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Los Angeles

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## Invasive Species: Jenny Yurshansky Plants Her Stake

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Somewhere on Interstate 210, speeding through the California landscape, I looked off into the distance and realized that this view was made for travelers. It was a sunny day, and artist Jenny Yurshansky and I were on our way to her show "Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory" at **Pitzer College**. The drive took nearly an hour, and en route I was reminded that good things take time to arrive, and patience actually is a virtue. This type of waiting on account of distance is a recurring element in Jenny Yurshansky's family history and art practice. She splits time between Sweden, where she lives in an old castle that she purchased with her husband, and her hometown of Los Angeles, where her art community and family reside. These constantly shifting borders began before Yurshansky was born.

Yurshansky's parents are Russian Jewish refugees, arriving in Los Angeles in 1979. America wasn't their original destination. They were bound for Israel from Russia, and at the last minute a relative of Yurshansky's father advised they change directions and go to America instead. They took his suggestion, quickly locating an 80-year-old cousin who lived in Los Angeles; Jenny was born in Rome while en route to America.

It could be said that Yurshansky has been developing since birth that keen sense of who belonged where and why, and who is seen as othered. This same sensibility crops up in her work as well, most recently in the form of plant species.

"Before this project ever got initiated at Claremont, I've always thought about how do we categorize things and put them in these boxes -- how does one thing belong and another doesn't?" Yurshansky says. "That began with me when thinking: What is a weed? It belongs in one place but not another. It's a plant like any other plant, but in one space it's unwanted and in another it's just a natural thing that's occurring."



Jenny Yurshansky, "Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Asylum)," 2014. | Photo: Robert Wedemeyer



Jenny Yurshansky, "Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Herbarium)," 2014. | Photo: Jenny Yurshansky

This nugget pushed off a project in Norway, which used to be part of Sweden and now share a political border. They also share a landmass and biome -- but the plants and animals that occur in one area are marked as "invasive" and "blacklisted" in another, while others are somehow "native." Yurshansky found herself thinking about all of these terms as problematic, and then related this same concept back to the landscape of California, the place of manifest destiny.

"California carries this whole history of waves of visions that this place ought to be based on people who were coming here," says Yurshansky. "It's all about fulfilling the desire of an image."

In her exhibition "Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory" on view at the **Lenzner Family Art Gallery** at Pitzer College (runs through March 26, 2015), she examines the concept of "native" versus "invasive" species, considering connections to U.S. Immigration Policy terminology such as "invasive," "alien" and other identities that directly relate to multiculturalism and border cultures.

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The **California Invasive Species Advisory Committee** has been compiling a list of these so-called "invasive" species since 2009. The California Invasive Species List includes **more than 600 plants**. For her exhibition, Yurshansky investigated 133 plants, which is the number she found around the Claremont Colleges.

For the exhibition, Yurshansky created archival files for each of the plants she located, painstakingly cutting out silhouette-like versions of them from paper. She also created a time-lapse image of all the invasive plant species incubated, growing together over a one-month time period. Depending on one's perspective this time-lapse image becomes either a portrait of wildlife gone mad, or an experiment in species living together harmoniously for a limited period of time.



Jenny Yurshansky, "The Architecture of Choice," (2011). Book, wood, metal, LED lights, gold plated key.

Yurshansky's work has always dealt with questions about the constructed and natural environments, temporalities and identity. Her 2011 project "**Architecture of Choice**" dealt with questions of institutional transparency, leading the artist through the various hoops they'd encounter when attempting to work with an institution. Both a "choose your own adventure" joke and a dry reality, the book itself becomes the installation, thus leaving one wondering about the so-called "real."

Her 2010 piece "**By Definition**" blends elements of mysticism and psychoanalysis, in which a mirror reflects the viewer's own image. It's impossible to ever truly see the image for what it is. The viewer keeps leaning in, attempting to recapture that moment -- a failed attempt at jouissance, the moment that can't ever be replicated anyway.

In her earliest series, "**Split Personalities**" (2003), she photographs 100 subjects and then has a professional handwriting analyst assess their writing in response to the question: "Does my identity lie in my ability, physicality, personality, or in some other space which cannot be defined?" The fixed identity shatters -- as if it ever existed in the first place.



Jenny Yurshansky, "By Definition" (2010)

As an artist, Yurshansky has shown her work heavily in Southern California, as well as abroad in Sweden and Norway. She received her undergrad from UCLA and her MFA in Studio Art from UC-Irvine. She's held solo shows at Adjunct Positions Gallery and workspace in Los Angeles, and Tierp Bibliotek and Galleri Rostrum in Sweden. Her work is included in group shows at the Hammer Museum, 323 Projects, the Torrance Art Museum, LAXART, Armory Center, MAK Center, Laguna Art Museum, Tight Space, The Silverlake Lounge and I-5 Gallery. She continues to migrate back and forth from Sweden to Los Angeles, showing and making work along the way.

"It's great for me to have the different kinds of influences available -- the place I am really familiar with and the place I go to unsettle things so that I don't become that complacent," says Yurshansky. "To keep it fresh."

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Top Image: Jenny Yurshansky, "Herbarium" (detail), 2014

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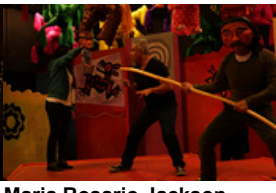
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