

**PROVIDENCE BIENNIAL
FOR CONTEMPORARY ART**

MEDIA AND PUBLIC INQUIRIES

FOR EXHIBITION:

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Reseeding the City: Ethnobotany in the Urban

A project developed under the aegis of the Providence Biennial for Contemporary Art
Part of The Year of the City: The Providence Project

A Focused Group Exhibition

Rhode Island State House, Lower Level Gallery

82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island

October 25 – November 27

Opening Reception October 26, 5:30 – 8:00 pm

& A Day-Long Forum

Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University

Stephen Robert '62 Hall

280 Brook Street, Providence, Rhode Island

October 26, 9:30 am – 5:00 pm

The Project Team

Exhibition curated by Judith Tolnick Champa

Forum co-organized by Sam Coren, PhD student, American Studies, Brown University

Aja Grande, PhD student, History, Anthropology, Science, Technology & Society (HASTS), MIT

and Alexandra M. Peck, PhD candidate, Anthropology, Brown University

Exhibition and Forum managed by Jennifer Dalton Vincent

The Exhibition

Providence, RI—From handmade paper crafted of local waste plant fibers expressing the changing nature of Providence's rivers (collaborating artists May Babcock and Megan Singleton), to a knitted, and then felted wall hanging interpreting the thickly built city as a setting and a subject (Margery Winter's *Mend a City*), the goal of the exhibition *ReSeeding the City* and its attendant community forum is to expose and explore a range of responses to the often contending forces of people and plants in the urban setting.

In the special dual project of contemporary art exhibition and community forum, we ask afresh how forces of nature and urban life may productively align. In this way the exhibition recalls the groundbreaking 1913 Armory Show, in New York, whose logo was a simple pine tree—aptly deploying a symbol of American political revolution to herald an aesthetic revolution.



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Curator Tolnick Champa emphasizes the timeliness of the exhibition and its special venue, in remarking, “Today, visual art is taking an increasingly prominent role in sparking urgent questions about the conditioning role of nature, and in informing debate about its responsible cultivation in the urban. The exhibition highlights these interlocking challenges; in places it may suggest impasse, in others reconciliation. The sense of inquiry and argument inherent in the work will amplify and resonate in the historic venue of the people’s State House, a site for productively re-seeding this debate.”

The exhibition features the probing work of twenty emerging and established artists based in Providence and throughout New England. A few highlights:

Susan Erony’s large-scale *Growth*, 2018 (pencil, burnt paper and acrylic on paper) that represents a tree and its root systems, is composed of two paper sheets glued to create an intentional edge. As she explains, “I had trouble deciding how to bring meaning to the edge. Was it the cliff that we are going off of, the ever-changing edge of the land and sea, or the edge of the seen and the subterranean? [...] The edge in my piece became the boundary not only between land and sea, but between water and sky, and earth and sky. I kept wondering what would grow in a post-Anthropocene era, the first plant that grows, the first creative force that flourishes after we are gone.”

Installations newly created for this exhibition include the dramatic *Ebb and Flow VII* by May Babcock and Megan Singleton, a nearly 25-foot long wall relief of handmade paper pulp harvested from local plant fibers, Woonasquatucket River mud, and wild urban plants. It will wend its way across the entrance wall, following the dendritic paths of the river’s watershed. Nearby, visitors will discover a reinterpretation of the Gallery’s early 20th c. shoeshine alcove by Elizabeth Duffy. Patterns derived from sole treads of shoes are screen-printed onto textile and wallpaper with shoe polish, soil, and flocking. The patterns undermine the self-limited earth-bound, ultimately challenging the pedestrian to step into untethered nature, upward and beyond. An open shoe polish can acts as a conceptual moon-like foil to the luminous State House dome.

Pond Portrait (Mashapaug) by Holly Ewald, a well-known champion of restoring this Providence pond as an urban oasis, makes an environmentally-themed mixed media floor sculpture incorporating found urban objects and her cyanobacteria print made from the pond water itself. Some viewers may find a consonance between Ewald’s piece and Jordi Lister’s *Golden Poppies*, a watercolor with gilding that refers to protrusions and patterning evident when nature reclaims or consumes boundaries.



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The specific concepts of several artists called for some unusual surfaces. Glazed white earthenware plates support transfer-printed engravings by Andrew Raftery. On exhibition are three pieces from his extraordinary cycle, *The Autobiography of a Garden*, a record of his gardening each month of the year, and a response to the medieval book of hours. “Oil on wood” inadequately describes the medium of Leslie Hirst’s “Circular Cities” series: rare woods whose cut surfaces reveal distinctive patterning, a “figured grain” to which her micro oil paint drawing responds. The paper of Wendy Wahl’s *Myceliology Diptych #7* unpredictably absorbs the mushroom spores she places on it, resulting in (literally) organically-derived monoprints.

Among several outstanding sculptors the exhibition will include the work of Robin Spears, Jr. of the Narragansett Tribe, for whom comfort with and knowledge of ecologically-minded making is a generations deep commitment. Additionally, artists born in other countries (Ana Flores, Cuba; Patricia Figueroa, Peru) and resettled in the northeast will bring their distinctive cultural frameworks to bear in works speculating on art’s own ability to re-seed the city.

The Forum

Providence, RI—Drawing from indigenous, cross-cultural, and Western knowledge traditions, Forum co-organizers bring together artists, academics, designers, urban planners, farmers, botanists, and herbalists to share their perspectives on the entwined lives of humans, plants, and other life forms in urban New England.

The day-long Forum is designed by three graduate students who share a concern for the life of cities and their ecological impacts. Forum co-organizer Sam Coren explains that “cities are often imagined as places apart from nature, as the preserve of humans, but there is no magic circle keeping other forms of life outside. Realizing this, we might begin to practice an ethics of care for the earth by tending to what is nearest—building relationships across species that generate richer worlds, while centering fellow humans’ universal right to a decent life. We hope that the Forum might contribute to this conversation by fostering new collaborations and shared vocabularies among those concerned with urban nature and its futures.”

The Forum looks to plants as models, metaphors, and partners in urban placemaking, exploring what it means to embrace the rich assemblage of life forms that take root in our midst, whether in gardens, wood patches, brownfields, or roadside margins. It aims to create a space in which art and science might inspire activism and enlightened policy. Forum co-organizer Aja Grande focuses on this point. “The *ReSeeding the City* Forum is intended to serve as a space to reflect on one’s consumption habits in cities, and to understand how our relationships with plants are inherently connected to the lives and cultures of others who pass unseen in their daily, mundane habits of urban living,” she says.



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Born and raised in Hawai'i, Grande's graduate research traces how the development of urban infrastructures frames people's relationship to the land." About a year ago, the *ReSeeding* team and I originally titled our project, 'home/lands,' "she continues, "Though its name has evolved, its original impetus persists. In my studies I seek to answer, 'How does one orient to a home that one cares about (a feeling known in Hawai'i as aloha 'āina, 'love of the land') while still supporting the livelihoods of Native peoples?"

Beginning with a blessing of the grounds by a Narragansett elder, a range of presentations, workshops and panel discussions will structure the Forum. Herbalists and plant practitioners will lead a workshop on how to prepare medicines, food, cloth, and other goods from plant materials. Papermaking from local seaweeds and invasive plants will be demonstrated. "The Role of Plants in Indigenous and Diaspora Community Formation" and "Urban Land Use and Urban Ecology" are topics addressed through panel discussions. An impressive variety of participants ranging from across the state, and beyond, will be featured. From the African Alliance of Rhode Island to the Tomaquag Museum, from Boston's Arnold Arboretum to graduate students in Cambridge and Providence, from a Visiting Professor of International and Public Affairs and Africana Studies at Brown to a Senior Research Scientist at MIT, from a New York-based educator and cultural organizer to the food strategy director for the city of Providence, the Forum participants are passionate and informed. Delving into human relationships with plants, in cities past and present, will be a leitmotif of the day.

The Forum takes place on Saturday, October 26, from 9:30 am to 5:00 pm in the Agora of Stephen Robert '62 Hall, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, located at 280 Brook Street. It concludes with a Reception in the State House, and the exhibition's Opening. All members of the public are invited without charge. Early comers are encouraged to respond through the Forum Eventbrite page at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/reseeding-the-city-ethnobotany-in-the-urban-tickets-70920973541?aff=ebdssbdestsearch>

Attendees please note: Catering of the Forum is by Harvest Kitchen, part of Farm Fresh RI, a non-profit that sources food from local farms, and is a culinary job training program for teenagers.

Exhibition-Related Programming in the State House and Beyond

In tandem with Year of the City: The Providence Project, Tours and Brown Bag Conversations with curator, artists and Forum organizers, Rhode Island State House, November, TBA. See <http://www.providencebiennial.com/>

Community Plant-to-Paper Workshop, Providence ¡CityArts! for Youth, 891 Broad St., Providence, September 23-27. On view at ¡CityArts! Gallery October 1-31. ¡CityArts! youth participate in a workshop culminating in a group-designed installation for the Gallery. The Workshop, led by



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exhibiting artist May Babcock over several days, has a combined didactic and aesthetic purpose. The young South Providence artists will learn firsthand about local ecological history, using foraged wild urban plant fibers and plant-based trash for pulp. They will come to understand local waterways and ways of mapping them, while also learning about plant ecologies. See <https://www.providencecityarts.org/>

Kokedama in Your Landscape, a special Providence Art Club workshop with papermaking partners and exhibiting artists May Babcock and Megan Singleton, 11 Thomas St., Providence, October 27, 1:00 - 3:00 pm. **Kokedama in Your Landscape** creates art through interaction. It spreads knowledge of local and native plants using the Japanese Bonsai method of containing plants into small moss balls that are then suspended, a technique known as Kokedama. During workshops held throughout the country, the root balls of local flora are covered with wet, freshly made sheets of plant-based handmade paper. Participants learn how to create their own Kokedama and take it back to plant into their landscape. In return, they are asked for an image of the plant in its new home and the coordinates of the location, to be mapped and documented on the website, <http://kiyl.weebly.com/>. Participants in the Providence Art Club workshop will become familiar firsthand with Rhode Island's native and wild plants ecologies. See <https://providenceartclub.org/>

We also announce **Local Ecologies**, a traveling exhibition of newly commissioned artworks and public programming devised for three collaborating UMass campuses, each having landscapes of diverse coastal and river ecosystems and layered indigenous, colonial and industrial histories. The place-based art practices of this exhibition bring ecologies and land use histories into new focus. Multidisciplinary artworks have been commissioned from ten leading artists, all of whom who have lived and worked in eastern Massachusetts. The exhibition is on view from November 7, 2019 to January 10, 2020 in UMass Dartmouth (Star Store Campus, Downtown New Bedford). Details may be found at: <https://sites.uml.edu/local-ecologies/>



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Getting to the Exhibition

Hours of the State House & Driving Directions/By Bus

Monday - Friday, 8:30 am-4:30 pm, holidays excepted

The address of the RI State House is 82 Smith St., Providence, RI 02903, and entrance is from the Smith St. side, which faces away from downtown. On the RIPTA bus line, Route 57-Smith Street is Stop #5.

Parking & Accessibility

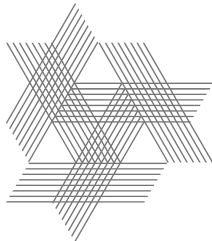
Metered parking is available on Smith, Francis and Gaspee streets. When the General Assembly is not in session, parking is available in the lower legislative lot off of Smith Street on a first-come-first-served basis. Handicapped parking and the handicapped-accessible entrance are located in the upper legislative parking lot at the eastern corner. There is elevator access on every floor. Wheelchairs are available free of charge and are located inside the upper parking lot entrance to the building. The Capitol Police stationed at the entrance will be able to assist in obtaining a wheelchair.

All programs are open to the public without charge & accessible to persons with disabilities.

Please check our website for updates: <http://www.providencebiennial.com>

**RE SEEDING
THE CITY**

ReSeeding the City was developed under the aegis of the **Providence Biennial for Contemporary Art**, an independent 501(c) (3) founded in 2011. It has been identified with several dynamic exhibitions throughout and beyond the city-state, partnering with a range of academic, cultural, artistic and community organizations.



RHODE ISLAND
COUNCIL *for* the HUMANITIES

This exhibition and its programs are made possible through major funding from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, an independent affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council seeds, supports, and strengthens public history, cultural heritage, civic education, and community engagement by and for all Rhode Islanders.



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