

## Jenny Yurshansky | Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory

*by David Bell | Feb 27, 2015 | David Bell, Reviews | 0 comments*



Through the tall slender stalks of deer grass, and clumping masses of wild rye, she treads gently. Shadows still laying horizontally she takes shade under a California Bay inhaling the sweet smell of lavender and sage carried in from the quiet breeze. She removes her gloves revealing the dirt embedded deep in her nails, bends down takes off her shoes and begins to extract the foxtails that have woven themselves masterfully into her socks. Holding the removed seedpods in the palm of her hand while using her thumb and index to excavate the others; she draws out strings of cotton with each failed attempt. The act seems violent. She sits in the shade, feet out in the sun.

Without identification, who are you? How old are you? Where are you from? Can you prove it? If you are pulled over by the police, you must present them with a card. This card states that you belong; you are identifiable. You may nervously smile, trying to simulate your photographic self, explain your situation; where you are coming from, where you are going. Has your name changed? Is this your current address? Are you wearing the glasses in which your card states you should be,

are you legally blind?

*Mediterranean mustard is an erect, canescent, biennial or perennial growing to some 3' tall.*

With the delicate eye of a botanist and the unique ecological perspective of California's Invasive Plant population, Jenny Yurshansky's solo show at Pitzer College addresses issues of permanence and belongingness, combined with sociopolitical awareness and hidden agendas.

*The stems are branched both from the base and above, and are covered with fine gray-white hairs.*

As a teenager I spent much of my formative years removing this plant from the Ecological Preserve I was raised on, making sure to leave the "native" plants intact while removing the non-native. There was always a strange amount of blame associated with this action, as if this particular plant had done something wrong. Why did the California poppy get to stay? Why is it a crime to remove one flower and an offense for one to remain? Occasionally when reaching down, near the roots of the invasive plant I would take hold of a stem from its neighbor, ripping it from its permissible home, a casualty of war; *Justum Bellum*.

*The leaves are alternate with the basal ones being from 1-1/4" to 4" long in a rosette, lyrate-pinnatifid with a large terminal lobe and several pairs of somewhat separated smaller leaflets or lobes, and the upper cauline leaves reduced, sessile, dentate to lobed, and not clasping the stem.*

Upon being let into the gallery space, in the small room to the left, is a nearly coffin size wood and glass vitrine with four framed paper cutouts of plants hanging above. Inside the display case rests four square glass models with impressions of various native plant species. The reproductions are based off of 19th century glass models from the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants, currently on display at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. The impressions are indexical traces of an already replicated thing, a trace twice removed from its original source, void of objecthood. The pressings appear almost topographic as the reliefs become small landscapes, valleys and canyons, with the stylized supports protruding throughout with nothing to hold into place as the objects have been removed. The indentations of the plants all signify species that over 100 years ago flourished as native California flora yet now exist on a watch list due to invasive species utilizing the resources needed for survival.

*The flowers are in many terminal racemes and are similar to most of the mustards we have in Southern California, with four sepals, four light yellow petals about 3/16" long, and six stamens, four long and two short.*

On the opposite end of the room the artist has constructed an herbarium to house the 133 invasive plant species that she had located, identified and collected in and throughout the college campus and its affiliated institutions during her residency at Pitzer College Art Galleries. This is where the framed pieces above the vitrine are pulled from. In an actual herbarium, archived plants would be dried and pressed against sheets of paper for later research; here the artist has carefully cut out the contours of each specimen and taped them to pieces of paper, labeling each one, replicating the botanical archival system, even placing the small negative scraps of paper in an envelope where plant fragments would typically be stored.

Sliding out one shelf at a time, one after another starts to feel formulaic and obsessive as if one of them will reveal a secret about the other; and to the non-Latin speaker the names gradually bleed into one another *Ricinus communis*, *Nicotiana glauca*, *Poa pratensis*. Though there are obvious

and verdant differences between each of the cutouts, their dull green and perfectly trimmed edges with taped down branches splayed across the paper makes for heterogeneity, guilty by association. The artist has deliberately chosen to leave out the details, only tracing the outer shape of each one, leaving a void where signifiers would be; we are left only with the labels in the bottom right corner. We begin to understand that they are all unwanted, displaced and considered a threat to what is considered local or native.

The herbarium design becomes a miniature morgue, where the subjects become cold, abject; one need only read the toe tag to have all the information necessary to know who this person was, pulling out one after another, identify and move on, putting them back on ice. In this case, they have or will meet their demise in the same way; through eradication, unless of course the rebellion is too strong.

*The fruit is a short-beaked silique 1/2" long, erect and closely appressed to the stem, and containing reddish-brown, oblong to ovoid seeds with a single row per chamber.*

Display cases, in the historical sense, often hold as much importance as the objects in which they hold, associating the preserved items with the aesthetic of the times in which they were made. The artist has crafted the vitrine, the herbarium and the framed images all made out of MDF (medium density fiberboard), a paradox in itself, but not lackadaisical or done out of practicality. MDF would be considered an unsuitable material for such seemingly archival supports; choosing to turn the legs of the display case, polish and sand the frames out of such an unstable material (a mixture of wood fibers, wax and resin) almost mocks the hardwood of the original vitrines that would increase longevity, and reiterates the examination of prolonged existence while still personifying the artists attention to detail and high level of expertise and care.

*Mediterranean mustard, also called wild mustard or shortpod mustard, formerly had the Latin name Brassica geniculata, and is a common weed throughout Southern California, perhaps our most common mustard.*

The lighting in the entire space is ghostly and still, there is a feeling of stumbling upon something, as if one should stay quiet; of entering a place where information has been locked away. Someone uses this room though; enters quietly and researches something, a special key is needed or a guide perhaps, you'll need to wear white gloves and put everything back the way it was.

*It can be found in waste places, fields, along roadsides, and in creek bottoms below 5000', blooming from May to October.*

In the main gallery one is confronted with a large projection screen that hangs in the center of the room. Although the image is not moving, the back lit projection and blurred silhouettes of plants is entropically somber, yet remains strangely active. The entangled grey flora on the screen is the documentation of the invasive plants the artist collected and removed from the surrounding area and re-planted in her studio; each day snapping one photograph of the select group of 133 invasive species. The photos taken over a month's span, were then collapsed into one single time lapsed image. Grow lights and controlled temperature, although being adequate for life are not equivalent substitutes for the sun and natural atmospheric conditions of the ecosystem in which the variety of plants have become accustomed to. Yurshansky's studio became a refugee camp of sorts, not ideal but sufficient for life, a safe house; a purgatory.

*It is a native of the Mediterranean region, and its young leaves and flowers are edible. It is often*

*confused with black mustard.*

Yurshansky is not providing a solution to the issues surrounding immigration, racial injustice or profiling, yet she is not solely using invasive plants as a metaphor for these problems either, as we are all continuously negotiating our environment. As the United States continues to implement laws that are unjust, not only to immigrant populations but the lower class, people of color, woman, gay and transsexuals, whilst preserving the rights of the privileged white male upper class "Natives" of America; the show sheds light on the fear of the expansion of these "alien" and "invasive" species seeking equality in a so-called land built on this very principle. *Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory* asks you to consider your neighbor, and reflect on the barriers and borders needed to come down in order to stimulate growth and change as well as the derogatory and subversive vocabulary used against marginalized populations born on and into a land of cultural and moral biases; a land of inequality.

Emerging Artist Series #9

Jenny Yurshansky:

*Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory*

January 24 – March 26, 2015

Lenzner Family Art Gallery, Pitzer College Art Galleries

Related Programing:

The Botany Seminar Series at Ranch Santa Ana Botanic Garden

Friday, March 6 at 4pm

Dr. Peter Del Tredici, Senior Research Scientist, Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University  
and Adjunct Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, Harvard Graduate School of Design  
FMI: <http://www.rsabg.org/research?catid=147:articles&id=639:research-seminar-series>

<http://www.pitzer.edu/galleries/>

<http://www.jennyurshansky.com/>

All photos are by Jenny Yurshansky, and are courtesy of Yurshansky and the Pitzer Art Galleries.





Detail of Herbarium installation.  
Photo by Jenny Yurshansky.





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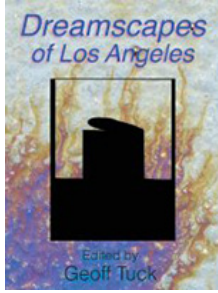
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