



Nicholas William Johnson – Plant Communication Network

21 September – 26 October 2018

Thursday to Saturday 12–6 pm and by appointment

Opening reception

Friday 21 September, 6–9pm

There seems to be nothing except primordial chaos outside my window. Utterly still, utterly alone, I watch darkness flower into transient symbols.¹

Nicholas William Johnson's paintings, a heady mixture of pigment and marble dust, appear tactile with several layers of canvas pasted and attached to each other. These paintings take Brugmansia (or, The Angel's Trumpet – an exotic, hallucinogenic plant cultivated primarily in parts of South America) as their centrepiece because of this plant's long history with altered behaviour, vision and reality. In these paintings, we watch on as the artist animates and controls light, dark and colour, elements of sight – placing things on top of and behind each other to create a sense of an elevated state – harking on the late mannerist tradition of pure colour, only adulterated through gradation. Obviously, Brugmansia do not naturally occur like this; you will not find these leaves on the floor of any lush jungle unless intoxicated or asleep.

The shape of the flowers' dangling heads, their solarised fruits and leaves, are indebted to the influential ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes who wrote heavily on the various properties and effects of Brugmansia. It was by way of these conversations that Schultes collated the rich information and charted the written history of what he called Plants of the Gods, which prominently featured the hallucinogenic strain of Brugmansia. Schultes committed his work to the analysis of the world's most potent shrubbery through sustained interactions with communities within and around the Amazonian rainforest – crushed leaves, petals and seeds of the plant are combined to make intoxicating beverages, or are smoked with tobacco to induce 'a delirium that can last for days...' In some cases, Brugmansia has been known to put its subject to sleep for several hours.

You remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens your skin; you stand; you leave the lighted shore to explore some dim headland, and soon you're lost in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing.²

In these paintings (except one: Sunspilt V), Johnson has arranged various cuttings of Brugmansia sanguinea, also known in parts of Peru as Huaca, Huacacha or 'The Plant of the Tomb' – so called because of its connection to the belief that, once ingested, this red-dipped petal can reveal treasures beyond a person's grave. Here, Schultes uses 'treasures' to denote anything latent or potentially atavistic; he may be gesturing toward a blurry vision of gold, its location (like the dead person buried beneath the ground), or some other gift of realisation, treasure in the sense that the flower reveals previously unknown territory in the mind and elsewhere. In Peru, Jivaroan people consider this hallucinogenic plant to be an important catalyst in coming of age rites and rituals: Schultes recounts how a young boy and his father 'make a pilgrimage to a sacred waterfall, bathing, fasting and drinking tobacco water' hoping to summon the son's arutam or, 'the vision-producing soul that can allow him to communicate with ancestors'.³

While under the influence of Brugmansia, the boy will adopt a type of shamanistic role, undergoing a slight personality change, in order to see differently and speak towards and of the past. Once the intoxicating effects are over, the young boy regains – what? – consciousness, perhaps. He will then attempt to recover these visions, the 'external soul', and the treasure presented during this inebriated state. Just like any memorable dream, the sleeper attempts to wake up and relay the particulars of their dream: this is a familiar, slightly tired tradition; a cliché of pillow-talk. More troubling, perhaps, is the supposition that what has been witnessed or uncovered here is proof of reality separate from perceived life; or, the idea that Brugmansia relieves the tension between life and death, stasis and progression.

Johnson's paintings are more than mere illustrations of Schultes' groundbreaking research; their arrangement comments on how this delicate plant conjures visions of late medieval and late mannerist scale, pigmentation and technique. Flower and leaf compete for space and coverage in Johnson's exotic landscapes; cyan tinted backgrounds suggest day-time reverie while, in other paintings, an overflow of cobalt blue produces an artificial night. But what of the night? Each form is composed of three shades: light, dark and pigment. It's possible to compare Brugmansia to other natural fluctuations, or what the writer Anna Kavan called 'the tension' between night and day: difference in accessibility, communication and visibility occur throughout. At night, under the influence of cosmic radiations quite different from those of the day, Kavan wrote, human affairs are apt to come to a crisis. Suppose this blue hue could plunge the viewer into unseeing, temporarily; it would ask them to remain perfectly still or, imagine this pigment possessed the initiative to direct attention towards specific qualities of behaviour, actions that closely resemble life. It's true that Johnson's light and dark shades produce contour; however, they also suggest certain restricted views and play on the idea of imperfect sight, amnesia, and hallucinations.

Through imperfect vision, these works hark on the idea of abstracting or elucidating on a purely visionary state. In 1907, the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint completed a set of twenty five paintings she called Primordial Chaos (these would later become part of a much larger, more famous, series called Paintings for the Temple) and within each of these works she used a language of opposition: night and day, supine and upright, light and dark, alive and dead. af Klint used a language in the sense that these symbols are taken from a closed system with internally agreed-upon rules that can be used to translate and decipher meaning from these signs. Blue and yellow hues, for instance, were used to signify male and female respectively. In one particular painting,

Primordial Chaos, No.3, af Klint creates a spiralling yellow submerged in a pit of blue; a giddy line travels from bottom-left to top-right, neatly traversing the fat yellow rays that are neither behind or in front of the mesh-like blue. Having spent some time in her early life with botanical drawings, af Klint was certainly influenced by fertilization or similar moments of convergence; the spiritual, celestial realm was her other guide. We may detect a similar system of notation at work in Johnson's depictions of Brugmansia as each canvas is evidence of the same object seen from a slightly altered state.

Leaves stand erect, anthropomorphized in Johnson's Caterpillarage while Brugmansia — these bellshaped, nightshade flowers — dangle from up high. Vegetation hides behind and sneaks up on this scene without indication of where it stemmed from. Johnson uses blue and yellow, echoing af Klint, to suggest multiple oppositions and tensions. Drawn to these apparently untethered forms, Johnson creates a chorus that descends on its viewer like light from the sun, or the chaos at the centre of af Klint's yellow orb, outside Kavan's window watching: darkness flower into transient symbols.

Olivia Fletcher

- 1 Anna Kavin, *Sleep Has His House* (London: Peter Owen, 1973) , p.9.
- 2 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row., 1985) p. 4.
- 3 R.E. Schultes, *Plants of the Gods* (Rochester, Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 1992), p. 143

Nicholas William Johnson (b. 1982 Honolulu, Hawaii) lives and works in London. He studied philosophy before completing an MA in painting at the Royal College of Art in London. Forthcoming and recent exhibitions include: *Plant Communication Network*, Peter von Kant, London (2018); *The John Moore's Painting Prize*, Liverpool Museums, Liverpool, UK (2018); *Inns of Molten Blue*, Plus-one, Antwerp (2017); *Dewdrinker*, Montoro 12, Rome (2016); *The Averard Hotel*, London (2016); *CueCollision*, House of Egorn London Lounge, London (2016); *Secrets in the Carbon Atom*, Podium, Oslo, (2016); *The Catlin Prize*, London (2016); *New Sensations*, selected by Saatchi Gallery, UK (2015). His work has been covered by *Artsy*, *Elephant Magazine*, *Nero*, *Studio International*, *Apollo Magazine*, *Dazed*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Times*.

Olivia Fletcher is a writer and current student of 'Critical Writing in Art and Design' at the Royal College of Art. Having graduated from Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge in 2016, she has worked on a variety of projects, both curatorial and in writing. Most recently, Olivia was Writer-in-Residence at Rule Gallery in Marfa, TX. For her other words and thoughts, visit: viaolive.wordpress.com

For all further information please contact the gallery.

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