes toward the inhabitants of the New World in the early Age of Exploration. Prospero, former Duke of Milan, abducts the child Caliban from his mother and raises him as a house slave. By teaching him European languages, Prospero learns from Caliban the magical secrets that the duke later uses to invoke the titular storm against the captors who have deposed him from his throne. By connecting the development of botanical science with global circumnavigation and trans-Atlantic trade, Lin's project addresses the acts of abduction by which human beings as well as natural and intellectual resources were removed from non-Western societies under the pretext of "discovery" and used to augment the wealth and power of European patriarchs.

Candice Lin and Patrick Staff, "Plants in Transition," 2015, detail of installation at 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica. | Photo: John Lucas

In contrast, Lin describes "the plants' multiple uses in decolonial struggles, struggles against slavery, and feminist struggles in Europe." Considering these historical complexities, she acknowledges, "It is interesting how plant knowledge (about abortifacients for example) seeped from being used in resisting and negotiating conditions of slavery to a knowledge that went over the seas back to Europe, where the knowledge was co-opted (when it was medically useful or culinarily delightful) or purposefully erased." She continues, "That Sycorax is a witch who was learned in the ways of herbs, banished for her use of sorceries, is also related to anti-colonial and anti-slavery struggles such as the Haitian Revolution, which was (at least in folk history) instigated by a Vodou ceremony led by the mambo (Vodou priestess) Cecile Fatiman (and priest Dutty Bookman), and fueled in great part through the slaves' use of herbs to poison their master's drinking water and food. This was an extension of African slaves' common use of poisonous plants for suicide, contraception, abortion (or the threat of) in desperate attempts to act out the small shreds of control they still had over their lives and bodies." Plants were used in this way to negotiate power in conditions of extreme powerlessness. Lin references a quote from the botanical illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian's book "Metamorphosis of the Insects of Surinam" (1705). Merian writes, "The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use the seeds of the peacock flower to abort their children, so that their children will not become slaves like they are. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. They told me this themselves." Merian was exceptional; most of her predominantly male European counterparts did not acknowledge the African and Indigenous sources of their information, and even purposefully erased anecdotal subversive uses of plants in the colony in published versions of their work. While Merian's gender may have made her more sensitive to non-Western women's use of plants in their struggle against capitalist exploitation of their bodies, she nonetheless used her complicity with the colonial expedition to gain professional opportunities unavailable to other women of her day, including European women of the working class.

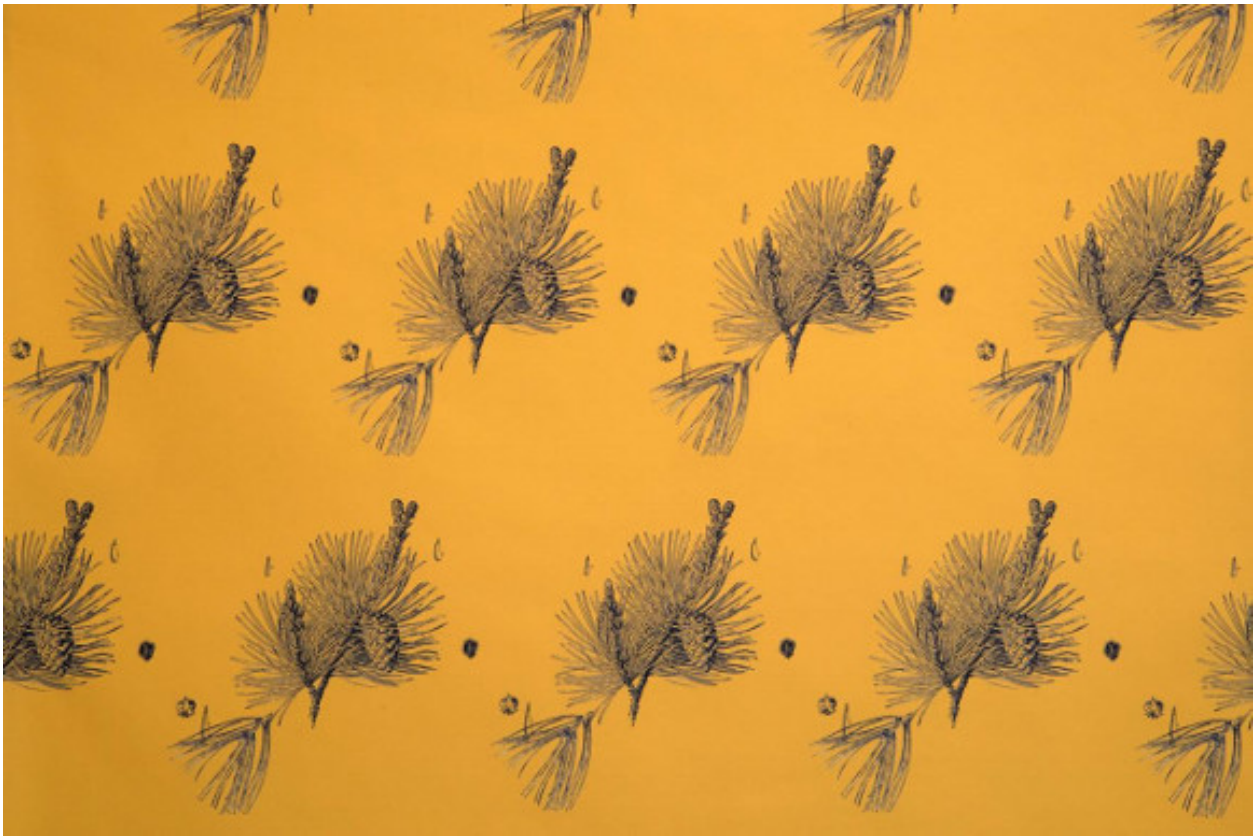
Candice Lin, "Sycorax's Collections," 2012, etching with watercolor and dried plants.

Similarly, the figure of Jeanne Baret, the first woman to complete circumnavigation of the globe, is another source of complexity and inspiration for Lin. A contemporary of Darwin's, Baret was responsible for introducing a large variety of plants to the European continent including the now-ubiquitous bougainvillea. Disguised as a man, Baret served as valet and assistant to her employer and lover, Philibert Commerçon (aka Commerson), naturalist to the French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville from 1766 to 1769. Baret stoked Lin's imagination because "She embodied a kind of folk knowledge that arguably was much broader and full-reaching than the newly professionalized (and masculinized) fields of science. And the fact that she had this asset becomes visible in what she was able to do against all odds: going on, in male drag, to circumnavigate the world, and [yet] still virtually unknown to us, even in France, where she came from." On behalf of King Louis XV, the party toured the South Pacific, identifying over 70 previously undocumented species of plants and creatures while also establishing colonial footholds in the Tahitian islands. For Lin, Baret exemplifies the intersectional nature of history in her dual role as agent of the European colonial project and victim of gender and class-based marginalization, having never been acknowledged for her contributions or expertise. The artist laments that, "The only plant named after Jeanne Baret on

the expedition was later renamed, and there exists only one plant that was recently named to honor her, but it has no relationship to the actual plants she used or was responsible for discovering." This fits with Lin's overarching interest in "the hidden or obscured stories in history of voices that are not part of the dominant narrative," particularly the stories of women and people of color whose knowledge has historically been discredited, omitted, and co-opted by structures of power.

Plants are a realm of knowledge that has been traditionally more available to women than other modes of scientific discourse, through the culinary as well as the healing arts. As such, their use has aroused the suspicion of patriarchal and colonial leadership, as evidenced by the 16th century "Malleus Maleficarum" ("The Witch Hammer"), a German clerical treatise on the moral and spiritual dangers of women's traditional knowledge that was cited in a number of subsequent witch hunts in Europe as well as the United States. Says Lin, "The relationship of colonial struggles is mirrored also in the struggle of women in medieval Europe (their involvement in heretical social movements, their role fighting against land enclosure acts and other land rent issues, agricultural working rights and food riots) and their related persecution as witches. This was no accident as those persecuted as witches in Europe were often those peasant/working class women who were knowledgeable about herbs and could help control a community's rights to abortion or contraception, or were outspoken women who fought against issues of religious or feudal power abuses." Though widely discredited, the "Malleus Maleficarum" is evidence of the threat that traditional plant-based healing posed to the

emerging, patriarchal scientific doctrines that emerged from the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation alongside the introduction of capitalist economics and colonial exploration during the Renaissance.



This subject is explored in depth by Italian feminist scholar Silvia Federici in "Caliban and the Witch," a treatise on women's unacknowledged role in the production of capital through domestic and reproductive labor. Lin explains how, she "started thinking about Sycorax when I read Silvia Federici's book "Caliban and the Witch" in 2010 and was struck by her analysis of Marxism from the perspective of feminist politics. I was interested in imagining a narrative about Sycorax that gave voice to these feminist struggles, and rewrote a fuller imagined story from the brief description she gets in Shakespeare's "The Tempest" as an Algerian witch and the mother of Caliban." Sycorax's Algerian lineage is also of interest in the context of the writings of Frantz Fanon, whose "Wretched of the Earth," set amidst the Algerian war of independence from the French in the early 1960s, was a catalytic text for contemporary post-colonial theory due to its controversial argument in favor of a colonized people's right to use violence as a means of throwing off oppression. This specter of anti-colonial violence is present, if sublimated, in "The Tempest."

Candice Lin, "Wigan Pit Brow Women"(details), 2006-2012, ink and watercolor on cut and hinged paper, dimensions variable.

The resolution of "The Tempest" speaks to how the female body functions as a commodity within capitalism. Unable to free himself from his enslaved condition, Caliban instead focuses his aggression on Miranda, the daughter of Prospero, menacing the teenager with the threat of sexual violation. Upon meeting two servants from the party stranded by the storm, Caliban offers them rule of the island in exchange for Prospero's death, and tosses Miranda in as a spoil of conquest. "Ay, lord; she will become thy bed, I warrant, and bring thee forth brave brood." The bodies of Sycorax and Miranda function as metaphors for the rights of men to land and property within the text. Says Lin, "Sycorax is cited in her role as a mother as a way to speak to land rights. Caliban references her in 'The Tempest' often to claim that she was here first, and so the island belongs to him. I think it's interesting how the role of motherhood, reproduction, land rights, freedom, and decolonization are all related in this visual trope where the female body comes to stand for the nation or the notion of freedom." Meanwhile, Shakespeare's contrast of Miranda's purity with Caliban's savagery illustrates the rhetoric of conquest, in which subjugation and enslavement of non-Europeans is justified by the supposed threat they pose to the virtue of European women of the upper class. We see this opposition at work today in the over-zealous policing of black bodies in American cities, where the mere presence of a person marked as "Other" in an affluent community can result in a violent response from law

enforcement, often justified by allusions to rape and other acts of gendered violence.

Candice Lin, "Birth of a Nation," 2008, watercolor and ink on paper, 42 ¼ x 55 1/8 x 2 in.,

Lin uses a variety of media including drawing, printmaking, installation, and video to tease out relationships between contemporary prejudices and the historical and literary sources from which she draws. These objects, as well as a series of workshops where participants can learn to make incense and tinctures from plant materials, function as launching points for public conversations about the evolution of sexual and racial oppressions from the early modern era until the present. Another aspect of Lin's residency will be realized in collaboration with London and Los Angeles-based artist Patrick Staff, whose work also addresses gender and sexuality as provisional, transitional, and changeable. Lin and Staff met in 2010, and their collaboration was inspired by the notion of "queer-hacking" whereby "certain [concepts] (medicines, plants, books, places like parks or libraries) could have one meaning or seeming neutrality to one person, but then could have a queer ontology where [each] operated or was used in an alternate way for different desires." With Staff, Lin will spend the second half of the residency creating performances and films around the hormonal properties of plants such as pine pollen: a plant-based substance that contains high levels of a phyto-hormone

very similar to human testosterone. The appearance of such a substance in plants, which are equipped with both male and female sexual characteristics, contrasts with the gendered perspective of humans who are assumed to come in two distinct sexual varieties. Lin points out that "Our bodies, like plants, have both [types of sex hormones], but we aren't accustomed to think outside of this binary setup." Plant sexuality represents a more fluid and changeable construct of gender, which both artists seek to explore.

Candice Lin, "Failed Matriarchy," 2008, ink on paper, 30 1/4 x 44 x 1 in.

Lin's research-based, interdisciplinary practice is ideally suited to the Artist Lab Residency, connecting her with a long succession of artists whose interests in feminism, gender and queer theory, performance, time-based art forms, and cross-disciplinary research have informed the ethos of 18th Street Arts Center over the past two and a half decades. Trained in New Genres at the San Francisco Art Institute and in Visual Arts and Art Semiotics at Brown University, Lin's work is deeply intellectual and critical, but she also finds ways to make it fun and accessible. During incense-making workshops in July and August, participants could investigate different smells, and hand-build incense cones and sticks to burn at home. Through this hands-on process, visitors to the exhibition were able to learn about the larger historical themes at play in a way that was educational but not dictatorial. Following the residency, some of the objects that she is creating will go on to another life at François Ghebaly in Los Angeles, where Lin's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery opens on

September 12. What visitors find there will inevitably be provocative and strange, and inspire fascination.

Candice Lin, "Objects of Magical Import," 2009.

Candice Lin, "A Future Ethnography of Power," (details) 2012, mixed media, 33 x 65 x 40 in.