

As we Stand: Seeing Plants by Paula de la Rúa Cordoba

By Zali Matthews

Shiny, dewy and vibrant, Paula de la Rúa Cordoba's *Seeing Plants I* (2020) depicts an overflowing cornucopia of vegetation. Infinitely varied plant life bursts across a carved wooden baroque frame in streams of luscious growth. The flora escapes the confines of the frame, and the leaves appear almost plump, as if truly bursting with moisture and life. The vision brings to mind the sensation of stepping outside after a heavy bout of rain, when the trees suddenly take on a garish green and sparkle with dazzling dewiness. This artwork highlights the beauty and richness of plants, while asking us to reflect on our ethical relationships with them.

Seeing Plants I has been lovingly constructed from ceramic and wood – materials that hold strong connections with the earth, which are universal and pre-colonial. In using them, Cordoba questions philosophical ideas regarding fragility and strength, seeking harmony through balance to critique colonial histories and legacies. Cordoba uses porcelain, associated with the crockery of the British Empire, in order to reverse the subjugation of nature with this imperialist material.

Cordoba's use of vegetation is equally significant. Some of the plants which she has carefully crafted are considered weeds in Australia, and the wooden frame behind them belongs to the camphor laurel tree, introduced by the British to Australia as a garden ornamental. In choosing such plants, Cordoba interrogates colonial systems of categorisation by questioning those British ideals of beauty which determine what we define as 'native' or 'weed'. She reveals a rich colonial history of introducing plant species to Australia while disregarding the environmental consequences.

At the centre of this work lies a dialogue around the way in which plants are defined. The title of this work, 'Seeing Plants', refers to the academic term 'plant blindness', which defines how anthropocentric western societies fail to perceive the contribution plants make to the environment. Such blindness allows us to continually undermine the ecological importance of plants, thereby justifying their subjugation and engendering environmental catastrophe. In her work, Cordoba questions the way our society assigns plants a passive and inanimate role in the global natural chain, demanding instead that plants be recognised for their dynamism, autonomy and intelligence.

Ultimately, in this work there lies a call to really *look* at plants. It is both captivating and meditative, and ultimately implores us to consider how we can, and should, treat plants – not only for a sustainable future, but also in regard to ethical concerns about plant agency.

Seeing Plants I is part of an installation titled *Seeing Plants: Reversing the Politicising of Plants as a Decolonialist Strategy*, which formed the basis of Cordoba's Honours research project, completed in 2020 as part of a Bachelor of Fine Art degree at Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University.