# Ann Shelton’s Strange Flowers Set the Stage

by Katie White

Published on 14.04.2021



*New York-based writer Katie White talked to Wellington artist Ann Shelton about her recent virtual exhibition* A Lovers' Herbal *at Manhattan's Denny Dimin Gallery. Associate Editor: Chloe Lane.*



I called photographer Ann Shelton at her home in Wellington, New Zealand one day in late February 2021. It was 5pm and I was sitting at my kitchen-table-turned-desk in Brooklyn, New York, as the winter sunlight was quickly fading, evaporating into darkness. It was morning in Wellington and during our call I could hear birds chirping behind the sound of Shelton's voice. Having been holed up in a one-bedroom apartment for the better part of a year, an

unexpected surge of joy flooded through me on hearing Shelton's voice—a new voice!—and the ambient noises of a place so far away. On the computer screen in front of me were the brilliant colours of Shelton's recent works from *A Lovers' Herbal*, a virtual exhibition with Manhattan's Denny Dimin Gallery[01]. Inspired by the Japanese art of flower arrangement, ikebana, Shelton has carefully shaped various flora—sticks, moss, flowers, seeds—into striking compositions that she photographed against bright monochromatic backgrounds. The images provided a stark contrast to the bare trees outside my apartment window.

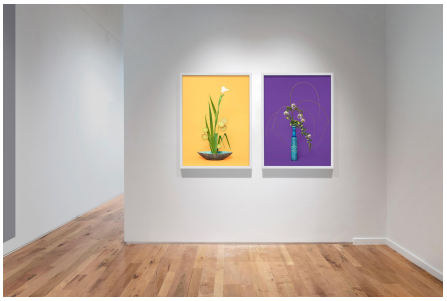
The pandemic, the wildfires, the 2020 US presidential elections: Shelton and I touched on those subjects right away, as one is apt to do these days, as a kind of recognition of shared experience. Time and space had warped, as had our grounding in them—places near and far felt equally accessible and unattainable. During our conversation, Shelton noted that photography can have something of a similar effect. It can flatten the world, and change the way we see our natural environment. Sometimes this leads to a feeling of having conquered nature, compressing it down into an image. But it can also do just the opposite: photography can unsettle our gaze and can make us see for the first time, or make us look again, and more closely. "It is a mischievous tool, photography," Shelton noted.

The photographs in *A Lovers' Herbal* (2020), are part of *jane says*, an ongoing photographic series that Shelton began in 2015. "I've been working with plant histories for about ten years and I'm interested in the ways that plants can function and can be narrated in ways that we were not so aware of," Shelton explained. These works possess a similarly disruptive effect. At first glance, the works could be classified as still lifes. Sprigs of tall elegant green shoots, fluffy white blossoms, even berry-like green bulbs appear carefully arranged in minimalistic, stylish vases. But rather than a more traditional stylised, decorative still life, these compositions feel practically scientific. Each is rendered hyperrealistic, every vein of leaf and curve of petal in focus. In a trio of photographs in the series nicknamed 'The Three Sisters' by Shelton, drops of moisture seem to quiver with fullness on the pink blossoms of peonies. The monochromatic backdrops Shelton

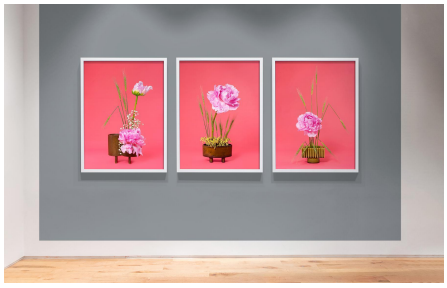
positions her arrangements in front of add to this uncanny quality creating a kind of vacuum-sealed space.



Ann Shelton, *A Lovers' Herbal*, virtual exhibition, Denny Dimin Gallery, New York, 04 February - 24 April 2021. Image courtesy Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *A Lovers' Herbal*, virtual exhibition, Denny Dimin Gallery, New York, 04 February - 24 April 2021. Image courtesy Denny Dimin Gallery.



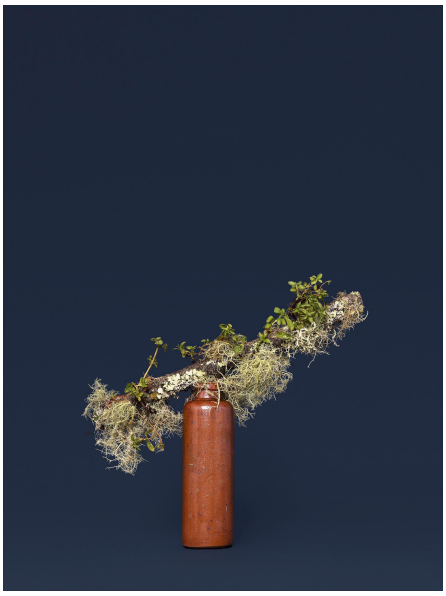
Ann Shelton, *A Lovers' Herbal*, virtual exhibition, Denny Dimin Gallery, New York, 04 February - 24 April 2021. Image courtesy Denny Dimin Gallery.

It can take many years to become a true ikebanaist. Lushly illustrated ikebana magazines from the 1960s and '70s first fuelled her interest in the technique and she started taking classes in Wellington. "As I learned the techniques of ikebana I was intrigued by its reverence for nature, but also a sense of control over it. There's a lot of cutting and folding and reducing elements, or drawing out a definitive element."

The inspiration for the *jane says* series fomented some time later, after Shelton dove headlong into researching herbs associated with women's fertility after reading trailblazing feminist Margaret Sparrow's writings on the history of abortion in New Zealand. Sparrow's writings gave Shelton early clues into the covert language used to describe various tonics and tinctures that addressed so-called 'women's problems', ranging from herbs that eased menstrual cramps to emmenagogues and abortifacients. Art historically, of course, the conflation of flowers and the female body is deeply ingrained, for example, the lily as a symbol of virginity. With names like *The Mother*, *The Witch*, and *The Nurse*, the most recent works in Shelton's series hint at ancient female archetypes, their roles in preserving knowledge of these natural medicines, and even the historic conflation of women and their bodies with natural landscapes to be pruned and tamed.

To some degree the plants Shelton has pictured in each of these photographs relate to the names she has given them. *In The Witch,*

*Pennyroyal (Mentha sp.)*, a plant used historically in small amounts to induce menstruation or, in larger doses, abortions spindles here delicately across a branch of wood that rests atop a rust-coloured vase. The branch tilts on the top of the vase at a slight diagonal, and, cast against a navy blue backdrop, it could be read as a witch on her broomstick setting off into the night sky. Other works take on the names of more contemporary characters—*The Party Girl*, *T he Influencer*, *The Congresswoman*—and comment on the way women and their bodies remain subject to scrutiny, manipulation, and distortion through society's lens.



Ann Shelton, *The Witch, Penny Royal (Mentha sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 84w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Justice, Willow (Salicaceae sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Archival pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 84w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Nurse, Opium (Papaver sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 83.70w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/ Denny Dimin Gallery.

American body politics weigh heavily in these works. Shelton made a trip to the US in 2019 for a solo exhibition at Denny Dimin Gallery at what was a particularly fraught moment for abortion rights in America. Emboldened by the Trump presidency's anti-choice agenda, many states had recently passed legislation that severely restricted women's access to abortions, with several states passing so-called "heartbeat laws" that banned terminations after six-weeks, when a heartbeat can be detected but before many women know they are pregnant. "Coming to the States allowed me to engage at a different proximity to the history

of body politics and enter the particular discourses around abortion and abortion access in America," Shelton said.

In *The Justice*, sprigs of willow stretch out from a vase in all directions, and lacy blossoms form a kind of collar around the vase. Behind it sits a regal purple backdrop. Made in 2020, the work pays tribute to the life of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose death that year imperiled the security of *Roe v. Wade*. By pairing feminine archetypes with medicinal flora (sage, rue, opium and irises also make appearances) Shelton hints at how our disconnection from nature has also disempowered women from making decisions about their bodies. Today abortion and birth control are political weapons fought over across the political spectrum and relegated to a medical industry that documents, details, and scrutinises what was a private experience. Centuries ago, these plants offered medicinal remedies and, with them, freedoms for women.

In Shelton's arrangements, the plants belie their powerful uses through their seemingly innocuous, decorative, appearance. Similarly, the knowledge of the plants' uses was often communicated covertly, through euphemism, and passed down quietly from woman to woman, even as those in power, from the Catholic Church to pharmaceutical corporations, have often tried to eradicate this knowledge. "Women were using, and are still using herbal contraceptives and birth control in many parts of the world though sometimes, it's very covert," Shelton said. For the series, Shelton even grew some of the plants pictured in her home garden when she wasn't able to readily purchase them—a demanding project (some of these plants are notoriously difficult to grow, and Shelton had several failed starts with one species while others can be highly toxic and need to be guarded off) that took on political implications as abortion was only decriminalised in New Zealand in March 2020.



Ann Shelton, *The Influencer, Peony (Paeonia sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Archival pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 83.70w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Congress Woman, Peony (Paeonia sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 83.70w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Party Girl, Peony (Paeonia sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 83.70w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/ Denny Dimin Gallery.

Shelton's 2019 trip to the United States had aesthetic implications for the series as well. In *The Three Sisters*, each of the three photographs feature vividly pink dinner plate peonies against pink backgrounds, the flowers' petals glistening with drops of water. The works make reference to Judy Chicago's iconic *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), which Shelton saw at the Brooklyn Museum. "Coming back to New Zealand and arriving at the florist one day and seeing these amazing dinner plate peonies, which are huge, was an amazing confluence," she said. "Even with their name 'dinner plate peonies'—those three works scream *Dinner Party* and quote from that lineage of feminist art practice."

Not unlike Chicago, Shelton has something of the archivist and activist in her and is quick to cite references. She counts Rachel O'Donnell's article on contraceptive plant properties in the Caribbean, "The Politics of Natural Knowing" and Londa Schiebinger's book *Plants and Empire* as valuable sources in expanding her knowledge of these plants' medicinal uses.[02] One can't help but feel a sense of rebellion in Shelton's images, when viewed as camouflaged in decorative beauty but containing coded knowledge from the past that she is carrying into the present. Shelton's photographs recall the work of artist-scientist Maria Sibylla Merian, a 17th century German-born naturalist and scientific illustrator, who is, as of late, finally garnering attention

from art historians and the public. In the late 1600s, Merian, who was divorced and in her fifties, travelled from Europe to Suriname in South America and spent two years documenting flora and fauna and its uses in exquisite detail. *The Physical Garden*, a poster Shelton designed for *A Lovers' Herbal*, features one of Merian's drawings. In tribute to Merian, Shelton has included insects in several of her photographs from jane says, as Merian was famed not only for her drawings of flowers but her knowledge and study of the insect world. In *The Sybil, Sage (Salvia sp.)*, which makes reference to Merian's middle name, Shelton has included a slug quietly disguised on a sage leaf. "Many botanists of Merian's time went out on these exploratory journeys and in some cases if they came across a plant that could be used for contraception or abortion, they didn't write up that aspect, even though they might've been made aware of it," Shelton said. "Merian recorded these other uses for the plants and engaged with enslaved peoples who used the plants as contraceptives so they wouldn't conceive children into slavery. There are aspects of this that link back to the research I did on the history of abortion in New Zealand. These are of course vastly different contexts, however they both engage with deeply traumatic, personal histories relating to women and reproductive control."

A week after my conversation with Shelton, I saw the works in *A Lovers' Herbal* in person at Denny Dimin Gallery during a private viewing and was struck by their scale. The ikebana arrangements are larger than I expected and lurking in their beauty one feels an if not menacing, then uncanny, sentience. Against their monochromatically coloured backdrops—so often used by commercial photography studios—it's easy for me to imagine these arrangements like actresses posing for headshots, every hair and lash in place, only here, it's petals and leaves and sticks. Put it this way: I almost expect them to wink at me, or smile suddenly with some hither-to-unseen teeth. I feel like maybe they are. *The Little Shop of Horrors*, the 1986 American comedy film about Audrey, a plant with an insatiable hunger for human flesh, springs to mind from some childhood recess. And, later, these lines from Daniel Chamovitz's book *What a Plant Knows*:

"Think about this: plants see you. In fact, plants monitor their visible environment all the time. Plants see if you come near them; they know when you stand over them. They even know if you've painted your house or if you've moved their pots from one side of the room to the other."[03]



Ann Shelton, *The Super Model, Iris (Iridaceae sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Archival pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 84w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Mother, Rue (Ruta sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 84w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/ Denny Dimin Gallery.



Ann Shelton, *The Sybil, Sage (Salvia sp.)*, 2015-ongoing. Pigment print, 44 h x 33w in; 112h x 84w cm. Courtesy Ann Shelton/ Denny Dimin Gallery.

Shelton emphasised how she tries to activate the depths of photography through takeaway items and self-made publications, and recently through live performances such as *The physical garden*, an in-person narrative monologue that accompanied the *jan e says* series. I can see what Shelton means now—between the photographs themselves, there is a kind of performance as though each were an actor in some ancient play. Looking more closely, I start to wonder if this staging is the artifice, the vase, a costume, and that these actors are not just playing a role we've assigned to them, but looking out, observing us closely, wondering what it is that we are doing.

Towards the end of our call, Shelton started speaking about the artifice of gardens as I looked out the window at the empty plot of my Brooklyn yard, clotheslines criss-crossing my view. "The architectural structure of gardens of the West have become

aesthetic armatures where one goes and has this sort of transformative visual experience. That distances us from what nature is and what a critical part of our planet it is," she said. "There is an aestheticised surface understanding of what nature is. That's part of the huge problem that we're now facing as we're destroying our planet. We're only beginning to understand our disconnect with nature."

There's a feeling I can't quite shake that I'm complicit in this disconnection and that her photographs have dislodged my gaze as she said photographs were sometimes inclined to do. I cast back to my own desires for winter to end and for a garden that is in bloom, elegant, pretty, pruned, and above all else pleasing to the eyes. The heightening of artifice in Shelton's careful and elaborate compositions breaks the fourth wall of our illusions—the artist overdoes the makeup, so to say, such that the reverie is broken, such that I can only see the actor and not the character. Now, prettiness feels very much besides the point. Shelton doesn't so much pull back a curtain to another world but to set a very elaborate stage. Here, these sticks and blossoms and bits of earth are not so much meant to be seen, as watched and listened to.

*Footnotes*

01. The media-rich online presentation of A Lovers' Herbal also includes a video interview with the artist and a downloadable poster.

02. Rachel O'Donnell, "The Politics of Natural Knowing: Contraceptive Plant Properties in the Caribbean" (2016) *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17(3): 59-79; Londa Schiebinger, *Plant s and Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2004.

03. Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows*, Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

*Biographies*



Ann Shelton (b. 1967, New Zealand) received her MFA from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. She lives in Wellington, New Zealand and exhibits internationally. Her most recent museum survey, *Dark Matter*, was curated by Zara Stanhope for Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in November 2016 and toured to Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū in December 2017. A catalog accompanied the exhibition with essays by Stanhope, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Ulrich Bauer, Donna West Brett, Dorita Hannah and John Di Stefano. Ann Shelton is represented by Denny Dimin Gallery in the United States, where in 2019 she had her first solo exhibition in North America at their New York location. Shelton's work has been extensively written about and reviewed in publications including Artforum, Hyperallergic, Journal of New Zealand & Pacific Studies, Artnet News, The Art Newspaper, Galerie magazine, and the Evergreen Review. Her works are included in public and private collections throughout NZ and in the US.



Katie White is a Brooklyn-based writer and editor. She is the Galleries Editor at Artnet News. Previously, she has held positions at Sotheby's, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and with arts publisher SNAP Editions. She holds an MA in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, where she wrote her thesis on Depression Era photography under Linda Nochlin. She earned her BA in Art History and Journalism from New York University.

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