

Methods of Preservation

Ashley Gillanders





It is Gallery 1Co3's pleasure to produce this print-on-demand publication as a document of *Methods of Preservation*, the first solo exhibition in a public gallery by emerging Winnipeg artist Ashley Gillanders. *Methods of Preservation* was on view in the Gallery from January 14 – February 20, 2016 and featured works that, through their content, contradict the realities of the winter prairie landscape and, in their form, defy conventional expectations of photography.

This exhibition represents a bold step in Gillanders' journey to find her place in contemporary photography. During her artist talk at The University of Winnipeg, Gillanders noted her longstanding interest in exploring human interactions with built and natural environments, as well as her fascination with society's desire to bring nature indoors. By photographing parts of tropical houseplants, she continues her investigation of these ideas in *Methods of Preservation*. However, while her earlier pieces were presented in a traditional format – as prints hung flat against walls – these works are photographic sculptures enclosed with acrylic covers and perched on pedestals or shelves.

In her discerning response to *Methods of Preservation*, art historian Susan Close contextualizes Gillanders' work by outlining photographic predecessors and contemporaries who have challenged traditional forms and functions of the lens-based medium, often employing nature as their muse. Close also tells us how Gillanders makes her work, a critical point to understanding the artist's disruption of established photographic processes.

Working with domestic objects considered mundane in their original form, Gillanders physically transforms houseplant parts into distinct three-dimensional arrangements and then isolates and contains them for our careful consumption. She acknowledges that in addition to confronting some photographic traditions, she works within others; in particular, Gillanders captures and suspends the existence of her once-living subjects at a specific moment in time. And, as Close notes, her method of presentation also highlights the preciousness of her subjects and alludes to methods of display during photography's formative years.

Gallery 1Co3 applauds Ashley Gillanders for exhibiting this experimental body of work at The University of Winnipeg. Her ability to merge aspects of traditional and contemporary photography in *Methods of Preservation* is admirable and I eagerly anticipate her future creations in the field.

Jennifer Gibson

Director/Curator, Gallery 1Co3

Ashley Gillanders
METHODS of PRESERVATION



Reflections on Ashley Gillanders' *Methods of Preservation*

Photography has long been understood as a primarily “subtractive” medium. Traditionally, photographs have been two-dimensional, lens-produced images made with a camera, through a process that involved selecting and framing objects, individuals, events or experiences pre-existing in the world. Photographers pointed out to us where to look and what to look at. This was, of course, in direct contrast to other picturing media such as painting or drawing that were “additive”, in that they required that an artist create images by filling in blank spaces.

From photography's beginnings though, there have always been artists who challenged this view by subverting the boundary between “taking” and “making” an image. Examples include pioneer Victorian photographer Henry Fox Talbot's light drawings of plants, the photomontages of the Bauhaus photographer and teacher Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and the more conceptual, Dada and Surrealistic inspired, camera-less photograms of the avant-garde photographer Man Ray. Photographic experimentation has persisted, becoming increasingly more spatial with the resulting image being clearly a manufactured, often three- dimensional object. Photo historian and curator Geoffrey Batchen has described that this transition from traditional photography to what he terms “post-photography” as an evolutionary phase that is “after but not beyond photography.”¹ As Batchen argues:

*[where] once art photography was measured according to the conventions and aesthetic values of the painted image, today the situation is decidedly more complicated. Over the past two decades, the boundary between photography and other media like painting, sculpture or performance has become increasingly porous.*²

In 1970, curator Peter Bunnell presented *Photography into Sculpture* for the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Batchen argues that this exhibition is significant for its consideration of the photograph as an object in its own right rather than merely being a representation of reality or, what John Szarkowski, former Director of Photography at the MOMA, referred to as being a “window” or “mirror”. Batchen points out that such questioning of the identity of the photographic image and its shift from one set of dimensions to another have become the focuses of concern for a growing number of photographic artists.³

The latest work of emerging Winnipeg photographer Ashley Gillanders, *Methods of Preservation*, falls within this contemporary sculptural practice in that it utilizes constructed, three-dimensional

1 Geoffrey Batchen, “Post-Photography” in *Each Wild Idea, Writing Photography History*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 109.

2 Batchen, “Post-Photography”, 109.

3 Batchen, “Post-Photography”, 110.



photo-based objects and environments. Her exhibition comprises a number of paper assemblages created to resemble houseplants. These are displayed in Plexiglas boxes that resemble small specimen display cases or terraria. Gillanders' process though, is unmistakably photo based. First, she disassembles living, tropical houseplants. She then photographs these and prints them at a 1:1 scale as archival, ink jet images. Next, she cuts out the plant sections and re-assembles the components as new, sculptural typologies. The results have a Constructivist quality, but with a twist. They are presented simultaneously as hybrid constructions incorporating the disciplined elegance of curving leaf forms reminiscent of *Ikebana*, the art of Japanese flower arrangement, with surrealist elements most evident in the jagged and obvious cutout edges of many of the leaves.

Gillanders' photo sculptures are a concerted attempt to disrupt the traditional photographic process. In this, her work is in keeping with the approach of other contemporary camera artists, for example, Owen Kydd and Marco Breuer whose works were included in the group exhibition *What is a Photograph?*, which was curated by Carol Squiers at the International Centre of Photography in 2013.⁴ Breuer makes sculptural installations that directly manipulate the surface of photographic papers achieved through interventions such as burning.⁵ Kydd creates durational video images that involve long exposures of still life compositions.⁶ Such exploration of the constructed nature of the photographic object is a shared concern among many contemporary photographers. It is now commonplace for photographers to first build a construction or sculpture and then push the shutter. Consider, for example, the expanded photo practice of James Casebere: his work begins with the construction of substantial models of entire built environments that he then photographs. Casebere's installations are on a much larger scale than Gillanders' and require teams of builders to construct them. His final presentation format returns to the two-dimensional, however: the photographic print becomes merely a record or document of his creation.

Gillanders' choice of a manipulated depiction of nature is a well-established practice that suggests a reference, and possibly pays homage to, one of photography's earliest expressions. As previously mentioned, in the 1840s William Fox Talbot made images using photogenic drawing techniques in which he set out natural materials on sheets of light sensitive paper. Fox Talbot arranged original plants so as to produce a contact print image through a medium that he referred to as "the pencil of nature". While differing in process the principle underlying Gillanders' work is the same as Fox Talbot's; like him, she is concerned with using photography

4 Personal communication with Ashley Gillanders, December 22, 2015.

5 Vanessa Rocco, Review of Carol Squiers, ed. *What is a Photograph?* New York: International Centre of Photography, www.caareviews.org/reviews/2348.

6 Personal communication with Ashley Gillanders, December 22, 2015.

as a tool to preserve the plant materials that form her paper sculptures. It is photography that allows Gillanders to suspend the moment and to preserve these plant sections from the natural processes to which they would normally succumb. Now they will not wither or die. As Gillanders explains: “[o]utside of the work these living objects are continuing to change but remain preserved in photographs at specific moments in time.”⁷

As well as exploring the idea of preservation inherent to the photographic process, by boxing in her constructions as she has, Gillanders makes clear that she is also concerned with issues of containment, control and display; again these ideas are commonalities of Victorian attitudes toward the natural world and photography itself. The Plexiglas shells that enclose her photo sculptures exoticize them; they protect them and suggest that these objects are special, fragile and rare; to the viewer the message is clear, you may look, you may wonder, but you may not touch. Within these small, transparent interiors, these delicate photographic simulacra remain elegant, distant and contained.

Susan Close

7 Ashley Gillanders, artist statement for *Methods of Preservation*, Gallery 1Co3, The University of Winnipeg, January, 2016.



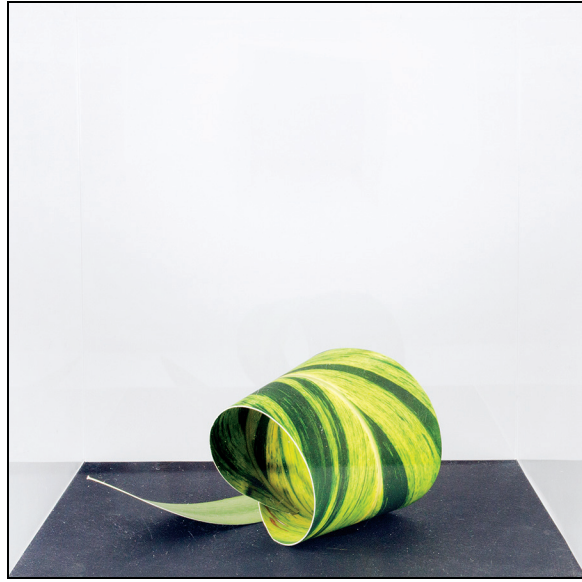




















List of works

Measurements are listed in order of width x depth x height. Descriptions for each piece appear in brackets.

untitled #1, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(striped green roll with curved leaf and flat pink petal)

untitled #2, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(flat green arrangement with yellow petal)

untitled #3, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(curled green leaf with pink and yellow petals)

untitled #4, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(stack with balancing leaves and pink and red petals)

untitled #5, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(dark leaves lying flat)

untitled #6, 8" x 8" x 8", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(curved red leaf with small petals)

untitled #7, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 42", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(green pile)

untitled #8, 18" x 18" x 28", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(large curved leaf with surrounding leaves and petals)

untitled #9, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 28", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic (ring)

untitled #10, 42 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 28", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(three piles of various heights)

untitled #11, 18" x 18" x 28", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(pile of rolled leaves)

untitled #12, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 30", 2015, archival ink jet prints, matboard, and acrylic
(flat multi-coloured arrangement on diagonal)

About the artist

Ashley Gillanders is an emerging photographic artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba whose practice incorporates traditional and experimental approaches to photography to explore the relationships between nature, humans, and their environments. She graduated from The University of Winnipeg Collegiate in 2004 and obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours degree from the University of Manitoba, School of Art in 2011. Upon completion of her BFA, she participated in residencies and mentorships at Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (Manitoba), The Banff Centre (Alberta), and the School of Visual Arts (New York). She has been the recipient of grants from the Winnipeg Arts Council and the Manitoba Arts Council. Her works have been shown locally at Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts and Actual Contemporary, and her series *All Things Considered* was presented by One Night Stand in 2013. *Methods of Preservation* was her first solo exhibition in a public art gallery.

About the essayist

Dr. Susan Close is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture and a Senior Fellow at St. John's College, both at the University of Manitoba. She teaches interdisciplinary courses on theory, history and photography. Her book *Framing Identity: Social Practices of Photography in Canada (1880-1920)* was published by Arbeiter Ring in 2007, and was short listed for three Manitoba Book Awards. Dr. Close is currently working on a new book on photography and the built environment.

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Curated by Jennifer Gibson

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