

For immediate release

Field Studies – Land Body Botany

Yan Wang Preston & Monty Adkins

15.09.23 - 07.10.23

Bath House Galleries, Sovereign Design House, The University of Huddersfield



09 June 2020. No. 43 out of 182 walks.

From *With Love. From an Invader.* (17 March 2020-16 March 2021). ©Yan Wang Preston

As part of Cultures of Sound, the School of Arts & Humanities at the University of Huddersfield is delighted to present *Field Studies – Land Body Botany* by award-winning photographer Dr Yan Wang Preston and leading experimental music composer Prof Monty Adkins, with guest artist Carrie Williams. This exhibition pays tender attention to so-called non-native invasive species *Rhododendron Ponticum* within one of its many ‘infested’ landscapes. Luminous and exquisite works in a variety of media were made between 2020 and 2023, shaped by how the COVID-19 crisis altered our relationships to the landscapes, flora and fauna that surround us.

Yan Wang Preston has conducted careful and exhaustive artistic research around the rhododendron from her perspective as a photographer, and in collaboration with composer Monty Adkins and textile artist Carrie Williams has situated it within post and decolonial narratives, as well as literally within the landscape of West Yorkshire and East Lancashire. Here, visual and auditory representations of the passing of time and the turning of the seasons are manifested through material representations which reference the artists’ cultural heritage and complicate their relationship to the categorising impulse of the institution. For the first time Wang Preston has produced sculptural objects which contain layers of meaning bound up in her choices around construction and materials, whereas Adkins and Williams have brought their distinct artistic and artisanal practices to bear on this body of research.

Cultures of Sound has supported research practitioners in the School of Arts and Humanities to realise projects in the public realm and to bring new exhibitions to Huddersfield. Dr Rowan Bailey, Director of Knowledge and Enterprise and Director of the Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture says ‘our Cultures of programme is part of a School wide approach to place-based cultural development in Huddersfield. We encourage knowledge and cultural exchange between practitioners and creative communities and through projects like these actively foster new ways to think about contemporary global issues and challenges. *Field Studies* shows us how, in and through

artistic research, we can investigate ecological, migratory and cultural phenomena, manifesting new aesthetic insights and ways of reading the world around us.'

Field Studies – Land Body Botany comprises two companion series, shown together in full for the first time. Among them, 'With Love. From an Invader.' is an immersive multi-screen projection with an original soundscape, made from Wang Preston's 182 walks to one love-heart-shaped rhododendron bush within one year. 'Autumn Winter Spring Summer' is a set of photographic objects and installations including a six-meter-long handscroll, a series of specially constructed lightboxes and an artist-specimen book, inspired by botanical methods and hybrid identities. Art critic Charlotte Jansen said, '...with soaring empathy...Wang Preston makes evident the way the earth accommodates itself as a hospitable habitat, where growth happens contrary to the will and definitions of mankind's order. The analogies with the migration and movement of people – by force and by choice – and the hierarchy of notions of belonging and home, are abundant.'

An Ecology of a Migrant

The rhododendron, a beautiful plant whose dark green leaves, twisted branches and magenta blooms are now a common site throughout Britain's countryside, is also poignant as a symbol of imperial hubris and how attitudes towards migrants can shift swiftly and violently. Britain is a multicultural society in terms of both its human and non-human residents. Yet, often institutions and individuals lack the tolerance of this island's rich soil and temperate weather. Many non-native species, brought by imperial scientists or simply arriving incidentally, contribute to a recombinant ecology that is characteristic of Britain as a post-colonial country. However, a colonial hierarchy persists whereby native species are considered superior to non-native species, as with the rhododendron. Subject of the Victorian 'rhodo-craze', these plants were once a symbol of imperial success and were pursued frantically by botanical garden collections and the landed gentry. Now, they are known as a notorious invasive species, smeared as 'a spectacular thug [that] is out of control'¹. These terms have been used to describe *Rhododendron Ponticum*, which is the hybrid species capable of self-seeding in Britain, with Scotland Forestry and Land needing to use 'chainsaws, herbicides, heavy machinery and considerable human muscle power in the battle against this unwelcome alien.'² Such terminology is alarming in the context of wider attitudes towards migrants, such as the China-born, British photographer Yan Wang Preston.

With an existing knowledge of the long history of and affection towards the rhododendrons in China, Wang Preston doubted this narrative. Spurred by the physical confinement and heated racial debates that took place throughout the COVID-19 crisis, she conducted her own artistic research on the ecology and perception of the rhododendrons, often in collaboration with composer Monty Adkins. From 17th March 2020 to 16th March 2021, at a frequency of every other day, Wang Preston walked to and photographed one love-heart-shaped *Rhododendron Ponticum* bush, found on an industrial wasteland at the outskirts of Burnley in Lancashire, a stone's throw away from her cottage in West Yorkshire. These 182 ritualistic walks, taking at least two hours each, provided time and space for further exploration. Placing infrared cameras in the area, she discovered more than twenty-five species of animal, including foxes, badgers, deer, mice, and hares traversing and interacting with the site. With Adkins, the artists recorded the cry of the curlew, the call of the cuckoo, and the passionate solo of a black bird, together with the songs of more than thirty different bird species. The resulting artwork, 'With Love. From an Invader.', is a visual and auditory document that provides evidence of the rhododendron's significance as a keystone species for these non-human inhabitants. In this immersive installation the multi-screen projection and soundscape form an emotive environment for the viewer, journeying through the seasons along with the local plants and animals.

'Autumn Winter Spring Summer' sees Wang Preston moving from observation to action. Focusing her study on a smaller rhododendron shrub around the same height as the artist, she collected all its falling autumnal leaves in 2020, seed capsules and aborted flower buds in the winter of 2020-2021 and fading flowers in the spring and

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/apr/16/rhododendron-ponticum-thug-invasive-out-of-control-plantwatch>

² forestryandland.gov.scot, accessed on 15 May 2020.

summer of 2021. This prolonged process of collecting in the field cultivated further embodiment within the British landscape, with time in the studio and garden allowing Wang Preston to respond to the materials subjectively and intuitively. Through this incremental development her background as a Chinese woman trained in western medicine rose to the surface. 'Autumn – Leaves' became a six-meter-long handscroll, depicting overlaid photographs of all the collected leaves touched twice by the artist's hand. The piece is printed on Chinese rice paper and produced by the best traditional craftsmen in Shanghai, a fitting testimony of the rhododendron's multicultural roots.

In 'Winter – Seed Capsules', Wang Preston arranged all the collected seed capsules into a circular shape on a bed of snow in her garden. She then set fire to the seeds while documenting the process on a large-format film camera. Unexpected snowfall re-covered the burnt seeds and completed the work that comprises a sequence of eleven. Within this work, the rage felt by migrant people like Wang Preston when referred to with terms like 'non-native, invasive', along with the persistence of the rhododendrons, and the healing power of nature are simultaneously present. After a previous showing at Messums, London, here the series is shown for the first time as a series of spectacular lightboxes.

Winter – Bud Blast, the third piece in the series, sees Wang Preston meticulously dissecting all seventy-five 'aborted' flower buds, one by one. Spending hundreds of hours studying such 'valueless' specimens became a process of deep reflection for the artist on the significance of dissection in both botanical medical settings. Raised in a family of doctors, Wang Preston was made by her father to study western medicine. After graduating from Fudan University in Shanghai, she worked as an anaesthetist for several years before migrating to England to pursue photography as a career. An epiphany came while tracing this history; realising how her life has been shaped by the patriarchal societies in both China and Britain. The artistic outcome of this process comprises a handmade artists' book containing archival photographs of each of the dissected buds, produced at life size, and troubles the space between a minimal sculpture and a botanical specimen book. For *Field Studies*, the work will be shown as an expansive wall piece, accompanied with an original soundscape composed by Monty Adkins.

Finally, having collected all the fallen flowers from the same rhododendron shrub in the Spring and Summer of 2021, Wang Preston sculpted them to form an elliptical shape reminiscent of the vulva. This references the human-scale of this plant and the artist's growing identification with it, as she explored and dissected her own personal history and how it has been influenced by factors like colonialism and patriarchal values. The high-definition photograph of the flowers, in various states of decay, is then made into a tension fabric lightbox at 167cm, the same height as Wang Preston. A new fabric work by Carrie Williams accompanies the work of Wang Preston and Adkins, specially created for this presentation at the Bath House Galleries, 'Remnants' (2023) is constructed from the remains of Yan Wang Preston's 'Field Studies' including seed pods, rhododendron flowers, and leaves. The circular form of the work expands on the symbolism in Preston's Winter-Seed Capsules whilst also embracing and emphasising the tactility and fragility of the remnants incorporated into the work.

In this cyclical series, a poetic handscroll embodying the traditional Chinese landscape aesthetic develops into a radiating opening which unequivocally references female genitalia, and through this processual journey of self-discovery Wang Preston has discovered a particularly 'migrant ecology'. The British landscape is seen anew with its multicultural plants and animals, meanwhile the reality that 'nature' is cultured and gendered is made plain.



Spring Summer – Flowers (2021 – 23) Tension fabric lightbox, 167cm 70cm 8cm



Winter - Seed Capsules (2020) Shedden Clough, Burnley, Lancashire, UK

Information

Cultures of Sound is the School of Arts and Humanities' contribution to Kirklees Year of Music, showcasing innovative collaborations and boundary-pushing experiments in sound undertaken by our researchers and staff. See: <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/ceada/>

As part of this programme the **Bath House Galleries** have been inaugurated as a new space for contemporary art and experimental practices in Huddersfield. Residing in the lower floors of Sovereign Design House, a stunning renovation by AHR Architects of the purpose-built Broadbents factory bath house, Bath House Galleries are an ideal environment for the display of the collaborative, interdisciplinary work that is fostered within the school.

For further information contact Lauren Velvick (Cultural Programme Manager): L.Velvick@hud.ac.uk

A selection of high resolution images can be found [here](#)

Biographies

Dr Yan Wang Preston is a British-Chinese visual artist interested in landscape, identity, migration and the environment. Her major projects include *Mother River* (2010-2014), *Forest* (2010-2017), *With Love. From an Invader.* (2020-2011) and *Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer* (2020-2023). Preston's work has won many international awards, such as the 1st Prize in Professional Landscape, Sony World Photography Awards (2019) and the 1st Prize in Professional Commission, Syngenta Photography Award (2017).

Preston's work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally. Her solo exhibitions have been presented at venues such as the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Messums London, Site Gallery, Look Photo Festival, Xposure International Photography Festival, Gallery of Photography Ireland, the 56th Venice Biennale, Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, and Wuhan Art Museum. Important group shows include *In Blossom* (Fotografiskia, Sweden), *Energy: Sparks from the Collection*, the V&A, Jeddah Photo 2022, Fotofest 2020 and Dubai Photo.

Preston's monographs 'Forest' and 'Mother River' were both published by Hatje Cantz in 2018. Her work is collected by public institutions such as Wuhan Art Museum in China, National Trust, UK, the Victoria and Albert Museum, UK, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA, as well as private collectors worldwide.

Preston was originally trained in Clinical Medicine in Fudan University, China. She emigrated to the UK in 2005 and was awarded a PhD in Photography from the University of Plymouth in 2018. Besides of her artistic practice, she lectures at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

Prof Monty Adkins is a composer and performer of experimental electronic music. He primarily creates digital audio works and installations. Since 2008, his sound works has become increasingly minimal and introspective, characterised by slow shifting organic instrumental and concrete soundscapes, focusing on encouraging a deeper immersive listening experience. Using a reduced sonic palette, he draws together elements from ambient, minimal electronica, acousmatic and experimental electronic music often combining instrumental and electronic sound.

His works have been performed at and commissioned by leading international festivals and institutions (including INA-GRM, IRCAM, BBC Radio 3, SpACE-Net, ZKM Karlsruhe, Sonic Arts Network, Visionas Sonoras, Bourges Festival, Akousma, IOU Theatre, and the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation) and released on labels worldwide including Audiobulb (UK), empreintes DIGITALes (Québec), Crónica (Portugal), Signature (France), Eilean (France), and LINE (USA).

He is Professor of Experimental Electronic Music at the University of Huddersfield.

Carrie Williams is an arts and crafts practitioner based in Marsden, West Yorkshire, specialising in textiles.