



NEW YORKERS ARE DESPERATE FOR GREENERY

BY ALICE HINES | MON. OCTOBER 27, 2014 | 7:30 PM



Channell by Simryn Gill

At 107 West 28th Street, Planthouse Gallery sits on Manhattan's densest stretch of urban jungle. On a recent afternoon, buds and stalks crowded the sidewalk as trucks unloaded giant pumpkins. Peonies and hyacinth drank up the rain.

Planthouse houses few actual plants compared to its Chelsea neighbors. Ideas about plants, however, are abundant. The gallery's current exhibition, *The Floral Ghost*, pays homage to the building and neighborhood's history. Formerly a flower shop, the gallery was founded by Katie Michel and Brad Ewing, colleagues at the nearby Grenfell Press, in 2013. The pair kept the florist's name, business card, and logo. For *The Floral Ghost*, they and

curators May Castleberry and Raymond Foye commissioned seven artists—including Katia Santibañez, Anton Würth, and Susan Orlean—to create work based on an image of faded botanical wallpaper originally scraped off the shop's walls. The result is a potpourri of group work: prints, paintings, photographs, etchings, a wall drawing, and an essay by Orlean (the celebrated author of *The Orchid Thief*, which later was turned into the 2002 Spike Jonze film, *Adaptation*).

It's no coincidence that much of the art in this exhibition is ephemeral. Like many of Manhattan's industrial districts, the Flower District is on its last act. It first emerged in the 1890s, catering to shoppers at the nearby Ladies' Mile, and bloomed for decades before being rezoned in 1995 to make room for residential buildings. (Planthouse will have to move again next year, when their landlord sells its building.) As articles about the "wilting" of the district reveal, New Yorkers have a tendency to rhapsodize the man-made forest as if it were a natural one. "I do think being so bound in concrete and asphalt makes plant life

very special," Orlean told Opening Ceremony in an e-mail. "You know this is the case when you see the collections of tiny potted plants on fire escapes—someone is desperate for greenery."



Simryn Gill's *Scale or Tasha and the Tree*

In her essay also titled *The Floral Ghost*—one of the first pieces she's written about plants since 1998's *Orchid Thief*—Orlean recalls her first time in the strange, verdant oasis. "I do remember the shock of seeing this quiver of greenery on the gray Manhattan sidewalk, not displayed as decoration but as product, as merchandise." It was, in other words, strange to see such "singular and beautiful" objects as flowers—destined for "a flower arrangement bought as an apology or a little green something to brighten a dreary corner"—clumped together for sale on something so literally pedestrian as the 28th Street sidewalk.

When you think about it this way, plants have a lot in common with art about plants—or art in general, even. Both are unique, emotionally resonant objects which exist uncomfortably within commercial economies. As with that special orchid, it's strange to think about paintings being sold, boxed up, and shipped to retail outlets (a.k.a. galleries) around the world. It's also interesting fodder for an exhibit, a fact that the self-reflective *Floral Ghost* proves. The exhibit deals openly with the commerce of plants and of art: In Simryn Gill's *Channell*, for instance, ocean freighters linger in the horizon behind a lagoon of trees. Others works, like Katia Santibañez's wall drawing of maple leaves in various shades of gray pencil, are ephemeral—and therefore complicated to sell, much like fresh-cut flowers.

For its part, "The spirit of Planthouse is more about crazy projects than big commerce," part of the reason why it's situated in the Flower District instead of nearby Chelsea, Katie Michel told us. Copies of Orlean's essay are available in a limited-edition portfolio along with all of the artists' prints for \$6,000—or, for free at the gallery. By the way, the comp copies are printed on a faded, near-transparent newsprint that crinkled as soon as this writer put it in her bag. "That's kind of the point," Michel reminds us.

The Floral Ghost *runs through December 12*

Planthouse Gallery

107 W 28th St.

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