



University of
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'Natural Othering' of Plants: human and non-human decoupling in artistic research

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The Happening (2008)
M. Night Shyamalan



Ian Brown *Orchid Unknown*
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Orchid unknown

The focus on plant/human relations, between scientific study and popular culture, allows for a consideration of the othering of nature in documentary and fictional storytelling. The narrative weaves factual accounts and fictional speculation to connect a group of detailed orchid models to a collection of miscellaneous reports related to economic botany and global colonial networks. The use of models allows for a focus on nature's aesthetic value as an anthropocentric trait, embedded in the orchid's commodified social and cultural value. Transformative acts aim to address broader implications of the distinction between 'artificial' and 'natural' and complications arising from separating human and non-human activity.

text and images: Ian Brown

At 2 am, my phone rang, and as I grabbed it, I noticed some missed calls that I must have slept through. It wasn't a number that I recognised. It was George, he sounded strange and flustered, in a way that, from my experience of being in his company, was very much out of character. He said that I needed to return to the herbarium immediately, but couldn't seem to explain why, or perhaps it was because I was not fully awake that I couldn't make sense of what he was saying. The herbarium was an hour away from my house, so I had some time to speculate on a potential reason for George asking me to return. I couldn't come up with anything satisfactory.

I had been meeting with different herbarium staff for just over two weeks and was all set to start interviewing them. I had spoken with George, a taxonomist; Jeff, a conservator; Kate, an archivist; and Lara, a botanical illustrator. The conversations that we had been having had taken up more time than I had expected. As these ongoing conversations continued to offer new lines of enquiry at every turn, I was behind schedule in terms of the filming on that day. George had volunteered to undertake night duty, to keep an eye on the building and its contents (a standard practice), and suggested that I could return in the morning to complete the filming. He said that he could ensure that everything I had set up remained that way.

I initially visited the herbarium to review some documents and meet the staff members who worked there, so that I could conduct interviews about their relationships with plants. I had recently read Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, and Jeff had shown me a set of wax orchid models in the library and archive collections, made by model maker Edith Blackman in 1893. I had set up the wax orchid models on various tables throughout the different herbarium buildings, placing a single LED film light panel in front of each model to photograph them and conduct interviews with staff next to these models. The stories of orchid hunters and their violent activities positioned Orchidaceae as a particularly aggrieved family. They also had distinct physical characteristics that, historically, had been deemed as opportunistic for othering.

I arrived at the front entrance, and George was already there, inside the foyer. There was only a small light turned on at the reception desk behind him, and so I couldn't see his face clearly. He pressed the door release button, and the large glass window of the door slid open. I could see his face more clearly as he turned towards the light, and he looked changed in some way. His usual



The Day of the Triffids (1951)
John Wyndham



The Day of the Triffids (1963) Directed by Steve Sekely and
Freddie Francis

Berlin W,
Mohnenstrasse 21,
den 15. August 1888.



Hochgeehrtester Herr!

Ich habe von den letzten 20 Jahren fast die Hälfte, wissenschaftlich thätig, in Afrika zugebracht und bin vor sechs Monaten von einer grossen Entdeckungsreise in Afrika nach Deutsch-land zurückgekehrt. Von dieser letzten Reise sagt die hochsehende geographische Zeitschrift "Petermanns Mittheilungen" in Jorha, dass sie "eine der wichtigsten Thatfachen der modernen Entdeckungsgeschichte" sei.

Eine Skizze dieser Reise, welche sich zwischen Gold- und Sklavenküste im Süden und Timbuktu im Norden bewegt, lege ich bei. Ich erlaube mir, um gefällige Rücksendung derselben zu bitten.

Ich will jetzt eine neue Reise nach der Gold- und Sklavenküste und den Hinterländern desselben unternehmen und Ende August oder Anfang September Europa verlassen.

Wolfe & Co. 1. Left News amongst the
black in letter to Wolffman in Berlin.

Ian Brown *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum* 1 (2025)
Photograph





Ian Brown *The Longest Living* (2025)
Single channel video with sound

Ian Brown *Angraecum sesquipedale* (2025)
Photograph



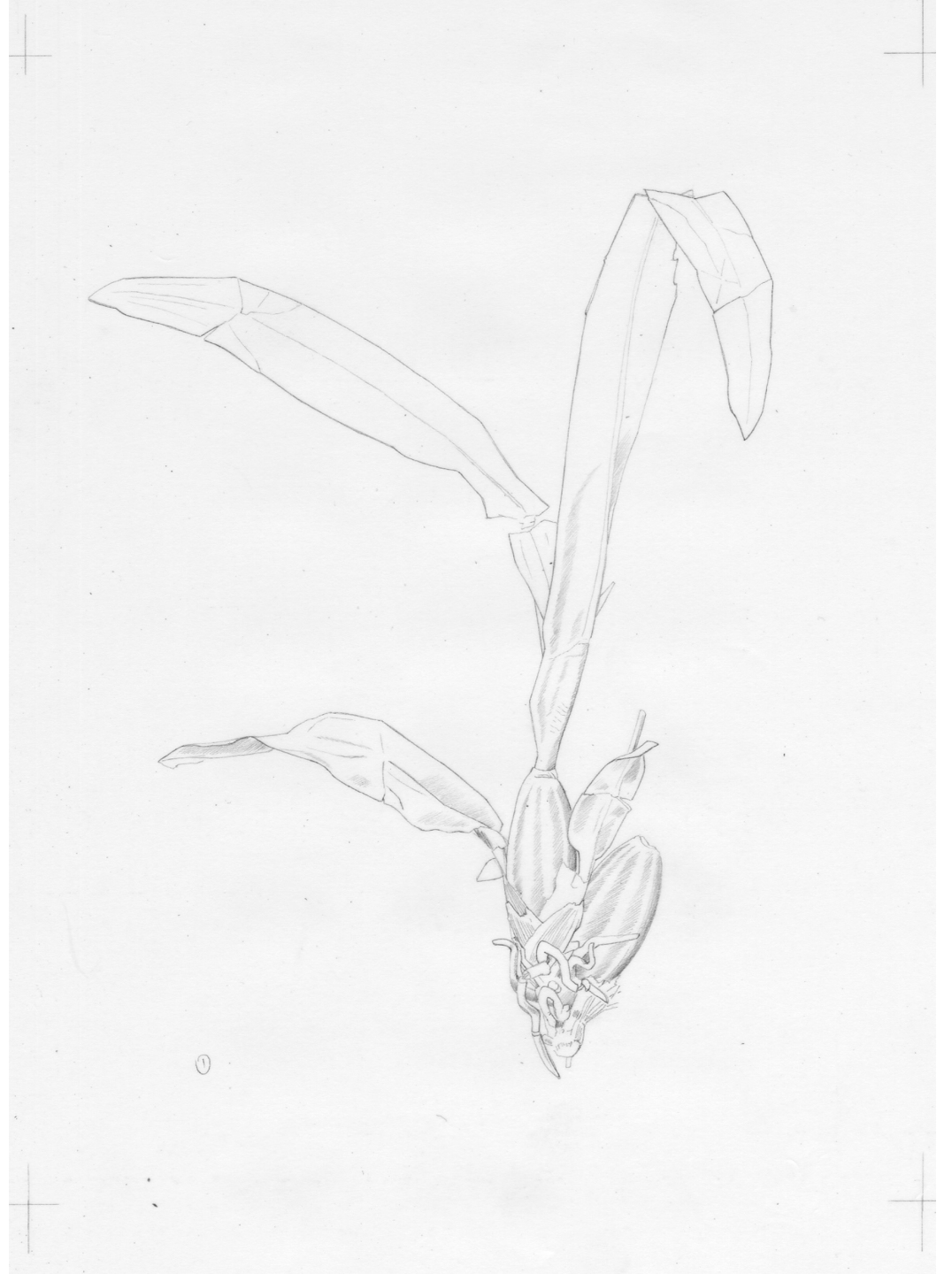
Ian Brown *Coryanthes gerlachiana* (2025)
Photograph



Ian Brown and L.T. Smith *Orchid Unknown 1* (2025)
Drawing on Paper



Ian Brown and L.T. Smith *Orchid Unknown 1* (2025)
Drawing on Paper



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Ian Brown and L.T. Smith *Orchid Unknown* (2025)
Drawing on Paper



Ian Brown and L.T. Smith *Orchid Unknown* (2025)
Drawing on Paper



Ian Brown *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum* 2 (2025)
Photograph





The Day of the Triffids (1963) Directed by Steve Sekely and Freddie Francis

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