

Phytopia

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Swansea 15 February to 26 May

The Glynn Vivian Gallery maintains a lively community presence in economically challenged Swansea – largely thanks to the City Council not following the understandable but short-sighted austerity-driven trend towards cutting local support for the arts. The gallery was founded on the collection of Richard Glynn Vivian, who travelled the world in the 1850s collecting objects and taking a particular interest in botany. That fits nicely with an exploration, originating in London, of the connections between people and plants. Artist-curator Edward Chell has been able to add to his project's previous instantiations (at the Milton Gallery, St Paul's in 2017 and Thames-Side Studios Gallery last year) with items from the Glynn Vivian's own collection. There are now 22 artists and around a hundred works in total, and a handsome catalogue has been newly produced.

If your internal dictionary is struggling with the title, relax: 'Phytopia' is a neologism of Chell's, linking 'phyto' – as in 'of plants' – to 'topia' – both a topological place or one's position in society, and with an obvious echo here of its use as a suffix in 'Utopia'. The show's thesis, then, is that we have lost our connection with the vegetable world, and that both we and the world are the worse for that. The simplest way of reading that across to what we see is as a rerun of the expulsion from Eden. First the garden is explored as a symbol of productive empathy between man and environment, then the optimism – or, perhaps, nostalgia – is punctured by the complications and contradictions we need to overcome.

The presiding spirit of the positive phase is Derek Jarman. His Dungeness garden is recalled through Fay Godwin's photographs; found object sculptures; flower forms cast dark in bronze; a trio of hoes punctuating the space (two wooden from the garden, one cast bronze); Jarman's diaries and photo albums; and his garden book for 1989 ('July 9th, Planted a triangle of three holly bushes and two tamarisk at the back of the house'). Jarman's reverential attention to plants is picked up graphically by Joy Girvin's drawings of botanical gardens (looking right at home in a gallery with excellent holdings of David Jones), sculpturally by Rosa Nguyen's unusual use of ceramic as casting medium for flora and

photographically by three ravishing sets. Those are Karl Blossfeldt's seminal displays of vegetal structure; Henry Bradbury's relatively unknown mid-Victorian electrolytic plate production, resulting in delicate life-size, X-ray-like images; and Neeta Madahar and Melanie Rose's newly commissioned silver gelatin prints of orchids. The positivity also embraces weeds, as in Siân Pile's richly detailed photographs of undergrowth, and Chell's own process of layering acrylic and gesso on lacquer to pay homage to hedgerows and motorway verges. It also spills into the natural cycles of Brian McClave and Tom Wichelow's time-lapse documentation of seasonal tasks *A Year in an English Garden: Flicker + Pulse*, 2016.

Then the serpents. In Ori Gersht's film *Big Bang*, 2006, an exploding bouquet makes the mortality behind the floral *Vanitas* still-life spectacularly explicit, while Rasheed Araeen's Warholish collages of *Flowers*, 1993-94, look jolly until you notice that they incorporate texts about political violence and that the panel of them forms a cross. That memorialising function flows into Peter Fillingham's *Poppy*, 2014, in which bright geometry carries a sub-text in a manner which could be a tribute to Araeen – for it turns out that the colours are those of military regiments. Alicia Paz provides the show's other large multi-hued presences: her paintings present versions of the *Tree of Life*, which Chell proposes as a unifying principle in his accompanying text, stating that 'the exponential nature of branching structures and the diversity this represents is a metaphor for life itself'. However, Paz's branches are labelled to present inequalities of class and race, suggesting that injustice is built into the metaphor, at least as we humans live it.

Told like that, 'Phytopia' is a fairly straightforward and effective show. Yet the fascinating catalogue reveals a more ambitious agenda. As Tom Jeffreys sees it in his essay, *phytopia* 'is the very idea of hybridity: a hybrid word for a hybrid world'. That suggests that we can read all sorts of further issues into what we see. Consistent with that, Chell's own essay cites not just gardens, growth, botanical illustration and weeds as key themes, but also light, Marxist economics and the idea that 'plants might form a galactic support structure for life that is like ours'. Chell claims that the centrality of plants is demonstrated by the way their 'prolific forms have emerged in every aspect of our culture from medicines to material science; from allotments to artefacts; from

pasture to painting – a landscape garden of germinating forms’. It’s all stimulating stuff – though if that’s the sort of test to be applied, couldn’t the same cultural centrality be imputed as readily to animals or geometry? – but I didn’t find it a compelling fit with the exhibition.

The nature and criticality of plants could have been explored further rather than assumed. For that, one might call on philosophers. The Russian Michael Marder, whose *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, 2013, radically counters the arrogance of humanist perspectives, seeks to consider plants on their own terms as an alternative ‘fugal, fugitive mode of being’. In contrast to our own striving for an independent and unified sense of self, plants are to be admired for an indifference to the distinction between the inner and the outer, such that they ‘merge with the external environment, to which they are completely beholden’. Similarly, French philosopher Emanuele Coccia eulogises them in *The Life of Plants*, 2016, as the only agents which can exploit the primary source of energy available on earth: their transformation of sunshine into stored biomass provides the basis for all animal development. Coccia also praises their lifelong growth; their ability to bridge the aerial and subterranean worlds, mediating between earth and sky; and the variation and seduction of flowers. Such considerations might have given a more coherent framework for linking the show’s content to its curatorial ambitions. Yet ‘Phytopia’ set me thinking in such directions: perhaps, after all, it did enough.

Paul Carey-Kent is a writer and curator based in Southampton.