



antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE
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antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE

edited by Giovanni Aloï

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Caroline Rothwell

Lung, 2021, canvas,
gypsum cement, stainless
steel, paint, mixed media,
118 x 65 x 40cm.

Photo: Felicity Jenkins

© Caroline Rothwell



Plant signatures, goodness, and the dose

The Doctrine of Signatures is the idea that plants that look like parts of the human body can cure ailments in those bodily parts. This essay first establishes a connection between the understanding or recognition of plants and the use of plants as a medicinal cure, tracing the Doctrine's origins from Roman and Medieval times to the Renaissance physic or apothecary gardens. The second part focuses on the Australian artist Caroline Rothwell whose engagement with the Doctrine of Signatures helps draw connections between the doctrine's religious underpinnings and contemporary interpretations of what a signature signifies regarding human and ecological fragility. Signatures are intimately connected with the concept of goodness, a moral concept that has long been associated with gardening constructs and of plants themselves.

text: Prudence Gibson and Sigi Jottkandt
images: Caroline Rothwell

In Renaissance Europe, physic gardens were established to cultivate herbs and plants for their medicinal and curative value. As precursors to botanical gardens, which were more focussed on design aesthetics, collecting practices, and rare specimens, the physic gardens were intent on showcasing the healing properties of plants.¹

A precursor to the medicinal concerns of the physic gardens was the practice of the Doctrine of Signatures. This Doctrine involved recognising plants that could cure human ailments, based on the appearance of those plants. Understood since the 19th century as an outmoded and even foolish practice, the Doctrine is worthy of attention and renewed focus because of its capacity to 'know' plants deeply as a professional practice.

This essay investigates the Roman and Medieval history of the Doctrine of Signatures that informed the Renaissance physic or apothecary gardens. It establishes a connection between the understanding or recognition of plants, and the use of plants as medicinal cure. It notes that these plant-medicine habits endured for up to 1800 years. In particular, it focuses on what a plant signature means or signifies, both in a historical and contemporary sense.

As part of researching the Doctrine of Signatures, this paper also brings plant-human systems into the present by focussing on Australian artist Caroline Rothwell, who has made many works about the Doctrine of Signatures over the last 15 years. Our argument connects the religious connotations of the Doctrine of Signatures with more contemporary associations of what a signature signifies and tells us about human and ecological frailty. It also connects signatures with the concept of goodness, a moral concept that has long been associated with gardening constructs and with plants themselves.

The Doctrine of Signatures is an area of plant study that emerged in the European first century AD and became extremely popular in the 16th to 18th centuries. For instance, a plant that looks like an eye, such as the bulb cross-section of the fennel, can cure eye problems. Kidney beans are good for the kidneys. Gelsemium roots look like brains and can cure facial pain and migraine. Pomegranate arils look like little teeth and pomegranate placentas look like gums, so the idea is that pomegranates could cure dental problems.²

Following the Doctrine of Signatures, each plant is thought to be a signature or map, based on the way its roots, stems, branches, flowers or fruits appear. That signature signifies human ailments and is the key to a means of plant medicine for humans. In effect, it is a double mapping of plant and human bodies.

History of the Doctrine of Signatures:

To briefly explain the history of the Doctrine of Signatures, we must visit Dioscorides, the first proponent of the Doctrine. Dioscorides AD 40-90 believed that the *Scorpiurus muricatus* plant was good for curing scorpion stings, due to its prickly scorpion-like tail. He noted that avocados can cure illnesses of the womb. Bloodroot (which has red roots) is good for the circulatory system. Ginseng root looks like a human body and is considered good for human vitality and the overall vascular system. Dioscorides noted these likenesses in his botanical and medicinal book, *De Materia Medica*, which launched a study of plant medicine that lasted 1800 years and influenced both western and eastern medicine.³

As early as 1290, the Italian doctor Guilielmus of Saliceto referred to signature qualities in a treatise on medicinal plants. His treatise was called the *Doctrine of Correspondences*. In this text, he noted that liverwort leaves



S. Parkinson del. 1770
F. P. Nodder pinx. 1777

PLATE 72

D. MacKenzie sculp.
C. G. B. R. B. 2019

HARDENBERGIA VIOLACEA (Schneevoogt) Stearn
Hedyarum monophyllum

Botany Bay, Australia
28 April-6 May 1770

look like livers and could treat diseases of this organ.⁴ Saliceto's doctrine was interesting because it made a connection between attributes of the physical world and made corresponding connections with things in the spiritual world. These connections were symbolic. The implicit suggestion was that these were hierarchical relations, passed down from the spiritual world to the physical world.⁵

While the Doctrine of Signatures has been debunked as spurious since the 18th and 19th centuries, it offered pre- and non-literate people the mnemonic means of remembering which plants are good for what, in terms of curing ailments and maintaining good health. It was a means of connecting humans closely to plant life, and generated a substantial respect from humans towards plants, much of which is lost to many humans today.⁶

The Doctrine of Signatures was taken up again in earnest by Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim), a 16th-century Swiss physician and alchemist. He further developed, in *Die Grosse Wundartznei* 1537, the concept that the appearance of a plant could indicate its medicinal use.⁷

This was a period of history that was dominated by ideas of nature as being the dominion of man. English philosopher Francis Bacon 1561-1626 was a significant proponent of the idea that God would provide, and this provision was divinely ordained and a sacred duty.⁸ After the Judaeo-Christian fall of man, the relationship between nature and man changed. The ultimate Garden of Eden human failing was a transgression against God. As theology became accepted cultural wisdom, human connection with the natural world became one of moralising separation, of human dominion and of utility. Colonial rapacity increased and so too did nature become perceived as existing for the use of man, often verging on a form of violent dominion. Consequently, man (not woman) could only be the executor of god's will – this included human relations to nature.

Within this moral historical context, where human-plant relations were shifting towards a more hierarchical and religious order, Giovanni Battista della Porta wrote about plants, animals and humans and how their outward appearances affected behaviour. His extrapolation of plant signatures became his treatise *Phytognomonica* in 1588, which contained many illustrations of the Doctrine of Signatures.⁹ In the same period, German philosopher, mystic, and theologian Jakob Boehme wrote *The Signature of All Things* in 1621.¹⁰

In 1684, English botanist William Coles 1626-1662 declared,

Though Sin and Sathan have plunged mankinde into an Ocean of Infirmities, yet the mercy of God which is over all his works, maketh Grass to grow upon the Mountains, and Herbs for use of man, and hath not only stamped upon them a distincte form, but also given particular Signatures, whereby man reade, even in legible characters, the use of them.

Coles referred to medicinal plants as 'simples'.¹¹ A strong connection emerged in this later period of the Doctrine, creating a link between religion and plant characteristics. Most of the Doctrine of Signatures plant treatises or books focussed on plant parts that helped humans, specifically for medicinal cures. This was a focus on the moral goodness of nature. Nature was good, man was bad (due to the original sin and fall of mankind) but the goodness of plants could serve as a kind of salvation, by healing human flaws.

While the Doctrine mostly focuses on the moral good of plant life, there were examples of 'bad plants.' Paracelsus was one of the few writers who also extended cures to kill, where all things are poison, and nothing is without poison.

Underpinning the Doctrine of Signatures is the trope of mimesis, which finds its way into Doctrine as a special form of magic. What looks 'like' something else has a necessary connection to it, allowing one thing to imbue another with (some of) its properties. Hence, rather than a passive figure - reflection merely reproducing what it finds outside itself - mimesis hides within itself an active principle. What it touches, it transforms. Mimesis is a fanged phenomenon, secreting its 'pharmakon' into the unsuspecting world.

One form of magic at issue in the Doctrine is what James Frazer, in his famous book *The Golden Bough*, named homeopathic magic. This works according to the "Law of Similarity" where an effect is produced through the act of imitation. One can adopt this Law for one's own purposes, both curative and nefarious. "The magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it", explains Frazer.¹²

The other operative magic in the Doctrine is what Frazer names "contagious" magic. Its principle is contact or presence. It assumes that objects that are brought into proximity with each other will activate an ancient "sympathy" they once possessed with each other. To be cured by a plant on the basis of contagious magic is implicitly to return one's body to an earlier state of equilibrium with the world. Contagious magic repairs the division instituted by distances of space and time. It states: things that have once been conjoined will ever be so.

The signature

The human signature can be seen as a form of mimesis, a physical extension or signification of the self, something that is copied out, over and again. The idea of the signature as a form of personal or individual identification dates back to the Antiquity of 3000 BCE, when stamps or seals were imprinted to convey meaning. By the late 11th century, there were known examples of documents being signed in Latin alphabets. Not many members of European society had access to the Latin language, whether reading or writing.¹³

The signature is a guarantee of identity, but it is also a suggestion of ownership, plausible power and dominion. One of the first recorded signatures dates to 1098 when the Spanish military leader El Cid signed a document regarding his donation to the Cathedral of Valencia. Signatures were slowly introduced as objects that connect to subjecthood. By the 17th century, it became a more common practice to require signatures for letters and contracts. In 1677, the Parliament of England enacted the *Statute of Frauds*, which required that all legal documents including property transactions, wills, leases, etc. be written and signed to avoid fraud on the court. It was done in an effort to replace X's and wax seals still commonly used at the time.¹⁴

While signatures are associated with identification, guarantee, advocacy and ownership, they are also associated with deception and fraud. Signatures are forged. Signatures are misused. If the signature is the sign, then it stands in for something or nothing. This uncertainty can be abused. The person who signs is a guarantor, but what is being guaranteed? For Jacques Derrida, the signature registers the absence of the one who signs. To sign, he explains, "is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will

Caroline Rothwell

Proplift fern, NZ (after Banks Florilegium), 2021,

canvas, hydrostone, steel, metal leaf,

83 x 21 x 15cm

© Caroline Rothwell



not, in principle, hinder in its functioning”.¹⁵ A signature participates in the wider structure of distance, divergence, delay, deferral that Derrida calls “writing”. Its very principle of readability and repetition makes it uniquely vulnerable to a *force de rupture* which severs the sign from its context: “No context can entirely enclose it. Nor any code”, Derrida comments.¹⁶

In 2009, Giorgio Agamben wrote *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, taking his title from Boehme’s previously mentioned *The Signature of All Things* (1621). Here Agamben focuses on the archaeological vigilance – a science of signatures that is more than the individual signed object, that exceeds the unmarked signs that signify.¹⁷ For Agamben signatures are not just marks but a primordial force of being: “Every phenomenon is the origin, every image archaic”.¹⁸

While this sounds like it might exist beyond an individual signatory’s reach, it is important for returning to or attuning to the complexity of the plant world and their own structures of identification and individuality. Plant signatures are primordial forces. If a plant communicates to a bee, it is emitting a gas or chemical signature that is recognised by the insect. When bioelectrical data is being recorded by ecological scientists, they refer to that data as a plant’s or a tree’s signature.¹⁹ Beyond human concepts of identification and power, the signature is also a method of particular communicative information.

Finally, the signature within the Doctrine of Signatures is afforded to plants, by humans, as ordained by God. It is only through the gesture of God and the interpretation of man that a plant has the capacity to cure humans. There is room for controversy here, in terms of who interprets God’s divine salvatory knowledge and who shares that ordained knowledge with the caretakers of the medicinal plant gardens.²⁰

Medicinal physic gardens

John Gerrard’s famous 1597 book, *Herball*, was catalogue of physic gardens across Europe, including over 1000 plants from his own physic garden at Holborn in London.²¹ The Chelsea Physic Garden, created in 1673, is a walled garden in the centre of London. The walls create a microclimate.²² These physic gardens have attracted scholarship due to associated colonial issues of avid and rapacious plant collection from less powerful countries, the philosophical instrumentalization of plants (the idea that plants are being exploited) and related colonial-era violences.

Added to that is the layer of aesthetic scholarship, whereby the design of orderly and manicured gardens that exhibit rare and exotic plants, is a drive to a better biblical past. As John Prest said in 1981, the will to collect from far and wide was to recreate the Garden of Eden.²³ This recreation or yearning for a perfect Edenic past is less obvious in physic gardens, compared to botanic gardens, because the collection, ordering and use of plants is purposefully directed towards human medicinal cures.

The interests, in this essay, are the physic gardens that are connected with the Doctrine of Signatures. In that vein, Hildegard von Bingen, who was a Benedictine abbess, founded three monastery gardens, one being at Ruppertsberg in 1150 in the Rhine Valley, and another on banks of the river and then Eibingen in 1165.

Von Bingen was drawn to the Doctrine of Signatures through her profound belief in the interconnectedness of all things. She wrote in her book *Physica* about *viriditas* as greenness and energy. In Michael Marder’s view, Von Bingen had deeply interconnected views of the cosmos as part of her ecological theology.²⁴ She saw the human body as microcosm of nature, and of the universe. Like other proponents of the Doctrine of Signa-

tures, she believed that the fall of man caused diseases, but God planted curative properties for human salvation.

Von Bingen wrote about 230 plants and grains in *Physica*, which had nine categories, including stones, elements, fish, birds, trees, and plants. She said, "Let a man who has an overabundance of lust in his loins cook wild lettuce in water and pour it over himself in a sauna". She noted that fennel was good for eyes, digestion and respiration.²⁵

We leave the physic garden, not so much as sites of conflict or even desire. Instead, these medicinal gardens, that drew upon the Doctrine of Signatures, were concerned with medicinal cure, in the name of God. That medicinal curiosity endures today.

In addition to medicinal properties, the Doctrine is a reminder that a recognition of human quality in plants is also a recognition, perversely, of otherness. The desire to see ourselves in plants is an admission that we ultimately cannot.

The artist

An artist who understands and recognises plant otherness is Australian artist Caroline Rothwell. Her sculptural and two-dimensional works are known for their technical acuity, historical references, sharp intellect and merging of art and science. She presents a subversion and reclamation of plant cures, within a climate context. Through her artworks, she consistently enquires about the patriarchy associated with the Doctrine of Signatures and what part imagination can play in an artistic interrogation.

English-born and educated, Rothwell spent several years in New Zealand before consolidating her art career in Sydney. But her life in rural England lingers:

My Irish mum grew as much as feasibly possible and fed us her vegetal wonders and medicinal plants: redcurrants, loganberries and blackcurrants for vitamin C, runner beans, marrows, an endless supply of heritage potatoes, spring onion, tomatoes, thyme and mint. She stored green beans throughout winter in vast ceramic jars, in layers of salt. Our garden was amazing. A quarter of the garden was veggies. And, so many flowers - foxgloves, holly (a poison), opium poppies, tulips. A walnut tree, veggies pickled in vinegar. Damsons, quinces, hops for beer and apples. To my mum, opportune plant cuttings were 'volunteers' in her hardworking garden.²⁶

Rothwell reclaims the Doctrine of Signature. Her curiosity about the scientific histories of plants often involves a disruption or inversion of plant-human relations. For instance, her lung-like plants are hung upside down. Her tree-like humans represent human exceptionalism but also create a tempest of not just imagination but of weather-like thought, of elliptical imagination. Her sculpture's fingers are roots

Perhaps her most difficult works are the controversial Banks Florilegium cut-outs. The Florilegium is a book of copperplate engravings of the plants that botanist Joseph Banks collected during the Captain Cook voyage of 1768-71. These are controversial in Australia because Banks is now known as a figure who extracted wealth in the form of plant knowledge, without permission and without acknowledgement.

Rothwell says, 'I love and loathe Banks's florilegium. They're epically beautiful and I am fascinated by their knowledge, representation and

understanding of botany. At the same time, I see them as one of the first acts of colonial stealing. Re-naming, re-imagining, re-viewing'.

Her Banks botanical images are snared by human tongues. Caroline's aesthetic image of the tongue is an ongoing emblem in her work, but here, leaf and tongue are the same. The tongue form is political for Rothwell. 'It's about colonial collectors who are grabbing elements of culture. On first contact at Kamay (Botany Bay), while Joseph Banks was busy collecting plant specimens, the Gweagal spears, were being taken by Endeavour's crew (and just this year returned from Cambridge University to La Perouse Aboriginal community). Curios for English visitors but so significant for Australian Indigenous community. The tongue is love and speech and greed and lashing.'

In Rothwell's work, *Proplift Fern (after Banks' Florilegium)* 2022, plants are proposed as systems of plumbing or industrial activity but they are still part of the connected knowledge of the Doctrine of Signatures. Plants and human activity are merged just as the Doctrine's likenesses connect plants with humans. *Tulip Tongue (after Maria Sibyl Merian)* 2019, presents plants and domestic bathroom taps and reflect the damage done to our water supplies, our rain sources and weather patterns. The elements also represent the structures and infrastructures of contemporary lives, as connected with past structures that were more enmeshed with nature and old knowledge.

Rothwell says,

I see the Signatures of Plants as this weird connective tissue where there was vast plant knowledge and a recognition of the value of plants. And from the perspective of now, the uncanny aesthetic and pseudo-scientific method connects us to stories of plants. I am interested in the surreal aesthetics, strange poetry and that sense of connection within the Signatures, but I have a double-edged relationship with the Signatures, as it is still anthropocentric and centres the human - the aim of plants is for use by humanity. I want to see plants valued as the operating system of our planet.

The artist uses the Doctrine of Signatures as a surreal, scientific and poetic reference to create a sense of interconnection and multi-species alignment. In her *Industrial Botanical*, 2020, the heart-shaped leaf could also be brain matter. The tap is now a filtration system mimicking the photosynthetic absorption, transport and transpiration of water. Here, there is a different kind of knowledge; it is not quite a *Materia Medica* pharmakon but there is still evidence of a pharmacopeia. There is, implicit in her artwork, a suggestion of a cure for an epoch of climate damage.

When we visited Caroline Rothwell, she showed us a fascinating little book that belonged to her great aunt, Ivy Drought. The book is called *The Ghost of my Friends*. Putting aside how fantastic her aunt's name was, this little book, small enough to fit in your hand, is a book of signatures. Ivy Drought's family and friends wrote their names using a fountain pen, across a middle line of each page. Then Ivy would fold over the page before the ink dried. This created a series of signatures that look botanical.

Each page of smudged signatures looks like a plant, but it also looks like a Rorschach blob. Rothwell has used the Rorschach image a lot in her work to abstract and to shift the representation by turning it into pop psychology. She says "I suppose plants frequently have somewhat mirrored sides like a Rorschach".

We asked her whether these Rorschach images are formed from any

Caroline Rothwell

Tulip Tongue (after Maria Sibyl Merian), 2019,

hydrostone, aluminium, canvas,

epoxy glass,

stainless steel, brass,

90 x 36 x 27cm

© Caroline Rothwell



significations and whether they are meant to be seen as plants or hovering on the border between human signature and plant form. Rothwell said, “I’m worried about the signature of plants because humanity is always centred. But then I’m less worried, because if we can see ourselves, then we can see a point of care. There is an uncanny familiarity of the plant/human into the contemporary surreal, which feels connected and so necessary for now”.

Conclusion

The Doctrine of Signatures grew into physic gardens. The physic gardens grew into contemporary pharmacology. The mycelium of these plant humanities ‘growths’ creates significant and ongoing meaning between plants and humans. Each signature signifies a new plant-human relation and this has endured over thousands of years. The gardeners, the apothecarists and the artists are best at identifying the signifying relations.

While the authors are not suggesting a return to the Doctrine, there is an important lesson to remember from its activity: plants are the key to all life. They signify life and they teach humans how to live.

The English word garden is said to come from the Proto-Indo-European root *gher-*, meaning “to grasp, enclose”. The garden, with its assumptions of order, symmetry, clarity and single-point perspective, yields to another principle.

Released by the Doctrine’s mimetic magic, signatures fly off from their sheets like strange typographical insects; Rothwell’s tongues murmur in an unintelligible language. How are we to grasp this art? What kind of gardener can make sense of such things? The plant that was to mirror us turns its back. It is no longer we who predicate or signify.

Perhaps we never did.

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[24] All quotes are from the authors’ interview and email correspondence with artist Caroline Rothwell, Sydney 10 April 2025

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Planning a natal garden

In planning a natal garden Martina Hynan strives to generate an expanded understanding of natality that reflects the interconnectedness of people with ecology. Such an environmental perspective on birth acknowledges the complex interdependency of human and non-human needs in a multispecies world. The planning of this natal garden is divided into two phases; firstly, a container garden, secondly, a garden located within a community environment. Making this natal garden is a slow art project intended to cultivate an expanded understanding of natality for a more-than-human world.

text and images: **Martina Hynan**

Natality, the question of what it means to be born, is central to my work as an artist, researcher, and birth activist. Natality is traditionally associated with human birth, yet, for me, a more expanded notion of natality as part of a more-than-human world reframes what it means to be born and reimagines it as a reciprocal co-creative ecological process. Historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt’s thinking on “natal notions” proposes that the act of being born demonstrates the capacity to begin anew. Arendt further asserts that by embracing this symbol of new beginnings, it should inform political action.¹ It seems to me that natality for a more-than-human world moves beyond the parameters of inherited human-centric ideologies based on human exceptionalism. In my work, I am striving to cultivate an expanded notion of natality, and this way of thinking is informing my plans for a natal garden. In the natal garden of my imagination, humans and non-humans are working co-creatively to generate healthy soil, healthy plants, and healthy people.

In planning a natal garden it would be relatively easy to list herbs suitable and helpful during pregnancy and to list galactagogues that would help breast or chest feeding. In fact, this was the first thought I had when I began to think about making a natal garden. However, I think this approach remains too overtly human-centric. Instead, I am taking a slow art approach to planning this garden. I am thinking about how I can make a garden that recognizes the reciprocal interconnectedness of non-humans with humans, that nurtures the multispecies gestation and birth. However, the natal garden of my imagination does not yet have a home; it does not have a physical location where I can truly begin to make a co-creative nurturing environment. Instead, I am beginning this new speculative venture as a container garden of sorts. More about the mutual reciprocal attributes of these containers will follow. At this preliminary stage of my garden plan, I am happy for it to be a container garden because I think that this is a fitting metaphor for the predicament that pregnant people face within contemporary maternity care systems.

Birth has been irrefutably separated from the place; tracing this separation process was part of this research. However, now, I am very