

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

confident and positive demeanor had been replaced by something more confused and concerned. As I walked into the building, I asked him what had happened, and he just asked me to follow him. We moved through the dark corridors, George leading and holding a torch, as only a minimal number of lights in the building were kept on at night. As we arrived at the first herbarium room, I could see, through the window in the door, that my large LED film light panel was turned on. I had noticed a hum as we walked through the corridors, but had assumed it was from the internal heating and ventilation system, which maintained each area at the correct humidity and temperature levels to preserve the plant samples and documents effectively. As he opened the door, the sound became painfully loud: I initially didn't notice it, but the wax orchid model of *Angraecum sesquipedale* was no longer on the table where I had carefully placed it. It was seemingly hovering in mid-air.

One of the orchid models that Jeff had shown me at our first meeting was particularly intriguing to me. It had no base plate, where the name of the species of orchid would be displayed, and it had no modelling of its flower (inflorescence), only its leaves and roots. This 'orchid unknown' had the same value as the other models in the collection, as, despite being broken and incomplete, it was still part of the collection and was treated as having equal value. It seemed to signify something. The archive staff were unsure why these models had been commissioned. They had ruled out any practical use for the activities that took place there. In an institution focused on the act of searching, this was a dead end.

We had both instinctively covered our ears as we had entered the room, and the sound resembled a loud test tone or something that a synthesiser would generate. George, who had turned off his torch and placed it on a desk, passed me some ear defenders and put another set on himself. As it was difficult to communicate, George gestured for me to move closer. As we got closer, I could see that the table had been moved from below the *Angraecum sesquipedale*, and George indicated that *he* had done this, presumably to see how it was apparently floating. It became apparent, as we drew even closer, that the sound did not seem to be emanating directly from *Angraecum sesquipedale* itself, but rather from around it, with the plant at the sonic epicenter. It was confusing as it felt as if the sound was being drawn to it whilst also being generated by it. It appeared that the objects in the room were vibrating, or being vibrated, and this was generating sound that was reverberating back towards the *Angraecum sesquipedale*. We stood there for some time, just looking and listening. I assumed that George was giving me the chance to contemplate this experience in the same way that he had obviously done some time earlier. As I looked closely, I noticed that the base plate of the model was no longer present, and tried to indicate with my hands what I wanted to alert George to. He seemed to understand my hand movements and then pointed to the far end of the room. Jeff had just entered the room from the far end, the end that was closest to where the collection of orchid models was stored. He was also wearing ear defenders and presumably had received a call from George, but had arrived some time earlier than I had. He was holding one of the white, corrugated plastic containers in which the models were stored. These containers were originally designed for transportation and had fabric ties attached to the inside to secure the models in place. As Jeff got closer, he placed the container on one of the large wooden tables that ran through the space. He opened



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Angraecum sesquipedale, photograph, 2025, © Ian Brown

the box and, with his back to us, blocking our view of the contents, he took out a wax orchid model and turned to face us, model in hand. It was the *Angraecum sesquipedale* model. The same model that Jeff had given me earlier, and that I had placed on the table in this room. I looked at Jeff, and he nodded, then I looked at George. He moved over to another table and picked up a green box file. He opened it and showed me an empty sample page and a botanical drawing of an *Angraecum sesquipedale*. He looked back at me and nodded with a calm but serious expression on his face.

As I had left all my recording equipment in this room, I spotted the folded-up tripod and camera bag in the corner, where I had left them. I pointed at them and then moved over to that area. I quickly erected the tripod and attached the camera to its top, then, after briefly looking at Jeff and George, moved it to the space directly in front of the *Angraecum sesquipedale*. As I did so, a second tone could be faintly heard coming from a different part of the building. I don't know whether this was new or had just grown louder, but we all looked at each other to convey a shared recognition of this change in our perceived soundscape. I gestured towards the end of the room that Jeff had entered from, and we all walked to the other end and out through the door.

In the corridor, beyond the room, we took off our ear defenders, and George said he knew which room that was. Clearly, this was new to him also, and he was only aware of the *Angraecum sesquipedale* in the room in which we had just been. The sound from the herbarium room we had just left suddenly stopped, and we all looked back through the window in the door. We couldn't see anything. It was pitch black. I opened the door, and we walked back towards the other side of the room again, aware that the newer sound was still audible from the different location. As we approached the area we had previously been in, George located the torch he had placed on the table and moved it around the space, settling on the area where the *Angraecum sesquipedale* had been. The film light panel was still there but was not emitting any light, and the *Angraecum sesquipedale* was no longer floating in front of it. We looked around but could not see where it had moved to. We all had the same thought and started to move towards the source of the new sound again, first at a normal walking pace and then in a more hurried manner, until we were moving through the building at a pace, following George, torch in hand. The beam of light bounced around as we ran, creating a much more erratic sense of movement and confusion than there would have been ordinarily. I still wasn't very familiar with the building's layout, so I wasn't entirely sure where we were going, but I just followed Jeff and George trustingly. As we turned a corner, we bunched up closely, and I knocked into a large box. A considerable number of large black seeds were scattered across the whole floor just ahead of us. With the movement of the torch, the seeds appeared to move in a strange collective way until we stopped, and the torchlight became still. The scattered seeds ahead of us blocked our way, and we stared at each other and the seeds, momentarily unsure of what to do. I had a sense that they were a threat of some sort, though I wouldn't have been able to explain why. I suspected that Jeff and George were more mindful of their value as natural artefacts within the herbarium collection. The torch dropped from George's hand, and the bouncing torchlight meant that the seeds looked again like a moving mass of objects. In the context of what we had just experienced, this seemed plausible.

In the herbarium's collection of miscellaneous reports, I came across a typed account of a locust swarm that occurred in Accra in 1875. The report was written by Sir William Brandford Griffith, the British colonial governor of what was, at that time, called the Gold Coast. It described the movement and destruction of the locusts throughout a particular day. It had occurred to me that the imagery of this movement and destruction could echo colonial activity itself – the occupation of land and the consumption of its crops, the commodification of people and natural resources. These grasshoppers, responding to climate conditions, transform into swarms of locusts and, in order to survive, as a newly formed mass population, strip the land of its vegetation.



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Coryanthes gerlachiana, photograph, 2025, © Ian Brown

As I looked at the black seeds, they reminded me of the swarm momentarily at rest, or at least more stationary whilst feeding. I thought about Gottlob Krause, the German linguist and botanist, whose communications with the herbarium had taken place in the same year as the swarm account and were included in the same bound volume within the collection of miscellaneous reports. The letters by and about Krause were very particular. He was offering samples of peanuts in exchange for funds to extend his journey across what was, at that time, German Colonial African territory. It became clear, when reading the communications, that the colonial governors and government employees were suspicious of Krause, and this was underpinned by con-

versations between British and German Colonial officials. Who exactly was Krause, and why were they so suspicious of him? When I met George, there was an openness and an enjoyment of storytelling on his part in particular. More recently, when I asked him whether it was true that there were a large number of peanut species but that only one variant was selected for mass production and consumption, he confirmed this. Having had this validated, I confidently announced, as someone with a nut allergy, that if they had only selected another peanut species, I might not have been allergic. He replied dryly, "Or you might have been more allergic".

Without being aware of it, I had said "Krause" out loud, and Jeff and George had both looked at me, unable to figure out why I had uttered that word. Gottlob Krause was not a particularly familiar figure, and I wouldn't have expected them to know who he was. Crucially, he was an anti-colonialist, and his botanical research had been prevented from being published as a consequence of him not effectively supporting the nation's colonial efforts. The sound from the other room, which we were trying to reach, suddenly and momentarily increased in volume, and the seeds all slowly rattled as they moved to one side. Jeff didn't dwell too much on the strange occurrence, grabbed the torch that George had dropped, and started to make his way towards that second sound. George and I followed, though more outwardly alarmed by the autonomous movement of the seeds, and we quickened our pace again until we reached the entrance to a different herbarium room. The doors to this room had no windows, so Jeff slowly opened the door, and we were met with a view which included a film light panel and a *Coryanthes gerlachiana*. It was positioned higher than the first, as I had originally placed it on a stool on top of a table, given that its form suggested a different type of composition in the space.

We all took the ear defenders from around our necks and placed them over our ears. The pitch was higher in this room, and it seemed louder, although the higher frequency may have resulted in this perception. We stared at it for a few seconds, and then, as I recalled that I had left the camera equipment in the first herbarium, I indicated that I was going to go and collect it. I pointed to the torch, and Jeff passed it to me. I left the room fast. I rushed along the corridors, dancing torchlight leading my way. I ran past the subdued seed swarm and turned down the next corridor on the right, running as fast as my asthmatic lungs could take. I opened a door and entered a familiar room, containing large botanical prints, and knew instantly that I must have taken a wrong turn. There was a light on in the archive room behind where the prints were displayed, and I saw the shadow of a figure move. In this current context, I felt alarmed until I saw that it was Kate. She waved, despite being very surprised that I was here, and moved out of sight towards the door. She opened the door, greeted me as warmly as ever, and then asked why I was here in the middle of the night. I garbled an explanation of sorts and asked her to come with me. I went back on myself and tried to find my way back to the seed swarm, knowing that I could recalibrate myself from that position. I was getting panicky and was struggling to find my bearings. I took a hunch and turned right again at a different junction and recognised that I was at the doors of the first herbarium room, but on the near side where I had first entered with George. I entered the room, and Kate followed. I explained that I needed to get my equipment, along with a composed but brief account of what had happened. Whilst packing up the equipment to take with me, I kept an eye out for the missing *Angraecum*

sesquipedale, which I still could not locate. This rendered what I had told Kate particularly implausible. The fact that the wax orchid model in the container was also missing, fabric straps open and drooping, did potentially indicate to Kate that there was some truth to my story, however. The concern on my face as I saw this certainly provided her with evidence that I, at least, believed in what I had told her. I grabbed the equipment, and we left the room once again at the far end, figuring I would be able to find my way from there. My instincts were correct, and we did pass the seed swarm on route to the second herbarium room. My heart was beating fast, from our urgent pace of movement as we entered the room. I had forgotten to put my ear defenders on, and it was only as I went to put them on that I noticed that the sound had already ceased. The room was dark, so I turned the torch back on and pointed it in the direction of where the *Coryanthes gerlachiana* was. I could see the unlit film light panel but not the *Coryanthes gerlachiana*. I could also not see Jeff or George. The room appeared completely empty, aside from the walls of closed cupboards that contained various box files and the empty tables that ran through the space.

We walked through the room to the far end and opened the door. I could hear a faint but recognisable drone once again. For the first time, Kate had a real sense that there might have been some truth to what I had told her. This time, the sound was lower in frequency and harder to pinpoint a direction for. I assumed that Jeff and George had left the second room for a third and possibly had answers to what must have happened to the *Coryanthes gerlachiana* and *Angraecum sesquipedale*. I was eager to catch up with them and find out what they knew. As I had spent quite some time with Kate yesterday morning, looking at the library and archives she had introduced me to, she came by while in the building to check on how things were going throughout the day. I asked her if she could remember how to get to the other room I had set up, and she said she knew.

As we arrived in another herbarium room, Jeff and George were once again standing, ear protectors on, this time looking at a *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum* floating in mid-air. The tone we could hear was different, and this time it was quieter. Perhaps it had changed in volume since Jeff and George had put on their ear protectors, but when they saw Kate and me able to be in the room without needing any protection, they removed theirs. This was a much smaller room, a later addition to the building with a more contemporary feel. George asked Kate if anything had been happening in the main library and archives area. She was silent, transfixed by *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum*. No one interrupted her gaze, but after some time, she said calmly that she hadn't noticed anything, but that she had been inside the sealed main archive space for some time. When Jeff asked her why she was here so late, she mentioned the collection of miscellaneous reports and that she was behind on preparing the Gold Coast volume for digitisation, and that it was the last one that needed to be collected tomorrow. She was curious to know whether Jeff had collected the wax orchid model that a colleague had been examining. He said he hadn't and asked which one it was. It was the damaged model, which had no base plate and was therefore referred to as the 'orchid unknown'.

In my first meetings with George, I had mentioned that I was interested in how plant/human relationships were depicted in popular culture. We had a consensus on the potential for novels, television series, and films to trivialise this relationship and undermine the seriousness of the work un-



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Bulbophyllum grandiflorum 1, photograph, 2025 © Ian Brown

dertaken at the herbarium. The novel that I referred to was written in a Cold War context, and, in particular, in the context of Trofim Lysenko's claims for new agricultural techniques in the Soviet Union. I was interested, therefore, in the 'alieness' of plants being utilised as a conduit for the othering of nations and ideologies, manifested through the anthropomorphic qualities of the strangeness of plants as a threat. We also discussed how the process of

understanding is built on the bridging of the gap between plants and humans by framing our experience of plants through entertainment technologies. The speeding up of plant growth, allowing us to see how it changes within seconds, relates to the medium of the moving image itself and its potential to compress time. I discussed this as creating a potentially problematic anthropocentric context. I'm not sure George necessarily agreed, but I considered that the technological process of stop-frame or high frame rate filming resulted in an experience of plants that could be regarded as a disassociating one.

I turned the camera on and finally had the chance to film what we had witnessed. I pressed the record button, and, as I was concerned about how much power was left in the battery, I immediately walked across the room towards the camera bag. I noticed that I was unsteady in my movements and, after I made my way towards the bag and reached to grab it, it jerked away from me with a surprising amount of force. As the bag was not properly zipped up, I could see the contents start to spill out onto the floor. If I were to be honest, I wouldn't say that I am entirely immune to clumsiness, and this was no surprise. What was surprising was that despite the force I had created, the bag didn't move far away from me, and the items were falling out of it as if the room had suddenly decreased its gravity. The spare batteries, battery charger, lens cleaner, and other items were falling as if in slow motion. I could see that we were all aware that this was happening. Jeff moved to grab something, I think to test out what he was seeing in my actions for himself, and knocked over a file, seemingly finding it difficult to grab the item as much as I had the camera bag. Sheets of paper floated to the floor, but in an elegant and beautifully slow manner. It was so gradual in fact that Jeff was able to gather up all of the separate pieces of paper before it had fallen more than a few centimetres. This accelerated speed, in relation to the objects around us, was both unnerving and difficult to adjust to; however, due to an experiential excitement, it also reduced the fear that we had been experiencing as a result of the unusual encounters we had been having. It was the first time since I had arrived back at the herbarium that I had smiled or noticed anyone else doing so. We had collectively clocked this, and communally we shared a moment of pleasure. This pleasure arrived with a sense of humour, an enjoyment of our new abilities, and a control over the physical world that we had never experienced before. What broke that moment of joy was the subtle change in the sound we had become accustomed to. We looked at each other and then at *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum*. Its inflorescence was moving. It turned its petals towards an area adjacent to the herbarium room. This was also the nearest location that let natural light in during the day. The only thing I knew about this area was that Lara often worked here, and I had met her here previously when she was explaining the processes used in the production of scientific botanical illustrations.

Lara had been producing drawings of the orchid unknown, and as we approached her desk, we could see that they were all laid out in order. I had seen the first one of these pencil drawings before. I had met with Lara two weeks ago, and she had shown me her study of the broken model. Lara was interested in exploring particular contexts of the relationship between plants and their depictions through drawing and scientific botanical illustrations. She had produced many scientific botanical illustrations for the herbarium, for when new species were published for scrutiny. I had imagined that the requirement to find new species and name them, as a

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Orchid Unknown 5 and 6, pencil on paper,
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taxonomist, had a significant degree of competitiveness. George and I had discussed the practice of naming new plant species after those who had 'discovered' them. What I didn't know was that there was another practice, where taxonomists' rivalry was embedded in the naming of plants. I was intrigued to find out that a new plant species considered to be particularly ugly may be named by one taxonomist after a rival.

Outside of this work, she had produced life-size drawings and paintings of the largest and smallest water lilies in the world and spent time studying the flowering of the recently discovered giant lily at night, the only time of day when this occurred. Creating drawings of a damaged model of a plant was in keeping with her outlook, which tended to welcome the unusual. Alongside the first drawing that I had previously seen were several others, all with a sequential number placed in a circle on the lower left of the page. These were more provisional drawings rather than the complete drawings that she would generally produce, where the outlining of the form and the characteristics of the damage in the paper and wax could be revealed. Through the series of drawings, the damage diminished, and the form of the plant changed as a consequence. Leaves raised where once they had drooped along the edge of a crack. George and Kate picked up a drawing each, being careful not to knock any of them onto the floor, examining them closely. As we all looked, we discussed the changes depicted in the drawings.

While we were discussing the drawings, the sound from the herbarium next to us suddenly stopped. Kate, George, and I walked over to the entrance to that room, noting that our movements were more natural, and peered in. It was dark, and we didn't need to go inside as we knew that the *Bulbophyllum grandiflorum* would not be there now. Jeff was so sure of this that he didn't move from Lara's desk at all. Instead, he called our attention to something else on the desk that we hadn't noticed. Next to this sequence of drawings was a green card folder. Jeff was the first to notice this and opened it up, flat on the desk. Inside the folder was a note stuck to the left leaf and a further drawing. This drawing, unlike the others, was highly detailed and resolved. Not only resolved as a drawing, but also of the object being depicted. The final drawing was of a complete plant form; it lacked its inflorescence still, but everything else about it was complete. Jeff picked up the note and peeled it away from the folder.

Lara had left a note for Kate. Kate picked it up and read it. "Kate, I've left the model in the archives room for you to give back to Jeff, as discussed, but I really need to talk to him as soon as he gets in tomorrow, L" We all looked at each other, concerned. Kate was about to speak when we saw the light turn back on in the adjacent room suddenly. A split second later, the silence was interrupted by a sound not only emanating from that room but seemingly across the whole building. The sound was thick and complex, a mix of all of the tones that we had heard in the three different herbarium rooms that we had been in. But it was more than that. There were clearly new, additional tones forming an intricate, layered, and harmonious drone.

There were more of them now.

Ian Brown is an artist, researcher and Professor of Fine Art at University of Staffordshire, UK. His research explores human relationships with the invented world and the natural world, with a focus on the commodification of nature and the mediation of these relationships through forms of popular culture. As part of Common Culture (with David Campbell and Mark Durden), Brown's research investigates how contemporary social identity is constructed through rituals of consumption.



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