

Conversation with Megan Powell and Graham Clayton Chance

On the occasion of Mimesis Megan Powell discussed the project with artist Graham Clayton-Chance. Mimesis is a further development of a previous work After the Bees, 2015-17.

GCC: I'm talking to you after you've shown me some of the mock-ups of the work you are presenting. I'm fascinated by where this all sits, the intersection of your practice with the wider narratives around art, activism and our experience of climate disaster.

MP: We've reached this point of history where it just isn't working, how we live and what we're doing - It's not serving even us anymore, this very definite climate crisis is very apparent and I suppose that this is the greatest negotiation we've got left, and the work is part of that dialogue.

In terms of what is happening globally with war, the climate crisis and economics it's probably one of the darkest times of history, and it can be difficult to connect to the enormity of that. It's something that does make people feel helpless. When people feel helpless, they give up and disconnect from narratives because they know there's nowhere else for us to go on that.

And I think being able to resist, you know, just even enough, so we can consider where we can re-establish connection, reciprocity, respect, its crucial. And crucial that art can help articulate this resistance...

Who are we? Who do we want to be? How do we make steps towards individuating in a way that is beneficial?

The planet has all these rich interconnecting, biodiverse systems that work respectfully with each other, that we, in this Anthropocene period, seem to have just dropped out of that system as if we can live completely isolated from it and not have to abide by any of those rules anymore. It is an odd thing for a species to do that is actually worried about its own survival.

I like these ideas of just drawing things back to very simple things, at such a complicated time; insects, pollinators, weeds, very just unseen under-considered inhabitants that have such importance.

And then for my own practice, I've always been interested in the unconscious and sections of reality that we just don't see - worlds within worlds and what is hidden and so there was a natural connection to this macro world of ecology. These things lead me to electron microscopy and some of the other techniques I use in this work. These kinds of capture devices are really interesting because it makes us see anew and there is hope there.

You can't really address the vastness of the narratives connected to the climate crisis, all those things that threaten and concern us in a body of work. But you can put a presentation of considerations up. I do feel like the work is unresolvable in that respect.

GCC: How does it feel preparing for this exhibition building on a body of work you've been creating for around 15 years, but now with new considerations?

MP: This is a work in progress show, the project is definitely in a new stage and I'm at a different stage. So it was a wonderful surprise for Sarah Fisher to offer me this opportunity and for me to go back to this project.

I thought that maybe I was done with this work, even though I felt like it wasn't resolved. So to be able to revisit it because I feel like, and maybe most artists can connect to this - the work is always to the side of what you idealise it to be. You have to resolve what your projected ideal is and what the actual resulting work is. So any opportunity to redo things and revisit things is wonderful.

GCC: What new elements have you brought into the work?

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One of the pieces I'm showing is an experimental cyanotype weed garden, which will be created in the install. This work is made of layered cyanotypes. Some images are multi-layered using acetates of electron microscopy studies, recoated with cyanotype solution and re-exposed to layer up weeds and plant-based materials with scientific images from the project.

I wanted to build on the previous body of work and techniques I was exploring looking at bees but create something new which reflected the idea of a weed garden - weeds and their importance to pollinators has become the new focus for the project, and I wanted this piece to look chaotic and unkept so to emulate the language of weeds.

I've been asking questions around...

how do you make chaos look beautiful?

How is chaos then made into something attractive again?

And how do we rebrand what chaos is and ease giving up control?

I feel like I've mirrored that in the way that I've worked because I don't think I've really ever felt in control the last six months as I've been doing this. It's been quite challenging in that way.

The collaborative ways of working have helped me with that lack of control, in particular with this piece - Craig Tattersall and Michelle Elackman have been really crucial in supporting the development of cyanotypes, solar plate prints and the construction of the weed garden as a whole. Craig and Michelle run the print workshop in New Adelphi and they've been really active in assisting with the work.

GCC: I'm interested in how you work with scientists and technology. You've been talking to biologists, bontanists, imaging specialists throughout the development of the work.

MP: I'd begun the electron microscopy process within the first established stage of the project in partnership with Manchester Museum and I worked with a scientist called Tobias Starborg, who facilitated the electron microscopy images. Open Eye Gallery were keen for the project to be collaboratively led and I also wanted to continue collaborating with scientists. I contacted the Radiography department, in the School of Health and Society at the University of Salford. Dr Claire Mercer, picked up the email and offered it to Dr Katy Szczepura, and the team were excited and that was a pleasure as we all mutually recognised the possibilities of the project. They were particularly interested in using their technology in a creative way.

We visited the science labs in the Cockcroft building, and picked out anything to do with pollination and pollinators. We just collected such a volume of materials and we X-rayed them and CT Scanned them.

There was something really ridiculously luxurious about the endeavour given what the technology is used for on an everyday basis. To set up a CT scan and then to put a melon or pomegranate through and to see what images are created.

It was really fascinating to use medical capture devices that are usually designed to study the human body, but for us, then be able to study these different objects connected to pollinators.

GCC: What other collaborations have you been involved with on the project? And how did that help the project develop?

MP: I interviewed a biologist from Greenpeace, Kathryn Millar and that shaped the focus of the project to become about weeds and the importance of weeds for pollinators. I was interested psychoanalytically in our need for control in the things that we do? Why do we have to have such cultivated gardens? Why is everything overly designed and arranged with the singularity of crops and plants? Kathryn spoke about only using wildflowers from local seed banks if you plant wildflowers. But more importantly, how we should just let nature take up space without our intervention - let nature be nature. And ideas of our aversion to chaos - I'm very interested in that.

GCC: What main ideas came from the collaborative conversation?

MP: The collaborations as a whole have been really important to the project. So technicians and demonstrators in UOS school of Arts, Media and Technology, engineers from Maker Space, scientists alongside our model, assistants and creative producer - all have influenced the project. These relationships are so important because the whole project's in itself, is ultimately about negotiation, connection and reciprocity. I felt every time I was in discussion with people and making work the ideas of the project expanded so much.

GCC: What were the good news stories you heard?

MP: I was very aware not to make the project so vast that people just felt overwhelmed by sensations of doom as that's the way the media tells it. When actually, simple things like allowing weeds to grow, which have high sugar content in the nectar, so they are a better food supply for pollinators is an achievable goal.

This is a simple thing we can do to support insects and it helps us to identify plants that grow in spaces without our intervention. We all have to provide more habitat for pollinators because insects and wildlife migrate along physical corridors. So the minute that there's a patch of land that doesn't have the sort of plants that they need, it stops the corridor.

So we need action with lots of people involved to make this happen. This is a very achievable goal that would have a lasting effect for insect populations.

GCC: And the idea of an insect corridor is a really nice image, it links back to these ideas you talked about of connection for survival, we have to keep connecting.

GCC: I'm thinking about how you work with these image technologies but also draw us into a complex awareness of skin, flesh, and the body. These layers of intimacy and vulnerability. It's very emotional. I love the image you have of the model covering themselves with the printed fabric. Can you talk about how that image came about?

MP: The original image before I printed it onto the fabric was an electron microscopy image of a bee covered in mould. I'd grown the mould on bees, which was an endeavour in itself because you need to grow the mould, and then the bee and the mould has to be dry enough to put into a vacuum with no moisture what so ever so it can be gold plated and be scanned. So it was a long process of growing mould on bees and then putting them in the oven and trying to create ones that could be plated in the vacuum. We got one successful one out of many failed attempts.

I'd put this under an electron microscope, which allows you to see the ultrastructure of biological material at a molecular level. I was then interested in the different focal lengths, so if you capture it with an extreme close up it almost looks like olives stuck together or beads. If you pull further out, it appears like either dense undergrowth or a seabed. I was fascinated at how limited our un-aided perception is, whereas in reality there are lots of hidden structures within other structures, we don't know what we are or what we're part of.

I wanted to take this research and see how I could make it less clinical, humanise it. And so I printing the image onto fabric and taking it into my studio practice was the next step and then playing with it, I think I took 200 images during that session.

GCC: It's a beautiful image, this decayed bee and mould creating a skin to protect the human figure. Like you say about the experience of the electron microscope - that we don't know what we are part of.

MP: I was interested in the idea of remaking skin and by looking at the role of skin for the body – how it contains everything and how vulnerable that is. How we're just contained by skin and fragile that is.

A lot of that came from the consideration of how do, in particularly bees, but how do insect colonies work together. So are they a group of individuals or a whole? An ant is one of the few creatures on the earth that can recognise itself in the mirror, which is a state of consciousness. There are only humans, chimpanzees, orangutans, Asian elephants, Eurasian magpies, orca whales, dolphins and ants that can do this. But the idea that a singular ant can recognise itself in the mirror and connect to an idea of self is unbelievable - that there's that level of self-awareness happening within each ant in a colony.

Biologists are very split with how bees work. So some think that they are individuals, but they are drawn together with the Queen's pheromones, which is passed throughout the hive through licking and exchanging food as food is passed throughout the hive and this ensures the pheromone is in every bee and this keeps them united. There's other biologists that think that basically that they're one organism that is unbound together without skin - so this is akin to what the cells are in our body, that our body is almost like a hive in itself. So all the cells have individual responsibilities but they have their own requirements, things like they need warmth and food to survive. We don't think about all these things that make up what a body is and then in turn how we can extend that. James Lovelock has ideas of the Earth as a body or that environments are bodies - I'm really interested in that.

I was interested in studies of where they took honeybees away from the hives and even though they had everything that they needed to biologically live that they died - there was no the reason but loneliness. They couldn't live without the collective hive.