



JENNIFER WANNER: IMMUTO

A Proposal of Dreadful Beauty
by Katherine Ylitalo

“Naming is one of the hardest things,” says Jennifer Wanner as she looks at one of her newly completed watercolours.¹ Her comment seems offhand, but is key in her current art practice. She echoes voices over two thousand years of philosophers, medics, naturalists, botanists and taxonomists who searched for order in the plant world and tried to pin down a rationale for classification with names.²

22. Jennifer Wanner
Florilegium:
Brassica rapa,
Glycine max,
Nicotiana tabacum,
Zea mays, 2009



23. Jennifer Wanner, *Florilegium* (video still), 2009

Four years ago, Wanner embarked on an extended project she calls *Florilegium*. The literal meaning, from the Latin roots, is a gathering of flowers, but it can denote a literary anthology of choice selections. She selects the six most commonly genetically modified plants, chooses photographic images of them from the Internet and downloads, prints, copies, cuts and collages them to create images of uncanny hybrid plant forms of her own invention. Wanner likens her concoctions to seventeenth century Dutch floral paintings, also realistic looking compositions, but actually fictive.³ In reality, the various flowers in the sumptuous bouquets don't bloom at the same time, although their idealized image has come to set the standard for grand flower arrangements.

She tussles with notions of truth and representation, drawing on the ideas of French philosopher and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard, regarding the simulacrum and notions of how we replace reality with its representation, with the result that we lose the ability to distinguish between the real and the model.⁴ Wanner's crossbreeds of corn, canola, soy, cotton, tomato and tobacco don't exist, but she enlists artistic devices and tropes to tempt us into believing that the images represent a real thing.

Based on the initial collaged maquettes, Wanner creates watercolours, stop-motion animations and rubbings. They supply the backstory, attesting to the bizarre plants' existence through botanical illustration, film and printing—forms that have traditionally served as methods of scientific documentation.

Botanical illustration, one of the oldest watercolour genres, is ruled by conventions that Wanner follows closely. To complete one of the earliest watercolours in the project, she used three 00 sable brushes, innumerable 2H pencils, a pile of steel pencil sharpeners, several erasers and calipers to blow up the image of the maquette into a pencil drawing at a ratio of 1:1.29. She then lays each miniscule stroke of colour into tiny graphite cells.

All her colours are mixed from only three tubes of paint: Quinacridone Red, Aureolin Yellow and Antwerp Blue (with the very occasional use of Phthalo Blue if necessary). By using a traditional, controlled palette, she achieves a harmonious range of colours that reinforces the convincing quality of the work. She credits artist Stefanja Dumanowski for setting meticulous standards and teaching her respect for the techniques of watercolour.

24. Jennifer Wanner
Florilegium
(*sine terra*): *Brassica rapa*,
Glycine max,
Gossypium hirsutum
2010





25. Jennifer Wanner, *Florilegium: Brassica rapa, Glycine max, Gossypium hirsutum, Nicotiana tabacum, Zea mays (detail)*, 2009

Wanner calls this painting simply *Florilegium: Brassica rapa, Glycine max, Nicotiana tabacum, Zea mays*. The name lists each of the progenitors by their Latin names providing the pedigree of the new hybrid. The use of the Latin names adds credibility to the images, as if the hybrid was produced in the heyday of binomial nomenclature (the hierarchical system pioneered by Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus in 1753 to classify and name organisms by a universally-standard name based on two words, genus and species). Wanner's use of the name is also a sly nod to recent developments in genetic research that suggest many re-classifications. The name could be a provisional one given by an old-school taxonomist who is reluctant to give the new creature a name of its own, perhaps waiting to learn more of its attributes, or on hold while new classifications are sorted out.

The task of the botanical illustrator is to work from preserved material, often dried, pressed specimens in a museum collection, to make a lifelike image of a whole plant, including flowers and fruit, and in this case, the roots as well. Wanner's model, her "preserved material," is the maquette, made from plant parts taken from various photographs available on the Internet: the roots and seed pods of

the soy plant (*Glycine max*) that she joins with the leaves and extended yellow flowers of canola (*Brassica rapa*), a ripening ear of corn (*Zea mays*) and the sticky leaves and stems and fragrant pink flowers of tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*). The result is an amalgam of high and low resolution images. Wanner is true to her source. Faithfully recreating the crispness of the pixilated edges and the blurred softness of the low-resolution sections results in a slight slippage, a disquieting frisson that briefly causes us to question what is going on. And then there's the slight suggestion that the plant is anthropomorphic with a head and arms. Could it be *doing* something—is it pulling out its own hair? Bizarre.

Wanner has a wry sense of humour that she channeled in her early training in drama. Her intuition for theatre still stands in good stead as the *Florilegium* project progresses. Enter a new set of characters, hybrid plants that can thrive and grow without soil, led by *Florilegium (sine terra): Brassica rapa, Glycine max, Gossypium hirsutum* (2010). The incredibly bounteous beauty offers both clothing and food as it hovers in the white field of the page. If the plant was alive, you might think she was flaunting cotton bolls about to burst and signalling come hither to



26. Jennifer Wanner, *Herbacentrice* (video still), 2010



27. Jennifer Wanner, *Messis (harvest)*, 2008-2012

pollinators as the yellow canola blossoms open to reveal the tiny receptive stigma. A full, nutritious soy pod dangles down. Could this creature be a hermaphrodite as well as rootless?

Next, Wanner sets to work to show the lives of the plants, emulating the style of early nature cinema with stop-motion animation. *Florilegium* (2009) is an exquisitely delicate yet unsettling film of the curious hybrids as they gracefully grow and propagate to a gentle mix of piano music by Eric Satie. They emerge from a tear in the paper and move through their life cycles, but they also manifest powers beyond those of plants as we know them. They are able to move through space, escape back behind the paper, re-emerge and engage in activities that suggest power struggles and the inclination to consume each other. Wanner's re-enactment of the scientific process has somehow gone awry, becoming a science fiction

nightmare. Images of plants that thrive without roots or eat their mothers give us pause as we consider the scientific developments of our own time.

Inspired by the dreamy short underwater films of French avant-garde filmmaker and theorist, Jean Painlevé (1902–1989), Wanner created the silent film *Herbacentrice* (2010).⁵ The black and white graphics created with photographic images printed on acetate, in this stop-motion animation, recall early cinematography as well as photography and printmaking and their links to botanical science. Anna Atkins was the first to use photograms as a scientific tool, making accurate images of algae. Even earlier, nature prints, such as Leonardo da Vinci's physiotypes made by applying candle soot to leaves and pressing them on paper, were regarded as excellent records because they replicated the exact

Jennifer Wanner is a Calgary-based artist whose interdisciplinary practice incorporates collage, watercolour, and animation techniques. Her work is invested in the politics and practices of art history as well as contemporary scientific discourse. Wanner holds a BFA in Drama from the University of Calgary (1995), a BFA in Visual Arts from the Alberta College of Art and Design (1999), and an MFA from the University of Western Ontario (2009). She has exhibited widely in Alberta and throughout Canada, and her work will be included in the 2013 Alberta Biennial at the Art Gallery of Alberta.

configuration of the intricate ribs, veins and outlines of leaves. The title of the film is a portmanteau of Wanner's making, a blend of "herbaceous" and "cockatrice," a 15th century feast dish in the form of a monster. It hints at the hybrid plant behaviors in the medley of six vignettes.

The newest forms in the compendium are graphite rubbings of the original maquettes, *Florilegium (frico)*. Like prints made from a pressed plant for scientific study, they portray a clear silhouette of the hybrid, carrying detailed information in the contour line. *Florilegium* continues as an ongoing project, a proposal of dreadful beauty. Wanner rightfully hesitates at the naming of names as she develops a compelling critique of the larger historical Western imperative to classify, control and dominate nature.

- 1 Jennifer Wanner, author's conversation with the artist, Calgary, April 19, 2012.
- 2 Anna Pavord, *The Naming of Names, the Search for Order in the World of Plants* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 14–19.
- 3 Jennifer Wanner, Artist Statement, August 2010.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jean Painlevé, Director, *Science is Fiction: 23 Films by Jean Painlevé*, 2009.