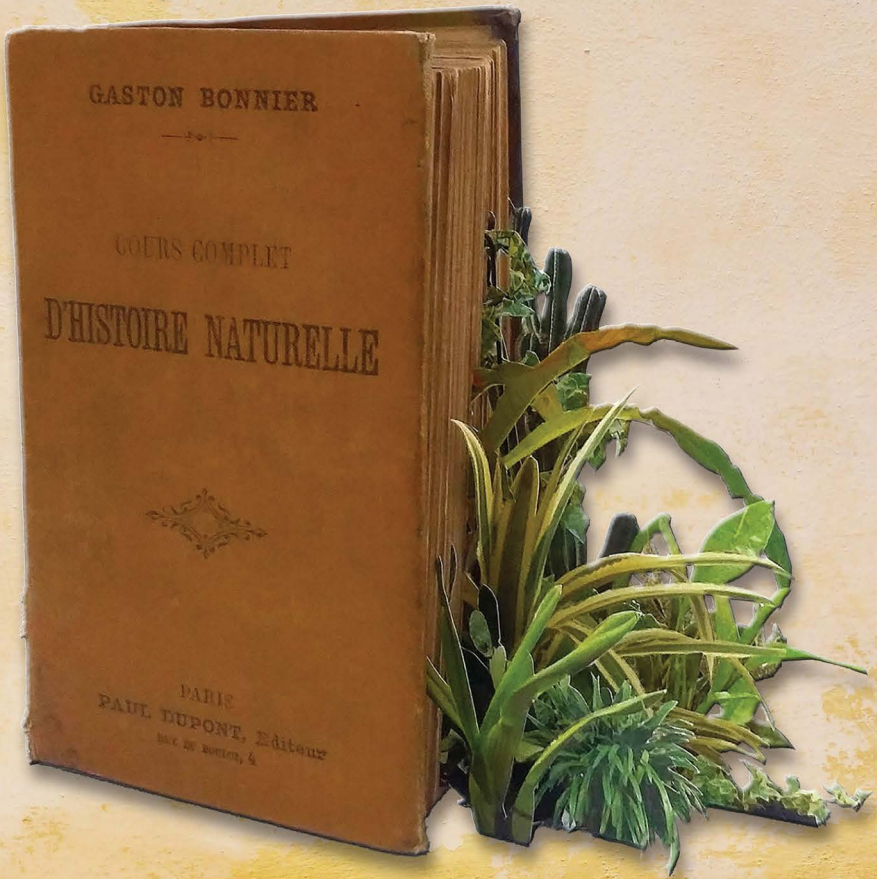


Decolonial Ecologies

The Reinvention of Natural History in
Latin American Art

Joanna Page



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Para Clara Kriger, con afecto y amistad

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simile is to be used, other than those derived from the external parts of the body, such as the ear, finger, navel, eye, scrotum, penis, vulva or breast; and not from the internal parts of the body, which are well known only to anatomists."⁴⁹ His recommendations point to the fact that plants have always been known to us via comparison with animal (including human) bodies. In De Valdenebro's work, this is taken as a starting point for an expanded expression of affinity, parity, and reciprocity. Her work suggests a kind of bioegalitarianism that does not erase the differences between species but finds in them a radical commensurability that is immediate and embodied.

María Fernanda Cardoso: Human Desires and Plant Sexuality

María Fernanda Cardoso's exhibition *On the Marriages of Plants* (2018) draws on scientific research to create detailed photographs and rigorously precise three-dimensional models of the reproductive systems of plants. In her work, Cardoso engages explicitly with Linnaeus's work on botanical classification, but in a way that emphasizes the most ludic and piquant elements of his work. She returns to Linnaeus's provocative analogies between plant and human sexuality to suggest potential re-readings from feminist and post-anthropocentric perspectives.

Cardoso's projects attempt to revive the theatricality of cabinets of curiosities, which was lost in the classificatory zeal of natural history collections. They also take inspiration from popular museums of the nineteenth century that used "technological innovation and technical virtuosity" to construct a "vivid visual language" with which to introduce novel facts and ideas to broad audiences.⁵⁰ *On the Marriages of Plants*, shown at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences) as part of a broader exhibition entitled *Human non Human*, develops some of the ideas and techniques that she had explored in earlier projects, particularly in the *Museum of Copulatory Organs* (2012).⁵¹ In creating intricate three-dimensional models of animal

49 Linné, 251.

50 Cardoso, "The Aesthetics of Reproductive Morphologies," 39, 30.

51 *Human non Human*, curated by Katie Dyer and Lizzie Muller, was exhibited between 7 August 2018 and 27 January 2019 at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia.

genitalia, Cardoso sought to draw attention to a world of extravagant diversity that is little known beyond the biology laboratory, as well as to understand the relationship between morphology and evolution: the theories that have been proposed to account for the astounding complexity and rapid divergence of genital forms.⁵²

On the Marriages of Plants was a celebration of the seductive beauty of the reproductive organs of flowering plants. A huge display cabinet was filled with silk blooms of many colours, shapes, and textures, lit dramatically in a darkened space to accentuate their vivid hues (Fig. 3.11). These flowers are not only aesthetically appealing, but also accurate scientific models, with the anatomy of their petals and reproductive parts rendered with precision. Erected around the cabinet were “walls” made of large sheets of black fabric, onto which had been printed enlarged photographs of flowers with their petals removed, showing their stamens and pistils, responsible for producing pollen and ovules respectively (Fig. 3.12). Lighting was installed behind the fabric, shining through the flowers to give them a glowing luminosity. These “undressed” specimens had been photographed for an earlier project entitled *Naked Flora* (2013). Cardoso chose flowers from her local neighbourhood, stripped them of their petals, and used a macro lens combined with a technique called “focus stacking,” in which multiple photographs are blended to extend the depth of field of any single image. These images were magnified for display in *On the Marriages of Plants*. The result was a stunning rendition of the spectacular colours and exotic forms of plant reproductive systems, towering above human viewers.

These glamorous images were given titles according to the classification system laid out by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae* (1735). In his *Praeludia Sponsaliorum Plantarum* (*Prelude to the Betrothal of Plants*, 1729), Linnaeus had already explained plant reproduction with an effusive metaphor borrowed from human society, describing petals as an opulent marriage-bed, “perfumed with many delightful fragrances,” ready for the nuptials to be celebrated between bridegroom and bride.⁵³ The analogy is made even more explicit in *Philosophia Botanica* (1751), where Linnaeus spells out: “the CALYX is the bedroom, the COROLLA

⁵² Cardoso, “The Aesthetics of Reproductive Morphologies,” 11, 56.

⁵³ Linné, *Prelude to the Betrothal of Plants*, 81.



Fig. 3.11 Installation view of María Fernanda Cardoso, *On the Marriages of Plants* (2018) from *Human non Human*. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia (photograph by Carlos Velásquez).



Fig. 3.12 Installation view of María Fernanda Cardoso, *On the Marriages of Plants* (2018) from *Human non Human*. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia (photograph by Carlos Velásquez).

is the curtain, the FILAMENTS are the spermatic vessels, the ANTHEERS are the testicles, the POLLEN is the sperm, the STIGMA is the vulva, the STYLE is the vagina, the [VEGETABLE] OVARY is the [animal] ovary, the PERICARP is the fertilized ovary, and the SEED is the egg."⁵⁴ In his *Clavis systematis sexualis* (Key to the Sexual System), published in *Systema Naturae*, Linnaeus used terminology that thoroughly humanized plants within a lexicon of marriage, moving from defining parts as male or female to referring to them as *andria* and *gynia*, derived from the Greek for "husband" and "wife."⁵⁵ Plant marriages ranged from the decorous *monandria* (one husband in marriage) to the licentious *icosandria* (twenty husbands, often more) and the even more wanton *polygamia* (husbands live with wives and concubines in different beds).

It is generally agreed that Linnaeus's provocative nomenclature—thrillingly scandalous in the cultural context of the eighteenth century—continued a tradition of pornographic analogies in the teaching of botany.⁵⁶ Linnaeus was certainly not the only (or the first) botanist to have drawn heavily on an understanding of animal copulation to ground his theories on analogies between the sexual organs of plants and those of animals.⁵⁷ To extend the metaphor even further with references to the specifically human social convention of marriage suggests a degree of anthropomorphization that most plant scientists would now reject as inaccurate or unhelpful (Linnaeus's nomenclature considerably added, for example, to the eighteenth-century overestimation of the importance of heterosexual reproduction in plants). But what if Linnaeus's aim in producing his "sexual system" was to comment on human society as much as to describe plant morphologies? In a lecture to his students, he described sexual activity as a necessity of nature that could not be subject to moral control without damage to health:

No dropsical person will be called drunkard, even if always thirsty.
No child greedy and avaricious because it wants to eat. Hence no girl unchaste that wants men, since once the egg (*ovum*) swells she feels desire, and it would be a miracle should she not feel it.⁵⁸

54 Linné, *Linnaeus' Philosophia Botanica*, 105.

55 Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae. Facsimile of the First Edition*, n.p.; see also Schiebinger, "Gender and Natural History," 167.

56 See Fara, *Sex, Botany, and Empire*, 11–12; Müller-Wille, "Linnaeus and the Love Lives of Plants," 309.

57 Schiebinger, "Gender and Natural History," 165.

58 Linné, *Diaeta naturalis, 1733: Linnés tankar om ett naturenligt levnadssätt*, 109; cit. Müller-Wille, "Linnaeus and the Love Lives of Plants," 311.

In the twenty-first century, Cardoso's exhibition delivers a similar critique of the enduring and widespread convention of monogamous marriage in many human societies, as she—like Linnaeus—stretches the single, inadequate term “marriage” to cover the immense variety of different and evolving reproductive arrangements that plants have created in their bid for survival. *Naked Flora* and *On the Marriages of Plants* celebrate the spectacular creativity involved in that enterprise, which is entirely beyond the reach of moral censure. “Nature is amoral,” Cardoso explains: “Whatever we do isn't right and wrong, it just is. It doesn't matter how many husbands you have.”⁵⁹ Rather than lapsing into lazy anthropomorphisms, then, Cardoso—like Linnaeus himself, perhaps—reverses the rhetoric, asking us to measure the strictures that often govern human procreation against the exuberant ingenuity and diversity of vegetal forms of reproduction.

The excitement surrounding the discovery of plant sexuality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries outstripped a knowledge of how fertilization actually took place.⁶⁰ Linnaeus himself did not progress far in his understanding of the role of insects in pollination, believing that self-pollination was the rule, although he was also aware of the part played by the wind carrying pollen in certain cases.⁶¹ In this respect, Cardoso's *On the Marriages of Plants* focuses on key revisions to Linnaeus's theories, drawing on more recent research to stress the crucial role in plant sexual reproduction of reciprocal arrangements between different species that have co-evolved over millennia. Near her vivid array of silk flowers, Cardoso positioned further display cabinets, made in dark wood and glass, of nineteenth-century origin. These housed microscopes and *papier mâché* models of flowers and insects that were used to teach anatomy, all from the Powerhouse Museum collection, alongside enlarged models of different kinds of pollen grain that Cardoso had produced for her *Museum of Copulatory Organs* (Fig. 3.13). The importance of interspecies reciprocity in plant reproduction was also conveyed through a work of sound art commissioned for the gallery, which brought the space alive with the buzzing and chirping of bees, birds, and other pollinators.

59 Conversation with the author, 27 April 2022.

60 Schiebinger, “Gender and Natural History,” 165.

61 Eriksson, “Linnaeus the Botanist,” 104–5.



Fig. 3.13 Installation view of María Fernanda Cardoso, *On the Marriages of Plants* (2018) from *Human non Human*. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia (photograph by Carlos Velásquez).

Humans are also important pollinators of plants. The sheer beauty and seductive quality of Cardoso's photographs points to the possibility that it is not only insects, birds, and other animals who are the intended audience for these displays of floral loveliness, but humans as well. This is also tacitly acknowledged in Linnaeus's marriage-bed metaphor, which is effective because we are easily wooed by his alluring description of the flowers' heady scents and the voluptuous softness of their petals. Indeed, plants may manipulate their human pollinators just as successfully as other species. The exhibition text for *On the Marriages of Plants* suggests that Cardoso's work echoes Michael Pollan's hypothesis that plants recruit us, by stimulating our taste and desire for beauty, to ensure their own survival.⁶² Flowers have evolved in a highly individuated way to attract specific insects, birds, and mammals by appealing to a range of senses (sight, touch, and smell). As Pollan writes, "We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it makes

⁶² The text was written by curators Katie Dyer and Lizzie Muller. See <https://mariafernandacardoso.com/documentaries/nature-in-art/on-the-marriages-of-plants-at-human-no-human/>

just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests."⁶³

However we understand the relationship between humans and plants to have evolved, it is clear that Cardoso's work underlines the intricate alliances and synergies that have allowed species to thrive by partnering with others. Linnaeus's projection of human desires and cultural conventions onto plant morphologies and functions betrays an important truth: that in a world that has been shaped through myriad co-evolutionary relationships, the changing desires and tastes of each species are inseparable from the destinies of others.

In curating *Human non Human*, Katie Dyer and Lizzie Muller sought to explore "how humans and our environment and everything that we're involved with are in a constant process of bringing each other into being through interaction." They selected artists, Cardoso among them, "who could move knowledge into a sensory experience."⁶⁴ Cardoso's projects enable us to understand the profound connection between these two aims. Her work cannot be reduced to a quest to make science visually appealing and entertaining for a mass audience, worthy though such an aim might be; it also reveals the extent to which it is our sensory immersion in the world that has thoroughly shaped the evolution of human biology and culture, just as we have shaped other species in turn. For the philosopher Emanuele Coccia, the plant is "the paradigm of immersion" in its total and constant exposure to the world around it; this immersion is not a passive experience but the "mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium."⁶⁵ Cardoso's recreation of the "visual y vivencial" (visual and experiential) language of pre-Enlightenment science, with its greater focus on a mode of communication that is "corporal y participativo" (embodied and participatory),⁶⁶ is a fitting way to probe how plant sexuality enlists the sense perceptions and actions of other species, and to reflect on the intricate interspecies entanglements that turn all evolution into co-evolution.

63 Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, xiv.

64 Dyer and Muller, "Objects, Energies and Curating Resonance across Disciplines," 257, 258.

65 Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 53, 5, 37.

66 Cardoso, "Matrimonio entre ciencia y arte," 180.

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Decolonial Ecologies

The Reinvention of Natural History in Latin American Art Joanna Page

Decolonial Ecologies is an original and heartening contribution to ecocritical scholarship. By examining how past understandings of nature and natural history have been folded into current art from Latin America, Joanna Page brilliantly foregrounds new possibilities for thought and action brought about by local knowledges and Indigenous epistemologies.

Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra
Birkbeck, University of London

In *Decolonial Ecologies: The Reinvention of Natural History in Latin American Art*, Joanna Page explores how contemporary artists in Latin America are reinventing historical methods of collecting, organizing, and displaying nature in order to develop decolonial and post-anthropocentric perspectives on the past and the present.

Page brings together an entirely new corpus of artistic projects from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru that engage critically and creatively with forms as diverse as the medieval bestiary, baroque cabinets of curiosities, atlases created by European travellers to the New World, the floras and herbaria composed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists, and the dioramas designed for natural history museums. These artworks forge a critique of the rationalizing approach to nature taken by modern Western science, reconnecting it with forms of popular, indigenous and spiritual knowledge and experience that it has systematically excluded since the Enlightenment. They also deconstruct the apocalyptic visions of environmental change that often dominate Western thought, developing a renewed understanding of alternative ways in which humans might co-inhabit the natural world.

It is valuable reading for scholars, students and anyone interested in Latin American art, transdisciplinary studies in art and science, or the environmental humanities.

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Background image: Mona Eendra. Flowers beside Yellow Wall, February 15, 2017, https://unsplash.com/photos/vC8wj_Kphak. Cover Design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

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