
Theatrum Botanicum



Theatrum Botanicum (2015 – 2018) is a major new body of work by London-based artist Uriel Orlow, which looks to the botanical world as a stage for politics at large through film, photography, installation and sound.

Working from the dual vantage points of South Africa and Europe, the project considers plants as both witnesses and actors in history, and as dynamic agents – linking nature and humans, rural and cosmopolitan medicine, tradition and modernity – across different geographies, histories and systems of knowledge, with a variety of curative, spiritual and economic powers.

Works in video, sound, photography and installation highlight botanical nationalism and other legacies of colonialism, plant migration and invasion, biopiracy, flower diplomacy during apartheid, the garden planted by Mandela and his fellow inmates on Robben Island prison, as well as the role of classification and naming of plants.

5 black and white photographs, 150 × 120 cm, 2016-17



This series of photographs shows trees as witnesses of history. They hold an embodied memory of events and, like ghosts, remind us of how the past lives on in the present.

Wild Almond Tree, Cape Town

The inside of the wild almond tree in Cape Town planted in 1660 by the first Dutch settlers to keep out the indigenous Khoikhoi and their grazing cattle from the vegetable garden set up to replenish the passing ships from the Dutch East India Company.

black and white photograph, mounted on aluminium, 150 × 120 cm, 2016-17

Single-channel video, 5'22", 2016-17



In 1963, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Kirstenbosch, the national botanical garden of South Africa in Cape Town commissioned a series of films to document the history of the garden, the Cape Floral Kingdom, and the jubilee celebrations with their 'national' dances, pantomimes of colonial conquests, and visits from international botanists. The films' protagonists – the scientists and visitors etc. – are all white; the only Africans featured are labourers. Considered neutral and passive, flowers were

excluded from the boycott until the late 1980s and so botanical nationalism and flower diplomacy flourished unchecked at home and internationally. The films have not been seen since 1963 and were found by the artist in the cellar of the library of the botanical garden. Orlow collaborated with actor Lindiwe Matshikiza who puts herself and her body in these loaded pictures, inhabiting and confronting the found footage and thus contesting history and the archive itself.

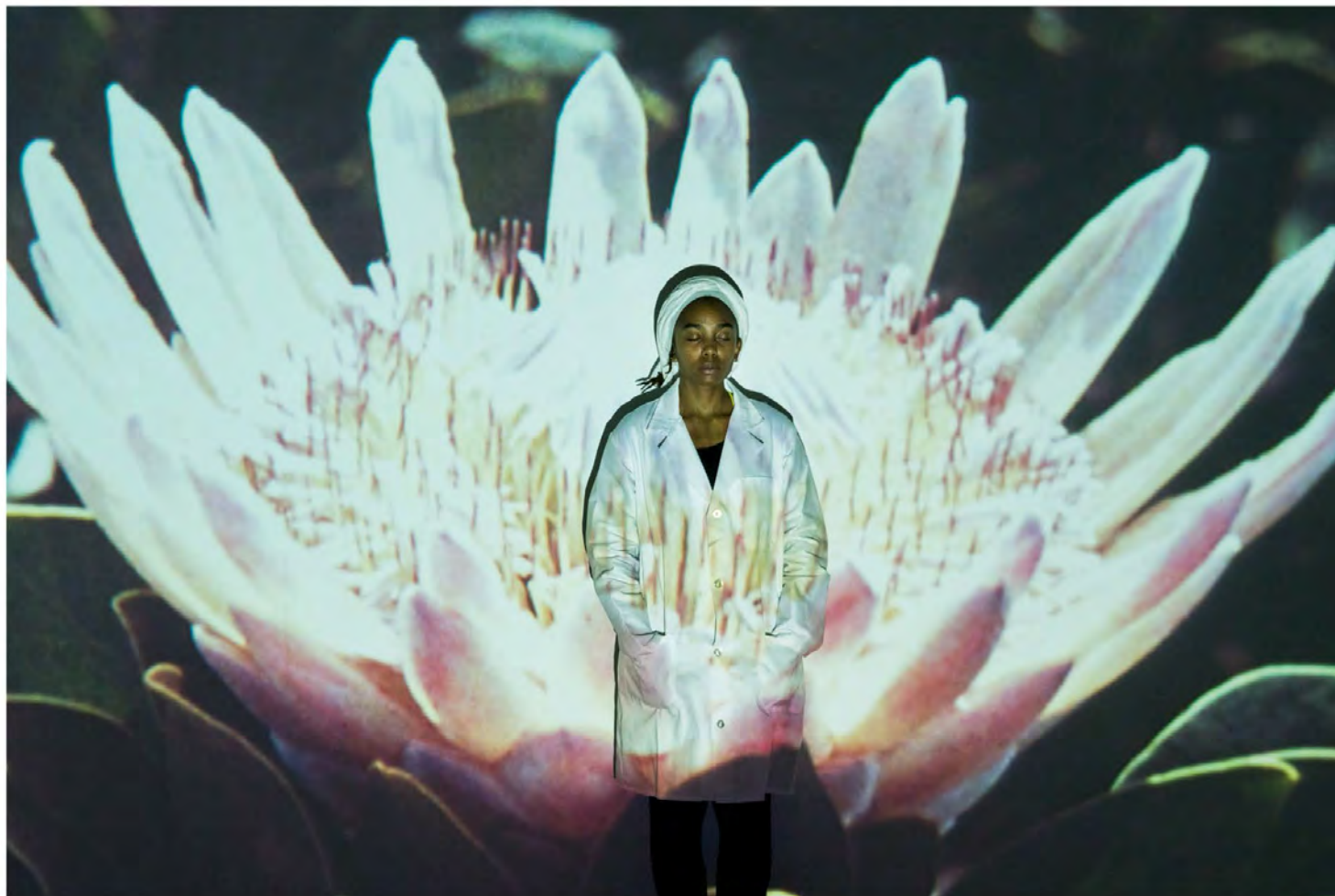
Preview

<https://vimeo.com/269798092>

password: Kirstenbosch



diptych, each pigment print on baryta paper, 55 × 65 cm, 2018 (#1)



pigment print on baryta paper, 55 × 75 cm, 2018 (#2)



pigment print on baryta paper, 55 × 75 cm, 2018 (#5)



pigment print on baryta paper, 55 × 75 cm, 2018 (#6)

6 Overhead projections

Herbaria are not only repositories of plant specimens but also function as a historical record of botanical exploration. The plant specimen is dried and mounted on a sheet of paper and made available for scientific study, naming and classification. However, the plant itself also resists being

subsumed completely in this rational system of control over nature and its imprint drawn over time on the paper covering and protecting it in the Herbarium speaks to us in a less precise but more evocative voice – in echoes – of its own mysterious conditions.

Surround sound audio, 22 40", 2015 – ongoing



European colonialism in South Africa (and elsewhere) was both preceded and accompanied by expeditions that aimed at charting the territory and classifying its natural resources, in turn paving the way for occupation and exploitation. The supposed discovery and subsequent naming and cataloguing of plants disregarded and obliterated existing indigenous plant names and botanical knowledge and imposed the Linnaean

system of classification and its particular European rationality.

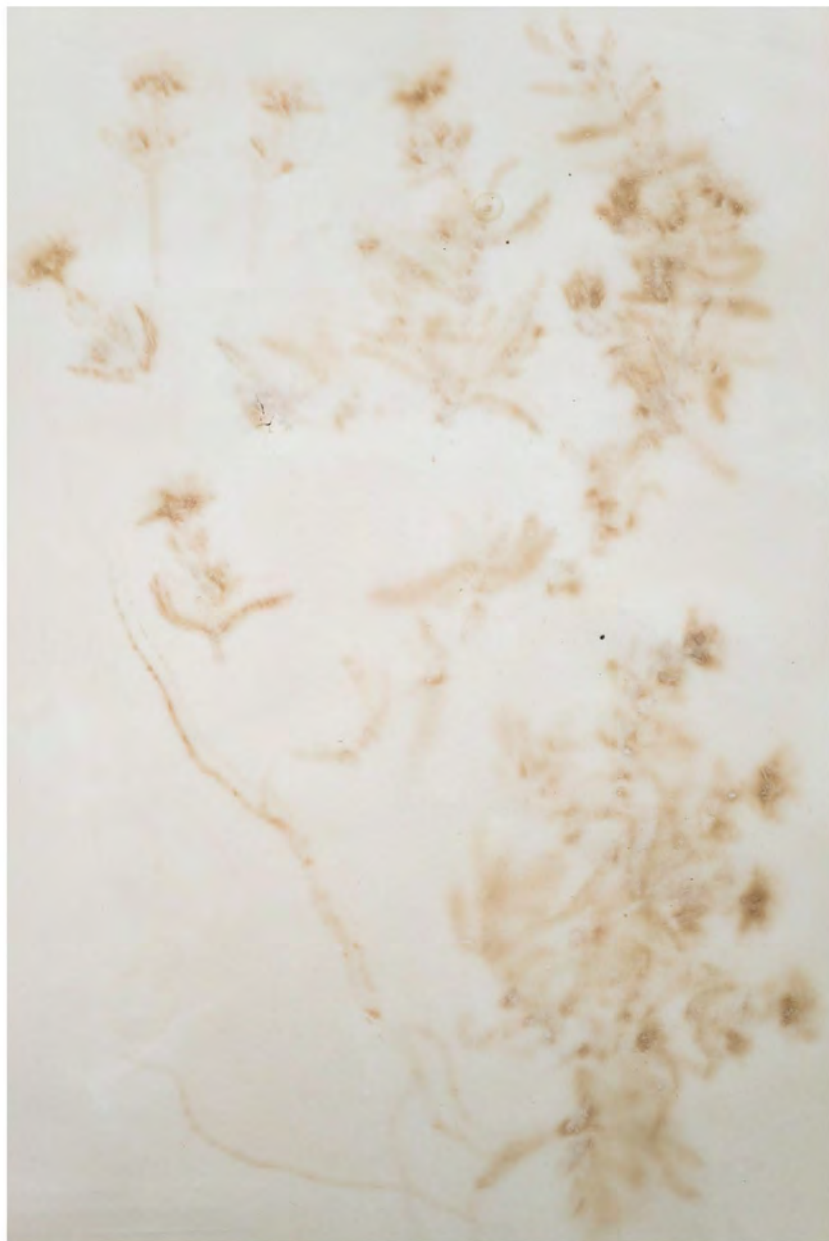
What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name functions as an oral plant dictionary of indigenous South African languages including Khoi, SePedi, SeSotho, SiSwati, SeTswana, xiTsonga, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

8 pigment prints 29 cm x 42 cm



Herbaria are not only repositories of plant specimens but also function as a historical record of botanical exploration. The plant specimen is dried and mounted on a sheet of paper and made available for scientific study, naming and classification. However, the plant itself also resists being

subsumed completely in this rational system of control over nature and its imprint drawn over time on the paper covering and protecting it in the Herbarium speaks to us in a less precise but more evocative voice – in echoes – of its own mysterious conditions.



6 PVC banners, 200 cm x 200 cm

12 archival pigment prints on Hahnemühle German etching paper, 25 cm x 25 cm



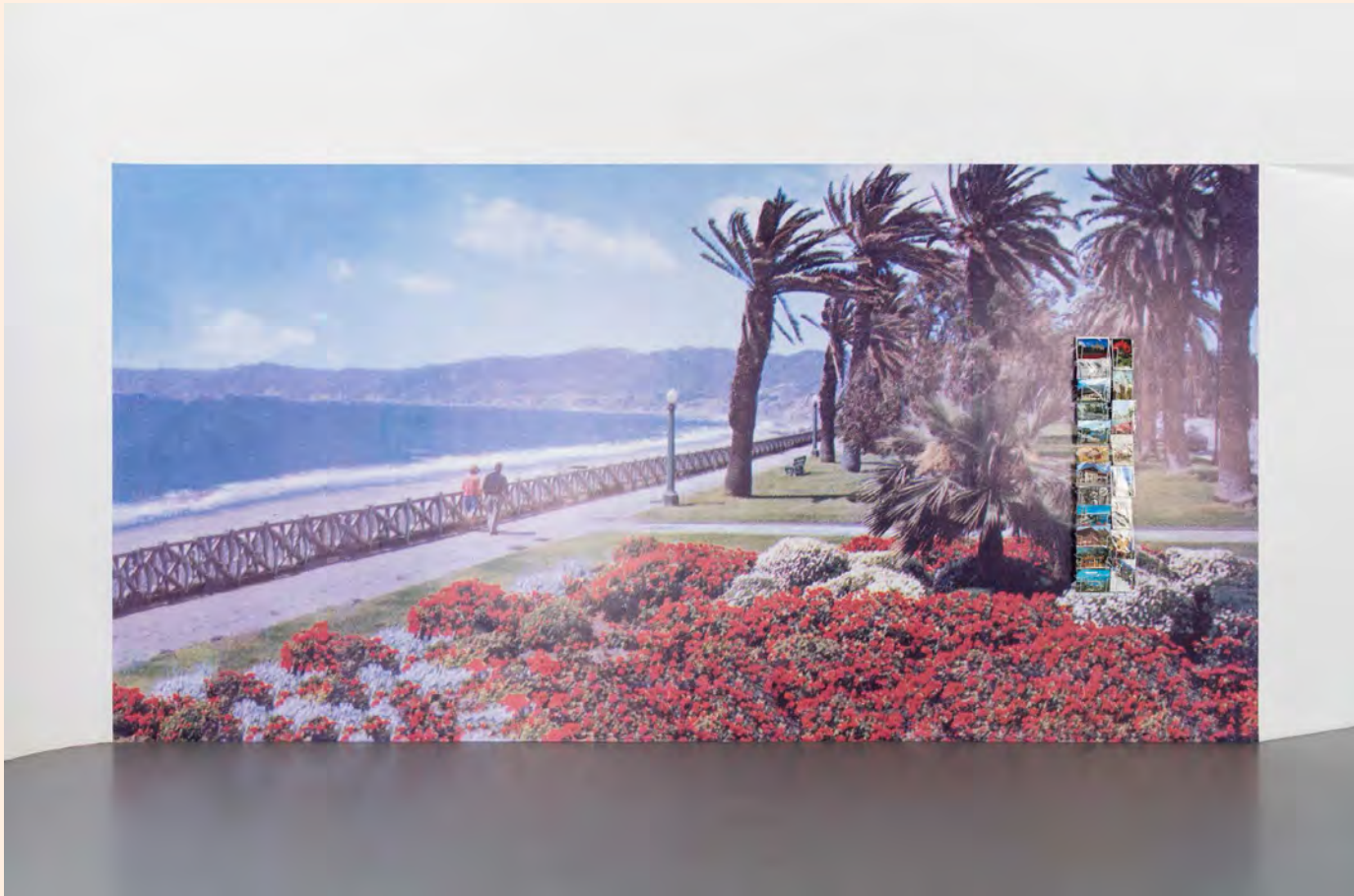
The term ‘muthi’ is used in most indigenous languages in South Africa for traditional medicine. Muthi derives from the Zulu word for tree. Various natural products, such as roots, barks, leaves, bulbs, seeds and fruit are prescribed and prepared by an inyanga, a herbal healer, as muthi.

South Africa is considered a hotspot of botanical diversity: 10% of the world’s plants are found on

less than 2% of the planet’s surface. Around 3000 species of plants are used as medicines in South Africa. Despite this, much less is known and preserved of Africa’s healing history, compared to the healing knowledge of other ancient cultures.

This series of portraits of plants used in South African traditional medicine shows them as sold in bundles in contemporary markets.

Wallpaper, vintage postcards, rack



The bright red geraniums that trail from the balconies of Swiss chalets and clamber up palm trees in California aren't, botanically speaking, geraniums at all, nor are they Swiss or Californian; in fact they are pelargoniums. They were first brought to Europe – and misidentified – after 1652, when the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) established a permanent settlement and a Company Garden at the Cape and started to



explore the surrounding flora to bring back new botanical treasures. Alongside pelargoniums, those discovered included proteas, ericas and many other mainstays of European gardens. By the time the confusion between the two species was resolved, 'African geraniums' had been around for 150 years and British commercial growers and gardeners were reluctant to give up the familiar name.

Concrete plinth with loupe and seed, slide projection with 81 slides, photograph mounted on aluminium/wallpaper image, framed photograph, 2015 – 2017



Nelson Mandela and his co-accused Rivonia trial ANC comrades were imprisoned for 18 years from 1964 to 1982 in a special section for political prisoners at Robben Island prison, off the Atlantic coast in Cape Town. In the prison they founded a garden that was to play an important role during their time there. It was in this garden that the manuscript of Mandela's biography, which was eventually published under the title *Long Walk to Freedom*, was hidden. In the late 1960s, rare yellow

flowering Crane Flowers (*Strelitzia Reginae* / Bird of Paradise Flower) were found at Kirstenbosch, the South African National Botanical Gardens in Cape Town. These native flowers of South Africa are usually orange. A process of selective breeding was started, pollinating yellow flowers with each other by hand. It took almost 20 years to build up stock of seeds of the highly prized yellow *Strelitzia Reginae* – roughly coinciding with the time Mandela was in Prison in Robben Island. In 1994,



after Mandela became the first black president of South Africa, the flower was renamed 'Mandela's Gold'. At Kirstenbosch the grey squirrel that the colonialist Cecil Rhodes brought with him from England and which has naturalised there, will

consume the entire capsule of seeds if unchecked. In order to protect the seeds from this European 'predator' each fertilised flower is enclosed in fine-mesh chicken wire.