

Seeds: Containers of a World to Come

KEMPER
ART MUSEUM

Seeds: Containers of a World to Come

February 21–July 28, 2025



Emmi Whitehorse, *Vernal Pool*, 2020. Mixed media on canvas, 51 × 39½ in. (129.5 × 100.3 cm). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Broughton.

At a moment when ecological concerns are becoming increasingly urgent, *Seeds: Containers of a World to Come* brings into dialogue work by ten international artists whose research-based practices are defined by sustained inquiry into plant–human–land relations. For Shiraz Bayjoo, Carolina Caycedo, Juan William Chávez, Beatriz Cortez, Ellie Irons, Kapwani Kiwanga, Jumana Manna, Anne Percoco, Cecilia Vicuña, and Emmi Whitehorse, the seed is the kernel, both literally and metaphorically, of their investigations into issues of fragility, preservation, and possibility in the face of the global climate crisis.

Together the artworks on view suggest the seed as a timely means to address existential matters. Seeds are the first link in the food chain, the embodiment of biological diversity and cultural heritage, and the repository of life's future evolution. Cultivated by humans for millennia, seed varieties carry with them local histories as well as narratives of migration and survival, bridging cultures, territories, and time periods. The diversity of seeds and associated ecological relations are at risk due in part to the development of high-yield crops and monocultures since the mid-twentieth century. The loss of seed varieties is symptomatic of broader developments in the Anthropocene, the name given to our current period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on the environment.

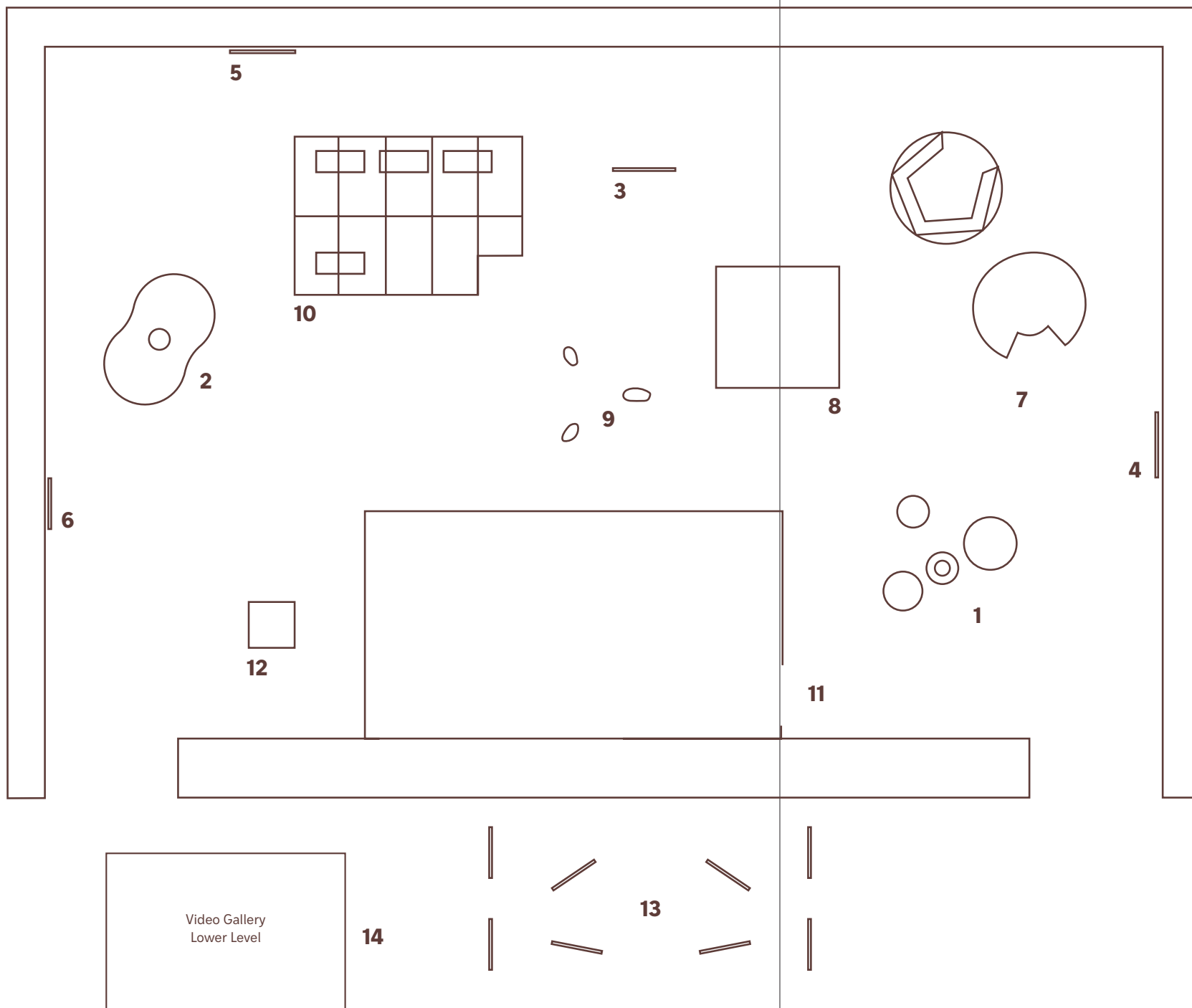
Working with and from a multiplicity of geographical and cultural contexts—both local and global—the artists in the exhibition create captivating sculptures, films, installations, and paintings that range from abstract, to speculative, to documentary. They share an anticolonial perspective critical of extractive capitalism, calling for more expansive ideas of being in the world anchored in reciprocity and care. Through these artworks, we travel from community gardens to global seed storage vaults; we engage Indigenous knowledge systems and plant-cultivation technologies; and we celebrate feminist care practices. This exhibition aims to spark active and imaginative responses through encounters with dynamic artworks that reflect on and reframe our understanding of current environmental challenges and our connections to the natural world.

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Kapwani Kiwanga

French and Canadian, b. 1978

**Vivarium: Apomixis*, 2020

PVC, steel, paint, and MDF, 120½ × 89¾ × 70⅞ in.
(306 × 228 × 180 cm)

Vivarium: Cytomixis, 2020

PVC, steel, and paint, 84⅝ × 109⅓ × 63¾ in.
(215 × 279 × 162 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin

Kapwani Kiwanga's biomorphic, inflatable sculptures from her *Vivarium* series reimagine the nineteenth-century Wardian case, a type of portable greenhouse. Named after Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, a London physician, the glass cases enabled the transport of live botanical subjects across the globe, impacting ecosystems worldwide. The two works on view here are made with PVC, a type of plastic, and contain metal structures for real or imagined plants to grow on. Unlike the technology of control and displacement represented by the Wardian case, these sculptures do not isolate and encase plants in an artificial microclimate. Rather, they exist as flexible supports that communicate with the surrounding environment.

Kiwanga's creative rethinking of the Wardian case, a historical model linked to extraction and dislocation, is characteristic of her ongoing interest in looking for new ways around or through systems that harm individuals and society. She describes her works, broadly, as a series of "exit strategies." They are, as she states, "moments that allow individuals to think about different ways of being in the world or with each other . . . and to become aware of how the way in which we relate to one another and our environments is destructive."¹ The subtitles given to the *Vivariums*—apomixis and cytomixis—refer to so-called asexual forms of reproduction in plants. Kiwanga's knowing appropriation of these scientific terms, which derive from an eighteenth-century botanical system shaped by normative ideas of human sexuality premised on binary sex, suggests ways of being otherwise in a nonbinary natural world.² These sculptural works thus hold and defend a more fluid sense of possibility and becoming.



From an art historical perspective, Kiwanga's blow-ups are reminiscent of inflatable architecture of the postwar period and the associated techno-optimism of the space age. Inflatables emerged in the 1960s as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with established cultural norms about life, work, and society. The "back to the future" aesthetic of the *Vivariums* underscores the artist's fluid understanding of history and the interfoldings of time. Her works open up a space for reflection and speculative thinking while simultaneously reinforcing how our participation in reordering nature to meet our needs is both life-giving and detrimental.

1 Kapwani Kiwanga, quoted in Salomé Gómez-Upegui, "The Nature of Archives," *Harvard Magazine* website (November–December 2022), <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2022/10/montage-kapwani-kiwanga>.

2 See, for example, Lee Davis, "Breaking the Binary: Celebrating Diversity in Nature," Kew Royal Botanic Gardens website, October 26, 2023, <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/breaking-the-binary>.

Kapwani Kiwanga

French and Canadian, b. 1978

***Seedbank*, 2020**

Wool weave with glazed ceramics, 98⁷/₁₆ × 49³/₁₆ in.

(250 × 125 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin

Kapwani Kiwanga's large, woven wool tapestry *Seedbank* foregrounds the role of seeds in repressed histories of human struggle for liberation. The coarsely textured patchwork of mixed earth tones recalls different layers and colors of soil. It hangs from the ceiling at eye level, inviting viewers to walk around and explore all sides of it. Stitched into the weave of the fabric are ceramic replicas of African rice, or *Oryza glaberrima*.

Seedbank was inspired, in part, by oral histories from the Surinamese Maroon community that intertwine the transatlantic slave trade and vernacular botany. These stories emphasize the agency of African people living under the condition of slavery who enabled their own survival and the survival of their descendants, both on and beyond the colonial Dutch plantations in Suriname. Kiwanga's woven tapestry contributes to the transmission and dissemination of resistance narratives, with each grain acting as "a tribute to individual resilience."¹ Through her precise combination of chosen materials with a history of inventive disruption and self-preservation, she asks how we might confront, acknowledge, and rethink violent oppression—to find ways out, to imagine other potential realities.

1 Glenn Adamson, "Escape Velocity," in *Kapwani Kiwanga: Off-Grid*, ed. Massimiliano Gioni and Madeline Weisburg (New Museum, 2022), 35.



Emmi Whitehorse

Diné, b. 1957

Green Wood, 1996

Oil, colored pencil, charcoal, and pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 39½ × 51 in. (100.3 × 129.5 cm)

The John and Susan Horseman Collection, Courtesy of the Horseman Foundation

Vernal Pool, 2020

Mixed media on canvas, 51 × 39½ in. (129.5 × 100.3 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Broughton

***Geographic Rhythm, 2021**

Mixed media on canvas, 39½ × 51 in. (100.3 × 129.5 cm)

Collection of Deborah Beckmann and Jacob Kotzubei

Emmi Whitehorse's abstract paintings are evocative of changing environmental sensations and steeped in the Diné (Navajo) philosophy of *Hózhó*, seeking harmony of life, mind, and body with nature. Her paintings “tell the story of knowing land over time” and of “being completely, microcosmically within a place,” she says.¹ It is the landscapes of her ancestral homelands in the Southwest, specifically the area around Whitehorse Lake in New Mexico, where she grew up, and in Santa Fe, where she lives now, that shape her artistic practice.

Included in the exhibition are three paintings that span twenty-five years of Whitehorse's career, each characterized by her signature chromatic fields through which the artist registers passing sensory perceptions and subtle fluctuations in light and space. The color is applied using oil stick that the artist grates by hand and rubs across the surface of large pieces of paper. Whitehorse then draws on top of the color fields with pastel and graphite, populating her compositions with diverse organic forms that reference seed pods, plants, grains of pollen, ponds, water whirls, and topographical features such as hills alongside elemental shapes and gestural markings that delineate movement—of light, wind, animals, and spores alike.

Geographic Rhythm, for example, is saturated with a vaporous coloration that shifts across yellows and golds, recalling seasonal changes and patterns while imparting an overall dreamlike atmosphere. The clusters of dots, circles, and half-circles derive from observations in nature as well as from memory, marking



movements of plants and animals that are indicative of the reciprocity of life and a nonlinear progression of time. The markings are specific and abstract at the same time, laying out a system of notation that is decisively multisensorial and multidimensional—an effect amplified by the fact that Whitehorse continually reorients her compositions as she works, making distinctions such as “top” and “bottom” irrelevant. Together, the different elements give visual expression to an experience of time and space set apart from the order of linear perspective and the Western epistemology for which it stands.

1 Emmi Whitehorse, quoted in RoseMary Diaz, “Emmi Whitehorse Paints the Harmonies of Her Homelands,” National Gallery of Art website, July 25, 2024, <https://www.nga.gov/stories/west-to-east/emmi-whitehorse-celebrations-of-natures-designs.html>.

Beatriz Cortez

Salvadoran, b. 1970

Chultún El Semillero, 2021

Steel, plastic, paper, soil, corn, beans, amaranth, quinoa, morro gourd, achiote seeds, sorghum, potatoes, chayote/huisquil, and ceiba plant, approx. 60 × 84 × 204 in. (152.4 × 213.4 × 518.2 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council
(Los Angeles / Mexico City)

Beatriz Cortez's *Chultún El Semillero* comprises two large, hand-built steel structures connected by a narrow tunnel. The forms evoke futuristic space capsules while also recalling ancient underground structures called chultunes. Made by the Maya of the lower Yucatán Peninsula, chultunes are huge storage vessels carved into the rocky ground that were used as cisterns for drinking water and as food cellars. With her sculpture, Cortez creates a speculative chultún, preserving seeds for the humans of the future.

One structure, surrounded by grow lights and functioning as a living garden, is filled with edible plants cultivated by Indigenous peoples of the Americas for millennia, including amaranth, black beans, corn, quinoa, squash, and sorghum, as well as sacred and medicinal plants, including a ceiba tree. The garden refers to the knowledge and technological advances of ancestral peoples in plant cultivation and nutrition. Cortez also draws inspiration from NASA's ongoing series of experiments aimed at growing plants in space, conducted at the International Space Station. In the controlled atmosphere of the museum, organic processes become a disruptive factor, and the health of these plants requires constant care and attention, introducing a layer of necessary participation on the part of museum staff.

The other structure, a futuristic pod the size of a one-person space capsule, includes a shelving system that holds a series of containers filled with seeds and a welded steel boulder. The inscription on the boulder was developed by the artist in collaboration with her mathematician brother, Ricardo Cortez, and is based on writing from Mayan stone carvings and codices, specifying instructions for the future handling and distribution of the seeds. The seeds offer a note of hope—the potential of a world to come—as well as a living connection to a world predating modern colonialism. “I’m not looking at ancient times as the past,” states Cortez. “I’m looking at the past in a more rhizomatic way as something that continues to be alive. And I am seeking to celebrate ancient peoples’ knowledges, but also because I want to imagine that Indigenous people survive at the end and that there is some way in which the future is not completely colonial.”¹



1 “Beatriz Cortez’s Cosmic Art Transcends Time & Space,” Artbound: Arte Cósmico, November 24, 2022, by KCET–PBS SoCal, YouTube, 5:27 min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTzosDB6MmU>.

Juan William Chávez

American, b. 1977

Survival Blanket (Decolonize the Garden: From Seeds to Bees), 2024

Mixed media, 51 × 72 × 72 in. (129.5 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

This commissioned artwork is the newest edition in Juan William Chávez's ongoing series of *Survival Blankets*, floor-based assemblages that typically include an assortment of plants, seeds, and other objects arranged atop a Mylar blanket. For this iteration Chávez includes a small textile that reads "Decolonize the Garden / Seeds to Bees," which sets the intention for the work. Additionally, a monitor plays edited footage from a workshop for local K–12 educators that the artist conducted in August 2024 at his Northside Workshop (NSW) in collaboration with Rico Rose, a St. Louis–based, Indigenous (Diné) community member and horticulturalist specializing in native plants and seed saving.¹ The NSW is both pedagogical and aesthetic, attuning visitors to the subtle temporalities and collaborative, sculptural dimensions of garden cultivation and holistic land management.

The relationship between the NSW and Chávez's artistic practice is symbiotic. The garden represents for him a *huaca*—a place or object that is revered, typically a monument of some kind or a natural location, in the Quechuan languages of South America—while his *Survival Blankets* function like a *mesa*—a portable version of the *huaca*, around which people may assemble and commune. Using reflective Mylar, a material associated with contemporary migration, as the ground for these *mesas*, Chávez transforms his itinerant gardens into portals for creative placemaking and imaginative modes of present and future survival. A zine produced by Chávez and Rose, exploring the impacts of colonialism on land management in the United States, is available for visitors to take.

¹ Run by Chávez in Old North St. Louis, the NSW is an art nonprofit organization that educates about the importance of bees and pollinators to our food, ecology, and community. It is a collaboration of the Old North Saint Louis Restoration Group, the Kranzberg Arts Foundation, and Chávez; see <http://northsideworkshop.org/about/>.



Juan William Chávez, *Decolonize the Garden: From Seeds to Bees* (zine detail and workshop images). Workshop presenters: Rico Rose, Juan William Chávez, Saundi McClain-Kloeckener, and Kiersten Torrez. Courtesy of the artist.

Carolina Caycedo

Colombian, b. 1978

Ñañay Kculli ~ S'oam Bawi Wenag ~ Kiik K'uum, 2024

Eastern hard maple, Northwestern red alder, Brazilian purple-heart wood, natural fibers, and steel, $24\frac{1}{8} \times 21\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{13}{16}$ in. ($61.3 \times 55.6 \times 22.4$ cm); $21\frac{1}{16} \times 15\frac{3}{16} \times 9$ in. ($55.1 \times 38.6 \times 22.9$ cm); $29\frac{15}{16} \times 16\frac{7}{8} \times 6\frac{1}{16}$ in. ($76 \times 42.9 \times 15.4$ cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council
(Los Angeles / Mexico City)

Commissioned by The Brick and the Mildred Lane Kemper
Art Museum

This sculpture is inspired by the “three sisters” plant cultivation technology—an Indigenous practice used across the Americas of planting squash, maize, and beans together as a system of mutual support. Each seed is modeled after a specific species native to North, Central, and South America. To create them, the artist Carolina Caycedo first had each seed 3D scanned before enlarging and carving them from three different types of wood. She then named each seed using the Indigenous languages spoken in their places of origin: the purple corn kernel is called *Ñañay Kculli* (Purple Corn Sister) in Southern Quechua, originating in the South American Andes mountain range; the bean, called *S'oam Bawi Wenag* (Red-Brown Tepary Bean Sister) in Tohono O'odham, is a tepary bean grown in southwestern North America; and the squash, named *Kiik K'uum* (Squash Sister) in Yucatec Maya, is a *Cucurbita pepo* seed from the Yucatán Peninsula in Mesoamerica.

Addressing each of the seeds as “sister” establishes them as kin to each other and to us. The names suggest a female genealogy, homing in on the fact that gardening and seed keeping was traditionally the work of women and seen as vital to preserving life. The choice of language also establishes a link to Caycedo's work with portraits that honor environmental activists as well as rivers and plants. The sculpture thus continues her ongoing interest in feminist care practices, food sovereignty, and transnational solidarity.

Caycedo understands her engagement with both human and nonhuman entities as a collaboration that implicates her and the viewers of her work. “We're not above, we're not outside nature, we're in this planet, standing, rooted in a place which is your place. What's your relationship to that place? What are the things in that place that sustain you, feed you, nourish you, and what can you give back? How can we be reciprocal with what sustains us?” she asks poignantly.¹ To realize such an experience of entanglement, Caycedo presents the “three sisters”



cradled in handwoven jute bags that hang from the ceiling at eye level. Visitors are invited to walk around and among the wooden replicas, attuning their bodies to the physical presence of the seeds.

1 Carolina Caycedo, “Carolina Caycedo Centers Social and Environmental Justice Conversation Around Care,” interview by Katy Donoghue, *Whitewall*, August 17, 2021, <https://whitewall.art/art/carolina-caycedo-centers-social-and-environmental-justice-conversation-around-care/>.

Jumana Manna

Palestinian, b. United States, 1987

***Family (Cache Series), 2022**

Ceramic, concrete, lime, and pigments, overall dimensions variable

Ghost II (Cache Series), 2023

Ceramic, concrete, lime, and pigments, 36½ × 24 × 15¾ in. (93 × 61 × 40 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Jumana Manna's ceramic sculptures *Family* and *Ghost II*, part of her *Cache* series, take inspiration from *khabyas*, traditional grain storage containers used for millennia in rural houses throughout the Levant region. The series stems from her research with the Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation, a Ramallah-based organization dedicated to the preservation of rural Palestinian architectural heritage. Literally meaning “the thing that hides” in Arabic, these *khabyas* were built into the interior structures of homes, often in the cool, dark recesses of cellar pantries, as a means of preserving grains for sowing and for annual communal consumption. Manna's sculptures are abstractions of these containers, which were made obsolete with the advent of refrigeration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

With their gently curving organic shapes, dentine legs, sensual holes, and creamy coloration, Manna's vessels exist as part creatures, part objects. The sculptures have a smooth, water-resistant finish called *tadelakt*, which is created by rubbing lime-based plaster with stone, following a long-established Moroccan method. In employing this technique, the artist aligns her ceramic sculptures with the functional and architectural as much as with the poetic and playful.

Manna positions these ceramic sculptures atop a platform made up of industrial steel grates, as if ethnographic specimens. Supported by cinder blocks, the grates are suggestive of those used in climate-controlled storage systems for museums, agricultural seed banks, and urban ventilation and drainage systems alike. With this juxtaposition, Manna contrasts her longing for the local, collective, and handmade with the centralization and standardization of industrial infrastructures, between what she describes as “preservation as a culture of care, a culture of maintenance,” and a form of control based on colonial accumulation and capitalist economies of growth.¹



¹ Jumana Manna, quoted in ma ma and Jumana Manna, “Perpetual Scofflaws: Jumana Manna Interviewed by ma ma,” *C Magazine* website, April 24, 2023, <https://cmagazine.com/articles/perpetual-scofflaws>.

Jumana Manna

Palestinian, b. United States, 1987

***Wild Relatives*, 2018**

Single-channel HD video with sound, 63:55 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

In her essay-film *Wild Relatives*, Jumana Manna focuses on the relationship between the complex geopolitics of seed banking, migration, and industrial agriculture. The film follows the 2017 journey of seeds from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in the Arctic, which safeguards duplicates of specimens from around the world in a facility located in a formerly coal-mined mountain, to the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), currently based in Lebanon. In 2015 ICARDA made headlines as the first entity to make a withdrawal from the Global Seed Vault as a result of the war in Syria, ultimately moving its headquarters from Syria to Lebanon to continue their work and to build a duplicate seed bank.

Throughout the film Manna presents a macrocosm of migrations and lives in flux. Filming across different geographies, she brings into focus tensions between state and individual and between industrial and holistic approaches to seed saving, as well as the hierarchies of labor involved in the duplication of these seeds. Manna highlights the contradiction between the international efforts to archive and preserve seeds that travel across borders, thanks to their economic value, and the highly restricted mobility of the Syrian refugees who lead the accession and planting efforts in ICARDA's labs and fields.

A different, grassroots seed-saving effort is followed throughout the film through the character of Walid, a Syrian refugee and organic farmer whose open-access seed library creates a critical counterpoint to the large-scale international efforts. These personal and affective acts of collecting and resilience put into relief the paradoxes of institutionalized preservation practices that erase as they conserve, while reflecting a belief in the everyday methods of preservation as a mode of taking care of life.

¹ ICARDA is one node within a global network of gene banks and agricultural research centers spread mainly over the so-called Global South. This network emerged from the context of the Green Revolution, a term coined by US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator William S. Gaud in 1968. The Green Revolution brought agricultural production to an industrial scale, believing it could end world hunger and in the process fight communism by making high-yielding seeds, irrigation techniques, and chemical inputs a global standard.



Ellie Irons and Anne Percoco

American, b. 1981; American, b. 1982

Next Epoch Seed Library, 2024

Mixed media, 87 × 22 × 19 in. (221 × 55.9 × 48.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artists

The *Next Epoch Seed Library* (NESL) is an artist-run project cofounded in 2015 by Ellie Irons and Anne Percoco that focuses on collecting, storing, and sharing the seeds of “spontaneous urban plants” (a.k.a. weeds).¹ Unlike a seed bank, whose efforts to safeguard against the loss of biodiversity are often proprietary, the NESL is intended to disseminate seeds to the public, preserving the shared plant varieties through propagation and further circulation of seeds. While firmly situated within an artistic context, the NESL proffers their efforts as being aligned with the missions of community seed storage and trading efforts that, as they state, “reclaim the autonomy of informal and community seed-saving cultures from corporate and private control.”²

For the exhibition, the NESL created a site-specific version of their seed library, which comprises a custom set of drawers and shelves filled with plant seeds harvested in the greater St. Louis region. Working with faculty, students, and community members in fall 2024, the seeds were collected from local weeds found in vacant lots, street verges, superfund sites, and abandoned infrastructure. Increasingly such ruderal sites—landscapes depleted, polluted, and fractured by human activity—are being recognized as lively zones full of novel ecological relationships. Visitors are invited to browse the library’s collections—labeled by species common name, species scientific name, collection date, collection location, and collector’s name—and take a selection of seed packets.

The range of seeds offered provides a gene pool of plants well suited to urban conditions resulting from human-caused environmental degradation. These plants are disturbance adapted and have the capacity to help build, nourish, and protect soil so that other plants might similarly take root and thrive in the future. In addition to their resiliency, many of these seeds are, as the artists note, “wild crop cousins, serving as reservoirs of genetic diversity. Holding traits that have been bred out of our highly domesticated, monoculture-oriented food crops, weedy species may provide a key to crop resilience moving forward.”³ While not all of them evolved in this bioregion, they are locally adapted and evolving towards balance with changing biocultural systems.



1 Ellie Irons, “The Next Epoch Seed Library’s Lawn Lab: A Public Experiment in Collaboration with Seeds, Time, and Weeds,” *Media + Environment* 2, Issue 1 (August 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.13470>.

2 Ibid. The artists cite groups such as Seeds Savers Exchange and White Earth Land Recovery Project’s Indigenous Seed Library.

3 “So I’ve got these seeds . . . Now what?” Next Epoch Seed Library pamphlet (2016).

Shiraz Bayjoo

Mauritian, b. 1979

Zott Konn – Yeman (*They Know – The Wise*), 2022

Single-channel HD video with sound, 26:32 min.

in collaboration with Nicolas Faubert (Gabonese, b. 1991)

Palm Crown, 2022

Plantation Landscape, 2022

Roots and Vine, 2022

Tangena Ordeal, 2022

Dye sublimation print on canvas, cotton batique, braided and tassel trim, sapele wood, and hemp rope, 78¾ × 68⅞ in. (200 × 175 cm) each

Split-architecture 1, 2023

Split-architecture 2, 2023

Dye sublimation print on canvas, cotton batique, braided trim, brass, and hemp rope, each 2 panels, 118 × 59 in. (300 × 150 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai

Shiraz Bayjoo's installation comprises a twenty-six-minute video and eight tapestries that hang from the ceiling of the Museum's Saligman Family Atrium. The project is the first iteration of the artist's ongoing engagement with plants in the context of Europe's colonization of the islands in the western Indian Ocean, including Mauritius where he is from. It was developed out of an artist residency in partnership with Kew Gardens in London. Formally established as a national botanical garden in 1840, Kew was at the center of the British plantation economy, which extracted and appropriated plants and seeds on a global scale. Drawing on archival sources ranging from letters and photographs to landscapes and organisms, the installation examines the transplantation of plant species from Mauritius to the UK during colonial rule and questions their current place in the British national archives.

The tapestries are printed with photos of plants, seeds, and architectural details, chief among them are images that emulate the experience of visiting Kew Gardens' Victorian glass Palm House. The smaller, low-hanging tapestries adorned with tassels focus attention on specific details, such as seeds of the poisonous *Cerbera manghas* once used in Madagascar's tangena ordeal, a ritual to determine a person's



innocence or guilt. Another photograph shows a contemporary image of a former plantation in Mauritius, stressing colonialism's lasting impact on the environment.

The video, titled *Zott Konn – Yeman (They Know – The Wise)*, further explicates the history of transplantation by presenting a visual narrative that combines contemporary and archival footage with dance and sound. Created in collaboration with the dancer Nicolas Faubert, the work reflects the act of sharing knowledge in its title, which draws from Mauritian Creole and the Bantu language Fang, merging two African dialects spoken by the artists' ancestors. Faubert is a visually impaired dancer who draws on hip-hop, b-boying, and freestyle, tracing objects and exploring space through his movement. In the video, he is seen responding to Bayjoo's research materials—presented in a visual montage that includes CGI animations, and red, blue, and green filters—through choreographed movement. The resulting overlay translates archival probing into a multisensorial experience.

Cecilia Vicuña

Chilean, b. 1948

***Semiya (Seed Song)*, 2015**

Single-channel HD video with sound, 7:43 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

“A sound is the seed of the universe. A genetically altered seed breaks the earth’s rhythm. Only a collective gesture of love can turn back destruction.” This quote opens Cecilia Vicuña’s seven-minute video *Semiya (Seed Song)*. The video shows the artist foraging for native seeds in the foothills of the Andes Mountains in Colchagua, Chile, gathering these living elements for inclusion in her artworks. These include her ongoing series of sculptures known as *precarios*, ephemeral arrangements of found objects, and *quipus*, large-scale, multiknotted threads that reimagine the ancient pre-Columbian system of nonwritten communication. The red thread seen snaking along a leafy path in the beginning of the video embodies the ritual function of the *quipu* in its weaving together of landscapes, rivers, and oceans, as well as humans, nonhumans, and animals.

In Vicuña’s practice as a poet, artist, filmmaker, and activist, she foregrounds Indigenous principles of reciprocity and exchange between the land and its custodians. That entanglement is expressed in the form of a multisensorial engagement with the environment. We watch Vicuña’s hands holding seeds and caressing plants, touching, smelling, and tasting them. We hear her chanting and modulating sounds drawn from the rhythms of nature. Also, there is the ambient sound of the environment and of her breath, as well as moments of cocreation when the artist rattles seeds or taps a piece of wood against stone. Vicuña has stated, “My process is not thinking. My process is sensing, attending to that that is around us.”¹ In *Semiya (Seed Song)*, this includes the seeds and plants, the rocks, water, and the wind.

1 “Cecilia Vicuña: Hugo Boss Prize 2020 Nominee,” by Guggenheim Museum, YouTube, October 5, 2020, 6:25 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL_7MDuT8Xk.



Artist Biographies

Shiraz Bayjoo (Mauritian, b. 1979) works with film, painting, textiles, photography, performance, and installation. His research-based practice explores the legacies of European colonization, focusing on the islands of the western Indian Ocean, particularly those of Madagascar and Mauritius, where he is from. He has repeatedly engaged with the collections of botanical gardens, mining both the archival potential of plants and seeds and the logics informing their systematization. Bayjoo earned a BA in fine arts from the University of Wales Institute. He lives and works between London and Mauritius.

Carolina Caycedo (Colombian, b. 1978) is a multidisciplinary artist who draws on approaches from environmental justice, decolonization, ancestral knowledge, and feminism. Her practice honors the work of land and water protectors who have safeguarded and regenerated the biodiversity of their territories. Caycedo holds a BFA from Los Andes University and an MFA from the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Juan William Chávez (American, b. 1977) is an artist and cultural activist who collaborates on social-practice art projects related to community building, food sovereignty, environmental stewardship, and decolonization. His creative practice includes public art, installations, knowledge-sharing workshops, paintings, zines, beekeeping, and agriculture. He is the director and founder of the art and ecology nonprofit Northside Workshop and a lecturer at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. He holds a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Chávez lives and works in St. Louis.

Beatriz Cortez (Salvadoran, b. 1970) is a multidisciplinary artist and scholar. Her work explores simultaneous and converging temporalities, from the deep past to distant futures. Drawing on her own experience of migration—she left El Salvador and immigrated to the United States in 1989—and an expansive philosophical framework, her projects look to ancient, futuristic, and object-based models to address urgent issues of the present. Cortez earned an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and a PhD in Latin American literature from Arizona State University. Cortez is associate professor of art at the University of California, Davis. She lives and works in Los Angeles and Davis.

Ellie Irons (American, b. 1981) and **Anne Percoco** (American, b. 1982) are cocollaborators who take an eco-social approach to art-making, emphasizing plant-human entanglement. With their ongoing Next Epoch Seed Library project they share a commitment to, as they state, “relearning relationships with weedy plants through the lens of reciprocity rather than animosity.” The project also consists of walks, workshops, discussions, an open-access curriculum, deep-time seed storage experiments, and other activities. Irons studied art and environmental science at Scripps College, completed an MFA at Hunter College, and a PhD in arts practice at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with a focus on public fieldwork, urban ecology, and socially engaged art. She lives in Troy, New York. Percoco earned a BA from Drew University and an MFA from Rutgers Mason Gross School of the Arts. She lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Kapwani Kiwanga’s (French and Canadian, b. 1978) work is research driven, exploring what she calls “power asymmetries,” drawing from forgotten or marginalized histories as well as fields of study from botany to anthropology, to create alluring objects and environments in a range of materials. The artist often delves into the role nature has played in determining the course of history, “bearing witness” to complex sociopolitical ideas and events. Kiwanga studied anthropology and comparative religion at McGill University and art at Beaux-Arts de Paris. She lives and works in Paris and Berlin.

Jumana Manna (Palestinian, b. United States, 1987) is a visual artist, filmmaker, and writer. She critically examines the paradoxes of preservation practices, particularly within the fields of architecture, agriculture, botany, and law, asking who gets to classify, who decides what is protected, and what is erased or removed. She earned a BA from the Oslo National Academy of the Arts and an MA in aesthetics and politics at the California Institute of the Arts. Manna lives and works in Berlin and Jerusalem.

Artist Biographies (cont.)

Cecilia Vicuña (Chilean, b. 1948) is a multidisciplinary artist and activist who works in performance, sculpture, installation, drawing, video, and poetry. Her sculptures stand for an artistic practice that engages with the environment, tackling sociopolitical issues such as ecological destruction and the need for preservation, calling on Indigenous knowledge to do so, and warning against cultural homogenization. Vicuña earned an MA in fine arts from the Universidad de Chile, and she also attended the Slade School of Fine Art at the University College London. In 1973 she was forced into exile by the military coup that brought the dictator Augusto Pinochet into power in Chile. She lives and works in New York City.

Emmi Whitehorse's (Diné, b. 1957) practice of abstract painting derives from close observation of and deep connection to the unique landscape of the Southwest, bringing her Diné cultural heritage in conversation with modernist abstraction. Although she usually shies away from decisively political statements, in recent years she has expressed her opposition to fracking, which is disturbing Navajo lands in the Southwest. Whitehorse earned a BA in painting and an MA in printmaking from the University of New Mexico. She lives and works in Santa Fe.

Related Programs

All programs are free and open to the public and are held at the Kemper Art Museum unless otherwise noted.

For full event descriptions visit kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/events

February 21

4:30 pm	Exhibition Opening
5:30 pm	Member and WashU Preview
	Artist Panel: Carolina Caycedo, Juan William Chávez, Ellie Irons and Anne Percoco
	Steinberg Auditorium
6:30 pm	Public Opening

March 26

5:30 pm	Bunny and Charles Burson Visiting Artist Lecture
	Beatriz Cortez: "Untimely Communities and Nonhuman Worlds: Reflections on the Survival of Seeds"

April 17

5:30 pm	Gallery Talk and Tour
	Natalie Mueller: "Reciprocity: On the Co-Evolution of Seeds, Plants, and People"

May 31

9 am–12 pm	Workshop
	Juan William Chávez: "Decolonize the Garden: From Seeds to Bees"
	The Northside Workshop, 1306 St. Louis Ave.

June 14

2–4 pm	Kemper Live: Collective Futures
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July 12

2 pm	Exhibition Tour
	Meredith Malone, Curator

Public Tours

English-language tours on March 1 and April 12 at 2 pm
Chinese-language tour on March 30 at 2 pm
Spanish-language tour on May 17 at 1 pm
ASL tour on July 19 at 2 pm

kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu

Hours

11 am–5 pm Mon, Wed–Sun
Closed Tue

Contact

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The exhibition is curated by Meredith Malone, curator at the Kemper Art Museum, and Svea Braeunert, research associate at the School of Design at the University of Applied Sciences, Potsdam, Germany.



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